

Accessibility and Privacy for Domestic Staff

LIVE-IN VS. LIVE-OUT POSITIONS

MANY EMPLOYEES PREFER TO LIVE OFF-SITE TO KEEP SOME DISTANCE BETWEEN THEIR JOB AND THEIR PERSONAL LIFE.



Historically, it was not uncommon for members of the household staff, from butlers to nannies, to live on the estate of their employers, where they were on-call around the clock. In general, female employees—including maids and nannies—were given accommodations in the house with the employers, while male servants had their quarters in the stables with the animals. But before you think the ladies had it made, know that most maids

did not have their own room; instead, they were squeezed into bathrooms or corridors. Or, in Germany, the preferred housing solution was a loft—a small shed over the kitchen or bathroom that could be reached by ladder and rarely had a window. Occasionally, better accommodations could be found in the attic, though this was never heated. None of these options offered privacy.

Today, although certain positions require an employee to live on-site, most staff

members are given the option to find their own housing nearby, where they will still be accessible to the employer, if necessary. Oftentimes, larger estates will have separate but adjacent staff housing or a designated employee wing in the residence. This situation can be a delicate one for setting boundaries. Simply by being accessible, staff members are subject to the whims and requests of their employer, and may be relied upon for even the most basic tasks whenever the need arises. This can become frustrating for the employee, who may feel that his or her privacy is not being respected. For this reason, many employees prefer to live off-site to keep some distance between their job and their personal life. In general, younger staff members want to relax and enjoy their time off during the weekend, while older employees may have their own family and are very careful to set aside their personal time.

Not all employers are looking for live-in employees. Some find it equally important to have private or personal time with their family without household staff. Depending on employer preferences and the specific position, live-out arrangements may be more or less likely. This spatial separa-

tion is certainly possible for housekeepers, since they can manage most of their work during the day (with the exception of cooking and serving of evening meals). In the case of a nanny (who is often hired with flexibility in mind), working nights and weekends is just part of the job. Compared with that of a maid, flexibility is more important for a nanny, since childhood illnesses have a tendency to change everyone's plans. The butler, by definition, is a 24/7 position—but the good ones already know that.

Though it may seem tempting to eliminate a commute or save money on a rent or mortgage payment, live-in accommodations also raise questions of privacy. What works for one person may be a deal-breaker for another. At Consulting Home & Garden, we find that younger employees have fewer problems with smaller accommodations in the employer's home than older employees, who require more space and privacy. ©

Ute Meier is the owner of Consulting Home & 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.