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Branching out

Expansions offer entry to banking careers

While big, national chain banks may alternate between major downsizings and branch expansions, smaller neighborhood banks have tended to maintain a steady flow of hiring. In many cases, their neighborhood focus has allowed them to tap their service areas for new employees. As major chains attempt to flood the Chicago market with hundreds of new branches, the uptown and suburban banks will hold on to valued employees and add one or two new branches a year.

A bank branch can be anything from a full service center to a "storefront" office with five to eight employees. CIB Bank is adding two new branches, according to recruiter Nikki Rogers. "Each branch usually involves two or three personal bankers and two or three tellers. We may open more if we find a site that's right for us."

Mid-America Bank has four new branches in the works. Tom Miers, senior vice-president of Retail Banking, says the first employee at each branch is the manager. "These are usually people who have come up through our associate manager training program."

At First Bank of Highland Park, Director of Human Resources Deb Elliot says that while they're not currently expanding facilities, they do need new tellers and other entry-level personnel. "We have actually had to advertise for new tellers, which we usually never do at the end of the year."

Though today's economy means many former management people have applied for entry-level jobs, many will find they lack some of the basic requirement to work as a teller. Most banks will want six months to a year of cash drawer experience. "Balancing a checkbook doesn't count," Elliot adds, "you need to have been handling cold hard cash." A high school diploma or GED, customer service, data entry and experience with banking software are also helpful. Most importantly, new applicants need a good credit history. This requirement can work against up to 90 percent of the people applying for an entry-level position.

Salaries for tellers are indeed entry-level:

figures from salary.com show that a bank teller in the Chicago area earns a base salary of \$18,200 to \$21,400 per year. But at many banks, it's an important first step and training ground for future loan officers, personal bankers, or other specialists.

Further opportunities can be had at a bank's corporate offices. Rogers notes that while CIB is owned by a bank holding company based on Wisconsin, "many of our corporate functions are at our Mt. Prospect office, such as auditing, IT and corporate banking."

Some banks provide help for new employees beyond the usual training and orientation. Mid-America Bank provides an allowance for "career apparel," according to Training, Recruiting and Benefits Manager Barb Peck:

"In spite of the fact that most people want a casual work environment for themselves, they still want to see their doctor or banker look professional. So we try to make sure that a wardrobe is not a barrier to entry for new people."

Many new bank employees come from the areas banks serve; students on internships, or parents applying to work part-time at "their" banks for extra income and a flexible schedule.

"People start with us who may not want a "career," but they'll come back to work with us part-time or they want to stay with us because they're raising families and they want to balance their work and their lives," said Peck. Many new employees are hired as referrals from current employees.

A local bank branch can be an opportunity for people starting out in financial careers, or a flexible way to balance work and family life. Like any business, they need to provide opportunities for talented employees while remaining focused on customer service. As Miers put it, "one of the ways we've been successful is by being a great place to work."

—Mark McDermott



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