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Wanted: Summertime Pool Directors

Jonathan B. Smith

For each of the past 10 years or so during my tenure as a college aquatic director, in the late winter or early spring I consistently have received several similar phone calls. Some years I have gotten as many as four or five of these calls, with each conversation being very similar in nature to the others. The essence of the discussions have gone like this: The individual making the call represents a country club, public swim club, community recreational facility, or apartment complex. The person points out that their group of applicants for a pool manager/director position is small or poorly qualified, or, even worse, they are unable to find a single person to apply for the job. Stated explicitly or implicitly, the caller ultimately is uttering one word: Help!

“Why are we not able to find a suitable pool director?” they inquire of me. Callers point out that the salary being offered for the summer season is something they consider good. What this usually means is that the advertised salary is beyond what the facility’s board wishes to offer because it stretches the budget. Often it simply is a higher sum than what was paid for the summer pool director 3, 5, and 10 years ago. Some facilities might even offer the summer director room and board, as well as a significant opportunity to increase his or her summer earnings by teaching private swim lessons or receiving a percentage of swim-lesson revenue.

The search for a director may go on for weeks, and sometimes months, as near panic sets in. They make telephone calls to any possible resource who might know of a competent pool manager. They wonder what they are going to do. Often they have to settle for a seasonal manager who is younger and much less experienced than they desired.

From my experience over the past decade, there are a multitude of factors that have contributed to these situations. My goal for this article is to present and discuss these issues, as well as to provide suggestions to those who might have to engage in this seasonal search process.

Historical Perspective

Until 10 or 15 years ago, finding a suitable professional to serve as a pool manager/director on a summer seasonal basis was not nearly the chore that it has become today. I believe one main reason for this crisis in locating and hiring adequate summer pool managers is tied directly to the growth of the salaries of

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public school teachers during the past 15 years. In the '60s, '70s, and '80s, it was common practice, be it by choice or necessity, for typical public school teachers to supplement their income with seasonal employment during the summer months. This combination of teachers wanting or needing to make more money and their availability during the summer months created a pool of thousands of potential swimming pool managers/directors.

A second reason might be tied to changes in public school teacher licensure requirements. Before 15 years ago, most public school teachers needed only to take continuing-education courses or accumulate a certain number of credit hours to achieve tenure, permanent certification, or ongoing licensure. Teachers usually could take one or two courses either during the year or in the summer and thereby accumulate sufficient credit to keep themselves in adequate professional standing.

Today's Realities

In today's education environment, public school wages are proportionally higher than 20 years ago. Because today's teachers earn much more substantial incomes, it has become more difficult to hire public school teachers as summer pool directors. It has become proportionally less desirable for a teacher to justify the sacrifice of his or her summer months' vacation to assume summer employment as a swimming pool director. Stated more explicitly, if a teacher is making an annual 9- or 10-month contract salary of \$50,000–70,000 or even more, an additional summer salary of \$2,500–10,000 might not be worth the time, energy, or effort required. In addition, it might not be the financial necessity it was 20 years ago.

In addition, relatively new, younger teachers today need to earn a master's degree within several years of being hired to earn tenure, permanent certification, or licensure. It is no longer sufficient to gradually accumulate continuing-education units or unrelated courses at one's convenience. Many new teachers need to spend much of their summer time enrolled full-time in a master's program. This commitment to earning a graduate degree does not allow them the time to be employed full-time during the summer.

Taking a look at this from the teachers' perspective, it is easy to see why fewer of them are interested in summer pool manager jobs. The approximate 10-month grind on a teacher, with the increased assessment and other tasks that the average teacher must undertake, often overlaps with the opening of a summer swimming complex. It is not uncommon for a typical summer pool manager to be required to commit significant amounts of time in May and June, as well as August and September, in hiring staff, preparing the facility, setting up work schedules, and closing down and winterizing the facility, which would require public school teachers to work two full-time jobs (i.e., teaching during the school day and setting up a summer pool complex and staff during the evenings and on weekends) at the same time.

For example, the 3-day Memorial Day weekend is a typical seasonal opening date for most summer pool complexes. At the same time, most public schools are still in full session on the day after this holiday weekend and for several subsequent weeks. In fact, it is during late May and June that many required final exams and compulsory state standardized tests must be administered and graded by public school teachers. During this extremely busy and hectic time for school teachers,

hiring and in-servicing a pool staff, as well as opening the pool and establishing smooth operations, might represent the most important and demanding parts of a summer pool manager's work.

Once school is over and the full-time focus on pool management begins, the summer employment can involve long, hot days that are physically, mentally, and emotionally strenuous. Quite often, summer pool directors only receive 1 day off during the workweek. It is unlikely that a pool board would allow them to take even a short vacation that required an absence from the pool of several consecutive days. Either implicitly or explicitly, it is communicated to the manager that "we're paying you to manage our pool, not to go on vacation." Objectively, any extended absence by a pool manager could amount to a serious potential for negligence or legal liability.

If all these demands aren't enough, throwing in factors such as demanding or unreasonable behavior by some members, tight constraints on operating budgets, staff certification and in-service requirements, and, in more and more locations, shortages of qualified lifeguard staff can only make a summer manager's job that much more difficult. It is easy to see why over the past 10–15 years the public school teachers who once served as prime candidates for summer pool directors are now opting to enjoy their summer months unemployed but unfettered by the demands of a summer managerial position. It seems to have come to be that the money earned by a summer pool manager is not worth the effort and sacrifice required of the job.

Suggested Solutions

I offer the following suggestions to the person or committee members who must recruit and hire a summertime pool manager. These suggestions cannot guarantee finding a pool manager, nor can they guarantee retention of an incumbent from previous years. I simply offer them as recommendations that also might serve as a reality check.

- Be prepared to pay a top-dollar salary. The saying *you get what you pay for* very much applies in this case. The basic economic concept of supply and demand is very relevant to the changing economic conditions and pool of potential applicants.
- Be prepared to show respect to applicants as qualified professionals. Keeping a pool clean, organized, safe, and in good operation is a tough and demanding task that carries legal liability. Don't let the pet peeves of some of the membership detract from the performance of a well-qualified pool director.
- Build in vacation time and other perks when possible. Everyone needs a break and to be away from the daily grind, especially a teacher who has already worked 9 or 10 straight months under stressful conditions. Vacation time is an important element to prevent burnout and improve the chances that a director will return another summer.
- Build in other incentives, rewards, and other inducements when possible to enhance the director's financial motivation.

- Accept the fact that a swimming pool is an extremely expensive facility to operate, as well as one that carries serious legal liability. Don't cut corners or become "penny wise and pound foolish."
- Consider having dual directors or a director and an assistant director. This will cost more and might require higher membership fees, but heeding the old saying *two heads are better than one* can often improve a difficult situation. In addition, with two managerial staff in place, if one doesn't come back the next year, the facility already has another person with leadership experience in place, potentially resulting in more operational stability.

Conclusion

At the heart of the dilemma and challenge of finding and hiring a well-qualified and skilled summer pool manager is one simple fact: Running a high-quality swimming facility on a seasonal basis is very expensive and hard work! The person serving as pool manager takes on numerous roles, all of which are different, as well as enormous responsibilities. These roles might include, but are not necessarily limited to, organizer and scheduler, custodian and repair person, mediator and counselor, staff developer and supervisor, risk manager, budget supervisor, surrogate parent, and creative problem solver. The harsh facts are that the financial incentive for potential pool directors and managers is significantly less than it was 15, 20, and 30 years ago. The best two ways to attract and retain a qualified, experienced professional pool manager are by paying a competitive salary and then treating this person as the professional he or she is. To do anything less increases the likelihood that you will be calling me again next spring looking for assistance in locating another pool manager!