

Changing With the Times Worldwide

Household staff and employers

by UTE MEIER

Originally, staff was kept for reasons of prestige and reflected social status—the more staff you employed, the higher your position in society. Today there are VIPs and millionaires who still keep large staff for reasons of prestige, and then there are middle-class employers who keep staff to help manage busy schedules and deal with time constraints.

In the ancient world, Egyptians and Greeks owned their staff and kept them as slaves. In the Middle Ages, kings, noblemen, and the clergy kept staff as subservient dependents, but staff could also earn the status of a freedman/freedwoman.

As society progressed through reformations, wars, and the Enlightenment Period, the norms for those who were able to keep staff changed. Along with the changing social status, the owner-slave relationship became an employer-employee dynamic, with staff being paid for their services.

Industrialization, globalization, and capitalism began a new age with unlimited possibilities, offering advancement through hard work. Self-made millionaires and billionaires worked their way into high society, earning their place among noblemen and heirs.

However, the desire and demand for household staff did not change; the number and categories of household staff needed by families, be it nannies,

housekeepers, butlers, or personal assistants, depended on the degree of wealth of the families themselves.

Today the luxury of having household staff is no longer exclusive to the upper-class. Middle-class professionals, including lawyers, bankers, doctors, and businessmen, now enjoy the benefits of having a household staff. The increasing need for such workers is primarily due to three reasons:

- Work commitments. In typical modern families around the world, both parents work full-time jobs. That factor, in conjunction with long working hours (seldom fewer than 10 a day) makes it nearly impossible to have a job and run a household, much less have personal time.
- The changing role of women. Nowadays, the term “housewife” is practically extinct (except, perhaps, in primetime television). The modern woman is self-confident and driven, with her own career aspirations and goals.

- Nuclear families. The extended family—grandparents, aunts, uncles, or older siblings—living in the same house and providing relief when needed no longer exists. Often spouses are physically separated because of their jobs (working in different towns or countries, having to travel often on business). This creates a need for staff to take care of the children, household, and garden during their absence.

The transition of domestic staff from owned property to paid employee, as well as the relative affordability of staff salaries, has made the luxury of hiring staff possible for the modern-day middle-class. And the desire and demand for qualified candidates is growing in this segment of society. Although the middle-class cannot afford to keep as large a staff as wealthy upper-class clients (from the nanny and bodyguard to the chef and chauffeur), they will often employ a housekeeper, nanny, and occasionally even a cook.

Searching for experienced and reliable staff can be a long and arduous process. Many people start with newspaper advertisements, but this is not the most effective approach, since it requires a great amount of effort and time. Specialized staffing agencies, with their rosters of qualified household staff, make the hiring process easier.

At our domestic agency in Germany, we find that the number of new clients is increasing daily. In addition to our national and international VIP customers, we are servicing more and more middle-class families that also have a need for staff, and we expect this trend to continue. c

UTE MEIER is the owner of Consulting Home and Garden in Germany. She began this domestic staffing service in 1996 after working as a housekeeper in exclusive households. Using those contacts, Ute began what is now an international service.

