Case Study: Operational Manager - Theme Park - Chris

What do you do?

I'm in charge of the 'thrill rides', here at Alton Towers. This includes anything from the day-to-day operational running of the rides, through to the more strategic, long-term planning involving employment regulation laws, etc.

I'm responsible for health and safety, in terms of the safe running of the rides, for our guests and staff. I'm also responsible for setting and driving the customer service standards that we have as a company.

My team is divided into three areas. Each of these has an 'area coach' and two assistants. Altogether, I'm responsible for about 120-140 staff.

At the moment, we're opening up for 'adrenalin week', so all of us managers will at some point be going back to our roots and be working on the rides for a couple of days. It always serves as a good reminder of what we ask our staff to do.

What is your background?

When I left school, I went to drama school to study stage management and technical theatre. I spent a number years after that working for a theatre and for touring theatre companies.

I had a small accident at work. During the period when I was recovering, I decided that it was time to have a bit of a change; to move away from living out of a suitcase, touring all over the place.

While deciding on the next course of action, and needing to earn some money, I came here to work as a ride host. My wife was working here at the time; she put me in touch with some people at the art workshop, who do the 'theming'. One of the areas of the park was being re-themed at the time, so I managed to get involved and do some work over the winter, using skills I'd gained in the theatre.

After the winter, I went back to being a ride host; then a team leader role came up, which I successfully applied for. About a year later, I became a ride manager. The company then went through a restructure; job titles and job descriptions were changed. It was also decided to separate the 'thrill rides' and the 'family rides'. I was promoted to head of 'thrill rides'.

What characteristics do you need to be successful in your job?

The biggest requirement is probably a never ending amount of energy and stamina, to do the long hours in all weathers and all conditions, and maintain a sense of humour when faced with some of the more difficult situations.

You also need to be flexible, both in terms of being able to respond to the business demands and having the ability to flip from strategic thinking to operational thinking. By this I mean being able to think about things five years down the line, and literally having to make minute-by-minute decisions, thinking on your feet.

The entire business runs around people - both guests and staff members - so you very much need to be a people person.

What other jobs could you do using the skills from this job?

It's difficult, because in one respect it is quite specialised. A theme park is quite a unique environment.

I suppose, essentially it's the operational skills that are transferable. So anything that involves co-ordinating different departments and large numbers of people - both employees and the general public - and managing access to whatever venue it is. So an operations manager of a large venue or leisure facility would be a logical step.

Also, anything to do with people management. Along the way and through my progression, I've learnt to manage, motivate and counsel, and deal with all challenges that come along when managing people.
What changes will there be in the future?

Like in most industries, technology is the driving force. So it's going to be about the next technological advance with regard to the rides and attractions that we have. Also, we're constantly changing and updating, re-theming and rethinking all our attractions.

We also need to respond to the changing demands from our guests. We're very much focussed on appealing to a wider audience than the traditional thrill-seekers. While we don't want to lose the thrill-seekers, we want to expand our offering far more to families, so it really becomes a proper day out at a real resort, where you've got enough for granny and granddad to do and mum and dad, the teenagers and the toddlers as well.

I think I've been here long enough to know that there will always be a change in thinking on how the business is run and structured; I've certainly been through two significant shifts in business culture. I would anticipate that we will change the way we do things and how we are structured. It's natural progression; a business can't stand still.

What are the biggest challenges in your job?

Time-management, I think. Balancing my workload between the administration side of things, the backstage office stuff, and making sure that that doesn't impact on the operation side. Ultimately, I'm here to ensure that the 'thrills' team delivers to the guests. By doing that we need to run a smooth, slick operation and we need to deliver extremely high standards. That's my role; that's my responsibility. I need to be out there, working with my team to ensure that happens.

The real challenge for me is to balance that - make sure I'm out there, people know me and can talk to me, and I can ensure the standards are being delivered - with being in the office and ploughing through all the dreaded emails that you get. Also, making sure people's training and development is up to date, and that I'm attending marketing meetings and any other strategic meetings that we have.

I suppose, sometimes, it can be a challenge to maintain a work-life balance. It's a fantastic place to work, so it can be quite easy to get sucked in and forget that you do have a home to go to. Very, very rarely does it get to me, but it's a challenge in terms of making sure that you don't burn yourself out.

The biggest challenge is the unknown. Not knowing what today or any other day will bring, because you never know what is going to happen. I have days where everything runs smoothly - no ride breakdowns, no employee issues. There are other days when it's non-stop, constant breakdown after breakdown or incident after incident. But we never know when that's going to happen, and on what scale.

Are there many opportunities to enter this career?

If you have the right attitude, the right skills and abilities, then you can start as a ride host and work your way through.

There is only one person in my team and three people overall who haven't started as a host. One of my 'area coaches' came from a health and safety background, with people management skills, so as far as she was concerned it was a process of coming in and learning about the rides and learning about the company; but two of the major skills were already there.

If the opportunities arise at the right time, then it's like any other job; it's not extremely difficult to get into.

What do you like about your job?

I love the biggest challenge, and that's just not knowing what I'm going to face day-in day-out.

I love the cut and thrust of when we're busy: the atmosphere you get from having thousands and thousands of people, who we're delivering thousands upon thousands of thrilling experiences to.

And the fact that I deal with such a large number of people from such diverse backgrounds, ages and types. I suppose, overall, it's just the challenge of the job that I love the most, because it's always changing.

What do you dislike about your job?

It's a really, really hard question to answer. It's like any other job in that you do have some bad days; you have days
when things don’t go particularly well, or on a personal level, you walk away and think ‘I could have dealt with that a little bit better’ or ‘that didn’t quite go the way I planned it’. You get inevitable frustrations because you’re working with other people and you don’t always see eye-to-eye.

I almost hate to say it, but there really isn’t anything that I dislike about the job!

**What are your ambitions?**

When I was at school, I never dreamt I’d be an operational manager at a theme park. It just developed - that's how life has worked out.

I would still love the opportunity to progress in the company. But, at some point, I would love the opportunity to go and work elsewhere, and I think I would relish the challenge of working abroad.

I suppose my next step would be to take on a bigger operational challenge, and rather than heading up a team within a department, head up the department as a whole. Whether that would be here or at a different attraction, I'm really open at the end of the day. Each attraction has got its own unique kind of environment.

**What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?**

Keep an open mind. Be prepared to learn each and every day, not only about the job, but about yourself.

I work in an environment where having fun and laughter is what we provide to people, and that's how we approach our jobs.

From a career point-of-view, it’s a case of getting your head down, working really hard, and taking as many opportunities as you can to learn and develop in any field you can imagine. You never know, in a job like this, quite what you're going to be called upon to do and what decisions you'll be asked to make.

There are many routes into a role like mine, so make sure you do your research and make sure you find out all there is to know about how you can get into these jobs.

We’ve run graduate schemes, where graduates are seconded into various positions. The first few of these are beginning to come through; I've got one graduate working for me at the moment. So there really are a number of opportunities.

Also, use the fact that we are open, we're friendly and fun-loving kind of people, so come and talk to us. We'll always be able to spare some time to have a chat on a one-to-one basis, if we can help out. We had some people from a college only last week; about 20 students spent time going out and about with various people from the business-side as well as ride operators.

**A day in the life**

A typical day as a ‘thrill ride’ duty manager:

The day starts at 8.30 am, when I meet my team of ‘area coaches’. We have a quick review of the previous day, picking up on any problems with the rides or queues, etc. We also have a briefing about the upcoming day’s events.

Then we go out on the park and make sure the rides are ready to open. One area of the park is open at nine o'clock, so that's the area of the park I go to first, to make sure everything is fine there.

At 10.00 am, the rest of the park opens, so I check all the other rides - that everything is up and running and that there are no issues. If there is anything that I need to deal with - whether it's a technical aspect, food/beverage, retail or any other department - now's the time to sort it out.

At 10.15 we have a meeting, which is imaginatively called the 10.15, where all the duty managers get together; we quickly report on any issues that might affect us during the day. Also, we make sure that we're all aware of any special events, show times, etc.

From then, I'll go back out on the park. If it's a busy day, it will be a case of making sure that queues are managed effectively, the rides are running efficiently, and that we are delivering the customer service standards that we expect.

After a half hour lunch - which is often interrupted - I'll go back onto the park. Often, by two or three o’clock, any issues should have been dealt with, so I'll probably go into a meeting. This could be with my boss (head of park
experience), where we might discuss anything from future planning to operational issues.

If everything goes according to plan, at 4.30 pm I’ll finish for the day. We work a shift pattern, so the following day I could start at 11.00 am and work through until 8.00 pm.