

Casino jobs – a good deal?

They are retirees and middle-agers who wanted to shift gears. Or seasoned professionals who brought specialized skills to a new arena. Others are just starting out, in their early to mid-20s.

They serve meals and mix drinks. They deal cards, greet customers and count change in cashier cages, handling more money in one shift than many people see in a year.

Earning USD 10 an hour to USD 100,000 a year, they're part of what has become one of the region's fastest-growing labor pools: the Indian casino work force.

Figures gathered from the five tribes employing almost 90 percent of the county's 12,800 casino workers reveal a demographic portrait of this burgeoning industry. Even more illuminating are stories from workers themselves, how and why they came to be doing what they are.

Few of them are making less than USD 20,000 a year. Many earn USD 40,000, USD 50,000 or more, plus benefits. They are ethnically diverse. Most are older than 30 and many older than 50. About half drive at least 20 miles to work.

An overwhelming majority of the casino workers have at least a high school diploma, and many are pursuing higher education with tuition assistance from their employers. More than half of those in management have college degrees, executives say.

For some in this industry, like table games shift manager Pat Hixon, gaming has been a longtime profession. He supervised floor games at Las Vegas' posh Paris Resort before coming to Pala in 2001.

For others, such as dispatch supervisor Jerry Lynn, who has been running Barona's busy radio communications control room

since 1994, casino work was a midlife change after 30 years of auto-body repairs.

„I make more now than I did in that career, and it's easier work," he said. "It's hectic and it's stressful, but I don't have to worry about stitches in my fingers."

Most casino jobs involve customer interactions, and people who are grumpy or introverted are advised to look elsewhere.

„It's lights. It's loud. It's fun," said Danielle Quiroz, 28, a buffet cashier at Sycuan for 3½ years. "It's kind of like you're performing sometimes."

Galyan „JuJu" Gago, 27, says working Sycuan's cashier's cage is far more stimulating than the liquor store where she used to be. „I deal with the money, with the jackpots. I deal with the customers when they bring me the chips," she said. „It's fun."

The regional casino work force has more than doubled in the five years that Gago has been at Sycuan. Five of the county's eight casinos opened in 2001, and all eight have expanded since then.

Yet the casinos still employ only a fraction of the region's 1.3 million workers, according to state Labor Department statistics. As of 2005, San Diego County had 86,600 construction workers, 21,600 grocery employees and 16,100 telecommunications workers. More people worked in clothing stores – 12,900 – than the 12,800 in Indian gaming.

Each of the more than two dozen casino employees interviewed for this story expressed high overall satisfaction in their jobs, including benefits such as health, dental and vision insurance, yearly bonuses and 401(k) funds.

According to figures provided by the casinos, a majority of their workers earn more than the \$ 32,300 calculated by the

state labor office as the 2005 median wage in San Diego County.

The main drawbacks voiced by casino employees were cigarette smoke and having to work nights, weekends and holidays.

„The hours can be a challenge,“ said Barona Assistant General Manager Kari Stout-Smith, whose four 10-hour overnight shifts each week include Saturdays. „The only other negative to it is that not everybody’s going to leave the casino happy. There can be some negativity sometimes.“

Each of the large casinos surveyed by The San Diego Union-Tribune showed noteworthy numbers in at least one demographic category.

Barona Valley Ranch, for example, reported that 65 percent of its 3,543 employees earn more than USD 40,000 a year. (Two casinos, Pala and Rincon, declined to provide pay-scale percentages.)

Viejas Casino reported many long-tenured employees, with 47 percent of its 2,222 workers on the payroll more than five years. Pala Casino listed 56 percent of its 1,863 workers as 41 or older.

Harrah’s Rincon resort reported the most long-distance commuters, with 81 percent of its 1,656 workers driving at least 20 miles. Sycuan Casino reported the most diversity among its 2,004 employees, with 37 percent white, 24 percent Asian, 16 percent Hispanic, 5 percent black, 1 percent American Indian and 17 percent other minorities.

Gago, the Sycuan cashier, is Iraqi. She spends much of her time off with 10 pals from work – men and women.

„There is a Mexican, Vietnamese, white people – we’re all mixed,“ she said. “We go to restaurants. They come over to my house. We go to the movies. We go bowling.“

Floor security guard Murrill McCoy, who is 62 and black, worked for grocery stores and armored trucks before coming to Sycuan 12 years ago. He makes USD 15.70 an hour and likes the "carnival atmosphere" of casino work.

He and others elsewhere say few workers are moving from casino to casino. Most migration is in-house, from entry-level to skilled jobs, such as dealers. Their bosses agree, saying most turnover occurs in the first year or two.

„The thing that surprises me the most is the stability of the work force," said Jerry Turk, Pala Casino managing partner. „Of the original 1,000 employees that we had (in 2001), over 250 of those people are still with us."

Among them is Hixon, the table games shift manager. He had doubts about leaving Las Vegas because he had heard that tribal casinos in California were unprofessional and second-rate. Those misgivings were dispelled when he came to Pala and met Turk and his top managers.

"They wanted to operate this 100 percent like a Las Vegas casino," Hixon said. "Everything I feared and heard was untrue."

Sycuan Casino General Manager Steve Penhall said the toughest positions to fill are those at the top and bottom of the pay ranges, and for the same reason: the high cost of living in San Diego. Entry-level workers often have transportation problems, he said, which is why Sycuan now buses employees to work from Tecate, Chula Vista and El Cajon.

Many specialized jobs aren't out on the casino floor. Creative manager Larry Gallegos has been with Barona 11 years, overseeing its radio and TV ad campaigns and making a salary he says would rival any in his field.

Late last month, Gallegos was holding casting sessions for actors in an upcoming commercial, then reviewing the

videotapes with the producer, director and writers in a Mira Mesa video production studio.

Tiffany Noriega of Carlsbad left an office job close to home four years ago to become senior secretary for the Harrah's Rincon marketing vice president. She drives 45 minutes to work, but says it's worth it.

A 38-year-old single mom, she makes USD 42,000 a year, 20 percent more than she did at her last job. She also likes being in on behind-the-scenes stuff such as booking entertainment, planning ad campaigns and organizing in-house promotions.

"This is the easiest and most fun job I could come up with without a college degree," she said.

Many entry-level employees dream of career paths such as those taken by Viejas' John Tehan and Barona's Rodrigo Acero, both 31.

Tehan started out at Viejas 13 years ago, making minimum wage "cleaning bathrooms and emptying trash." He worked his way up through the housekeeping department, eventually supervising it for eight years.

In 2004, he transferred into gaming, learning all the card games and becoming a dealer, then pit boss. Now he earns more than \$ 55,000 as a shift manager and part-time casino manager, alternately supervising Viejas' 31 card tables and, in his other role, the entire casino on 12-hour overnight shifts.

Acero started at Barona almost 12 years ago as a dishwasher making USD 4.75 an hour. He was soon serving food and drinks on the casino floor, then 10 years ago got trained in-house to become a blackjack dealer.

Now Acero makes more than USD 60,000 a year managing Barona's baccarat room, where players wager USD 100 to USD 10,000 a

hand. He wears a crisp suit; his dealers wear tuxedos. He describes his job as the exact opposite of the golf-club assembly line where he used to work in El Cajon.

„What attracts me to it is the action, the money, the people,“ he said. „On top of that, every day is a different day.“

Acero expects more growth ahead in his casino, his industry and his career.

„They’ve given me the opportunity to be able to progress,“ he said. „I know I can still keep moving up.“