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**Steven Swannell- Operations Manager at Owens Food Court**

*Interview Transcription (24m 11sec):*

Torria: So, if you would like to start off by saying your name and your position here?

Steve: I'm Steve Swannell, and I'm Operations Manager at Owens Food Court.

Torria: Okay. And how did you become an Operations Manager here?

Steve: Um, about ten years ago I started my first job at Virginia Tech. I was a stock clerk at West End Market, and I just worked my way into management from there.

Torria: So what did you do as a stock clerk?

Steve: Um, receiving all the storage -- some of the ordering. Mostly making sure that we had all of the product we needed to run the dining hall, and that everything was rotated properly and got out to the shops.

Torria: Okay, so typically what do you do as an Operations Manager here?

Steve: Um, I'm charged with making sure the Owens Food Court runs the way we want it to -- providing the dining services to the students and all the other customers who get here at Virginia Tech. And, 90% of my job description is out front making sure that shops are running properly -- 10% is administrative.

Torria: So are you in charge of complaints from customers?

Steve: Yes, I deal with customer complaints fairly frequently -- sometimes compliments too which are always nice to get. But, if anybody has any problems we'll fix their problems for them -- offer them something else to eat, or give them a refund, or anything we can do to make their experience better.

Torria: So, have there ever been any complaints that were kind of out there -- just bizarre complaints?

Steve: Um, for the most part it's about either quality of the food or the size of the portions or things like that. They're pretty reasonable about it. Sometimes you get a weird one now and then. I can't think of anything too terribly offbeat right now. For the most part they're fair criticisms of what we're doing.

Torria: Alright, hmm. As far as your pay goes, is it adequate for all of your living expenses and taking care of your family?

Steve: Sure, if I were doing this job in the private sector, I would expect more pay in terms of cash compensation. But, being a state employee and with the university, you sacrifice a little bit of that for some other benefits like state benefits are pretty good. We've got health insurance -- good retirement plan. The academic calendar is nice so that we have some breaks during Thanksgiving, Spring Break, Christmas and things like that. So we have time to come up for air when a lot of people 52 weeks a year minus whatever vacation they might take. So, the academic calendar is nice and that plays a part in the quality of life issues that could go along with your compensation.

Torria: So how is during the summer? Do you still have a lot of customers?

Steve: Well summertime, Owens is closed... usually. And people from all of the closed units go up to D2 where they have 'conference schedule' going on. And there's all kinds of sports camps, academic camps going on. Things like that, various conventions that'll come through. So, in some ways summer times are even busier than during the year because we're kind of cramming everything into just one unit. D2 is big it seats nearly a thousand people but we might do 2500 to 3000 counts during meals at the peak of the conference season. So, in some ways we're busier in the summer than we are during the academic year.

Torria: What would be the worst aspect of your job?

Steve: Ooh. Maybe this is why we said we shouldn't release this to public domain! Sometimes it can be frustrating when things don't go the way we'd like it to. One of the problems that we have just in this business -- and part of it is because of its academic nature and part of it is just because it's food service -- but there's a pretty high degree of turnover as far as employees go, so we're constantly bringing in new people and training them. And at the beginning of semesters usually, especially at the beginning in August, it's a particularly difficult time because a lot of people don't know what they're doing yet. So it's a lot of hard work to get people in and trained and get up to the level of service that we want to have.

Torria: So what would the best aspect of your job be?

Steve: Well, sort of the flip-side to that is we get people who stay with us for a while -- you're one of them -- who gain sort of a veteran status and are really key to us training these new people. Because just the few managers that we have can't train the hundreds of students and wage personnel that we bring in. So, I work with some really good people and I'm really happy about that. And that's one of the best parts of the whole job.

Torria: Do you have... I'm not quite sure how to word this question. But, let's say that you do something 'wrong' in your position. Do you ever face some sort of disciplinary action? Like, us as employees we can get written up for stuff. Can you get written up for anything?

Steve: We certainly can. We're held to pretty high levels of accountability. Part of our job descriptions states what you're responsible for. And our supervisors hold us to these parameters pretty closely. Well, there are a number of quality assurance aspects to our job like Mystery Shoppers -- they can come in from time to time and give criticisms of our quality of food and our service. We have a state health inspector come in and they make sure we're serving in a sanitary fashion. We have a company called Steritech which also does what's almost the same thing as the state health inspection. They call it a 'food safety audit' and they also take care of our pest control. So we have both the state regulators and a private firm that come in and observe us and send reports to our supervisors. And our scores are what the scores that we get on these inspections and audits are reflected in our yearly evaluations so it affects the way that we're compensated and it affects the way that our evaluations go. And if things go wrong, we face a lot of the same disciplinary actions as we hold our employees to. So yes, you can be written up. You can be suspended. You can be terminated if things don't go well. There is a pretty high level of accountability.

Torria: Has Owens ever had a major pest problem? Because I know we've had bugs in a few shops sometimes.

Steve: Yeah, and you're going to get that pretty much anywhere you have food. Not necessarily the fault of the facility. A lot of times your food providers will deliver them to you in the boxes that come in with the food. I've worked in a lot of different restaurants and pretty much all of them had to contend with pests on one level or another. And Owens, being a very old building, has its share of pests, but like I said we have a company called Steritech come in here and does a really good job of coming in here and keeping that under control.

Torria: How does Virginia Tech affect your job?

Steve: Well, we work for Virginia Tech. It's part and parcel to what we do. We are a part -- we represent Virginia Tech. When people come and are prospective students, and they look around -- they're shopping for colleges. They come through and part of their experience is the dining experience. We have open houses throughout the year. So, I don't know if it's Virginia Tech affecting us as much as we affect Virginia Tech. So, just the past year we attained the number one ranking with The Princeton Review and so that showed Virginia Tech in a very good light. And a lot of people, in part, make their decisions on when they're sending their kids to school, are they going to feed them well? Are they going to be well taken care of in the absence of their parents? And that and of course academic standards play a part in there as well. But we're proud of our high ranking; consistently high ranking number one is great. We fell to number 3 this year but we've always ranked very highly among the surveys that people use to sort of benchmark us amongst our competition and other universities. But as far as Virginia Tech affecting us -- certainly. We're affected by Virginia Tech's salary policies. You know, they affect all the faculty and staff. Not necessarily on an equal basis but there's certain procedures and policies for both faculty and staff. In fact, some of our positions are faculty positions -- some of the higher levels above me. I think some of them are... more of them are becoming faculty positions is what they're calling them. Not sure exactly why they're doing that. Might save them some money I'm not sure. But we're affected by Virginia Tech in -- their strategic plans and goals -- what they want their dining services to be. We're affected by things like if they decide to close. Their

weather policies affects us a great deal. So Virginia Tech affects us and we affect Virginia Tech. It's a relationship that goes hand in hand. So, and really also the state – Virginia Tech being a state university, we're a smaller part of the state government. So policies that affect people in the state government that are not non-university related, you know, they affect us as well. Things like salary increases, cross support (?), things like that or lack thereof. So, if on a larger level, we're state run – state government. So, you know, Virginia Tech is a subset of that and we are a subset of Virginia Tech.

Torria: So, what would your typical day be like? From getting up to going to bed?

Steve: From the very beginning?

Torria: Yeah.

Steve: On a work day?

Torria: Yeah.

Steve: Okay. I have a 4 year old daughter. And she goes to daycare, and so I've worked out a schedule where I don't come in 'til 1 o' clock. And that helps us so we don't have to drag her out of bed at 6 or 7 in the morning. So, she can sleep a little longer and so can I. And so we'll get up and we'll have breakfast and get ready for school. And I'll take her to school. And I'll come back and get ready to come in to work. And I'll come in to work at about 1 o' clock, and I'll see you through the rest of lunch. Make sure we get all our breaks taken care of. Our clean-ups after lunch. Get everyone ready to serve dinner. We'll have our shift change. The evening folks will come in and we'll go through the dinner shift. Close up Owens and clean up. And then I go home -- go to bed at some point shortly thereafter.

Torria: When do you pick up your daughter? Or does your wife?

Steve: My wife picks her up.

Torria: Ah, okay. So pretty much, how many days a week do you work?

Steve: I work, well, that depends. Most weeks I work a 5 day week. We're scheduled for a 40 hour work week but it seldom runs that close. I usually just have more than 8 hours of work to do. There's the running the front of Owens and making sure that we take care of everything at the operational level, but then I have to deal with the administrative aspects of it when everyone leaves. I have to follow up on our food safety documentation. Look at attendance logs and things like that. So, there's some paperwork that comes with it at the end of the day, and usually I'll get out any time between. You know – the earliest is 9:30 so that's kind of an 8 hour day there. But it's more like 10 or 10:30. So, usually it's more like about a – maybe a 45 a 50 hour week when it all comes down to it. And sometimes longer depending on special events, special meals we might have, football games, things like that.

Torria: I know there was one day you were saying you were going to go help, I think, with a football game? How was that?

Steve: Yeah. Part of my job I guess is... something I've been assigned or volunteered to take on. I can't remember since it's been so long. But Personal Touch Catering is a branch of Virginia Tech dining. And they run some concessions in the club lounges at Lane Stadium as well as catering to the luxury suite boxes that folks buy. And I don't do that part. I run 4 of the 6 lounges in Lane Stadium there in the West stands. It's pretty well spread out. There's a lot of ground to cover because they're in the end zones. There's 2 on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor and 2 on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor. So, I have a lot of ground to cover and that takes some set up on the Fridays before a game. And then the actual game day operation is itself. While that's going on I'm sort of – I'm within the department but I'm acting under the auspices of Personal Touch Catering rather than Owens Food Court. So, I'm working under their manager, who's Anthony Purcell. And it's just a little bit different accounting. I order in all the food for that. All the nachos and popcorn and hotdogs and all that ball game fare. And I set up the stands so that it's ready to go. We do the football operations, the catering operations there. And then that involves a lot like Owens where there's the reconciling of the money the putting everything away clean up and making sure that we leave the place in good shape.

Torria: So do they have you there because they need an extra person or is that just part of your position?

Steve: It's not written into my job description per say but we help each other out at the department, and you were kind of right the first time where catering is not a really large operation in itself. So, when they have big things going on, they ask for help from the other units. Football games are one of them. Another example would be the big picnic they do at the beginning of the year -- the sort of 'welcome back' picnic? That's a huge event where some 5 or 6 or 8,000 people – I'm not really sure – but the little catering operation can't do that all on their own. So, all the units help out with that one. Football, there's Ut Prosim I think they might borrow some help from other people. And when they sort of get into a little bit bigger project than what they can manage on their own they ask for help from the outside. I'm the one for football.

Torria: Oh okay. Do you like doing that?

Steve: Um. Yeah. I like it from the standpoint it's fun to go to the games and things. It's a lot of hard work and they're long days. So, it's not all gravy. I like sports and I like football. The bad part about that is I'm usually too busy to watch much of the game. But the atmosphere is fun and if I have a good day setting up on Friday I can watch a little bit of the game on Saturday. The harder I work on Friday, the better my Saturday goes. So, yeah it's fun. I like it okay. But then again, if somebody else volunteered to take it over it wouldn't break my heart. But I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon. But I'm glad to help them out.

Torria: Right. That's good. Where do you see yourself in 5 to 10 years?

Steve: Oh, this sounds like a job interview question. Gee, 5 to 10 years I'm not really sure. Like I said before, I've got about 10 years experience with Virginia Tech now, so it would take a pretty good offer to pull me away from here. I've had times where I've shopped around a bit in other places, but I like Blacksburg and I like Virginia Tech. So, I don't have any real inkling to move on. It would be nice if I could move up in position. But, what is a little bit difficult about that is there is just not as many positions above me to move up to. And the people that are in them are in them for long periods of time. So, it's maybe a little bit harder to do that. I keep an eye on the job listings and I wouldn't mind working in another department at Virginia Tech and then I would maintain the continuity of benefits and retirement and that sort of thing. So I keep an eye on things like that. And I've interviewed around but I haven't really – I haven't had any offers outside the department or anything like that. And that's okay. I'm fine where I'm at. Sounds a little unambitious maybe, but I'm really not in too bad of a place right now. And, it's taking care of my family -- we're doing okay so, no real ambitions as far as moving up and out and going out and conquering the world. But it probably would be nice to move up again within the department or find a different job that might pay a little more outside the department. But Blacksburg is nice and Tech is nice so I'm not in any hurry to move from here.

Torria: So, you were a Geography Major, right?

Steve: Yes I was.

Torria: So do you ever have any desire to have a Geography-related career at all?

Steve: Probably at this point, I've been away from it too long -- to really be considered for any kind of jobs in relation to that. I've majored in both Geography and Economics. I always liked Geography because I liked maps and I like when you show me a picture of something rather than reading a whole bunch of text. And Econ is the same way. You're always looking at graphs and things like that. And they show relationships and concepts are sort of drawn out for you rather than just reading them. So I guess that's kind of my way of learning. And so, I guess what happened is, as I got through college, I came into a really bad economy and when I got out of college, there wasn't a whole lot of jobs in particularly in my field. So I came to grad school and that's what brought me to Virginia Tech. And I did some Geography grad work here and then just sort of – I'd always worked in restaurants my whole life and so I sort of defaulted to food service by virtue of not really doing anything else. So, as far as careers or something I might do in Geography or Econ, it's probably not going to happen just because there's people coming out of school that are more – you know, that haven't had their degree be as perishable I guess as mine is. I'm glad I have that background. I really enjoyed that academic work. But, I really don't see myself going into any kind of Cartography or any of the jobs you might see in Geography or Econ really. Although, I think that those disciplines have helped me in my job that I have now just in some of the – especially some of the Econ has helped with the accounting and some of the things like that that I do. So um, probably not.

Torria: Alright. If someone were to hypothetically come in to your position here, what kind of personality and skills do you think they would need in order to succeed?

Steve: Well, you have to be able to deal with people. And a wide variety of people because VT is a very diverse community and so you have to be able to understand that there's a lot of different backgrounds and there's a lot of cultural differences. And I think that's one of the things that makes Virginia Tech so great. Is that we have that. I think we have a good world view here. So it would have to be somebody who understands that there's all different kinds of people, and that you will be working with a lot of different kinds of people. Just at Owens alone we're representing... I'm not sure how many different countries. But there's a lot of international students that work for us as well as American kids from all over the country. So, you have to be able to work with the diversity. Sometimes, there's language barriers and cultural barriers – things like that. And you have to reconcile that with the policies and procedures and the goals that we have to meet. So, while you have to bend a little bit culturally towards your employees, we also need to get them to understand what our mission is and what we have to do. And so I think that takes really good communication skills. And you need to have a little bit of business sense and understand that we have portioning and cost and we need to train our folks to recognize that. And that's a constant struggle -- as you well know -- that we're always saying 'Watch your portions! Watch your portions!'. A little bit of an accounting background would be good because we're dealing with cash sometimes and we have to watch our sales and things like that. So, you really need to be well-rounded.

Torria: Has there ever been a time where you just kind of got fed up with the job and thought about leaving – and moving on to somewhere else?

Steve: I think everyone has those days. So, I wouldn't say no to that. There's times where I think 'Geez why am I doing this?'. Nothing's going my way and I'm just having a real bad day. Can't get anyone to listen to me and there's frustrating days like that. And then there's days where things fall into place and kind of on top of the world. So, I think you get that in any job and any career you're going to have your good days go along with the bad days. So yeah certainly I've thought "What's the point? Why am I doing this? Can I move to another town and start all over?". It's a little harder to do once you have a family. Certainly, I've been there and I've considered it. I've interviewed around and just nothing has come up that's made me want to actually physically make that move.

Torria: Hm, I think that's about it.

Steve: Sounds good.

Torria: Alright. Thank you very much.