

WHO'S HIRING

Profiles in growth, opportunities, and employment trends

Tour firm's hiring journey started with 100 applicants

Only three jobs were added at a tiny Seattle company that does "foodie" tours in downtown Seattle. But the experience of Savor Seattle Food Tours is revealing because of the volume of people who applied and the way the company vetted all those applicants.

Angela Shen, who owns the company that does walking culinary tours of Pike Place Market and other areas, recently decided to hire three part-time tour guides. After posting the openings on Craigslist, through Twitter and Facebook and through word of mouth, Shen heard back from a hundred candidates.

Other companies inundated with job applicants, such as Seattle website developer Cypress Consulting Inc., have done "speed dating" interviews, inviting a large group of job applicants to mingle with managers.

But Shen took her own unorthodox approach, given the fact that her tour guides must be gifted like improv performers, with the ability to entertain customers and think on their feet.

First, to test the creative mettle of the applicants, she asked them to use the words "alfalfa" and "escargot" in their cover letters.

Then she rented a conference room at a Tully's cafe in downtown Seattle earlier this month. When the job applicants arrived, they faced a panel of interviewers inspired by "American Idol." The interviewers had one request: Entertain us with a story.

The most memorable story was a Ferris Bueller-type yarn about a guy who as a teenager borrowed his dad's fancy car on the sly, only to have a flat tire during the adventure. He and 14 others survived the first round of screening, only to be surprised during the next round, when Shen and the other panel members asked them to conduct an impromptu tour of Pike Place Market.

Shen wound up hiring three of the finalists.

Shen said she had wanted to hire four people for this tourist season, but settled on three because she has run a lean organization during the recession, which has been particularly brutal to tourism in Washington.

In March, leisure and hospitality companies added 500 jobs in Washington, something that state labor economists noted as welcome news for a sector that was hit hard by the downturn, especially in the last three months of 2009.

All of those 500 jobs were in the

arts, entertainment and recreation sector, according to the state Employment Security Department.

For the 12-month period since last March, the leisure and hospitality sector lost 12,000 jobs.

In March, Christopher Kraus, senior vice president of PKF Consulting, said Seattle's hotels should see a flat year in 2010, compared with 2009, with greater recovery arriving in 2011 as the region's and the nation's employment picture recovers.

That's coming off 2009, when revenue per available rooms — an industry statistic widely used to measure a hotel's overall financial performance — plummeted by nearly 20 percent in the greater

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ANGELA SHEN
SAVOR SEATTLE FOOD TOURS

Seattle market.

Shen said her business felt the effects of the recession in 2009, with tourism down statewide and the conference business off in Seattle.

But Shen said she thinks her company turned a corner this year. In the first three months of 2010, her revenue was up 20 percent, compared with the first three months of 2009.

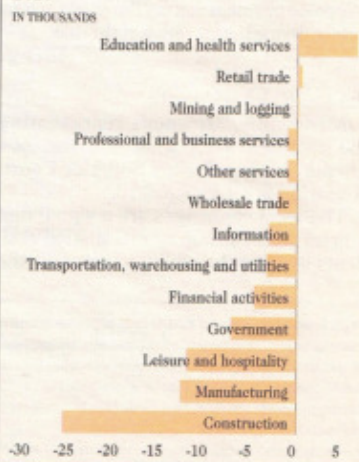
Shen said she also is fortunate that culinary tourism is an interesting niche, especially in this region, which is getting a name for itself with celebrity chefs such as Tom Douglas.

"People are really into food in Seattle," Shen said.

If you are hiring or have employment-related news, contact Greg Lamm at greglamm@bizjournals.com or 206-876-5435.

Scorecard

Jobs gained or lost by industry in Washington from March 2009 to March 2010



Source: Washington State Employment Security Department