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Household staff are vital for a stress-free lockdown, and the ultra-rich pay a premium for the best

It's not just nannies and tutors: the super-rich will pay handsomely for butlers, housekeepers and cooks to keep lockdown life in order

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You only know what you're missing when it's gone. I'm not talking about love here, but domestic help. During the first lockdown many people experienced – some for the first time – what it's like to do their own cleaning, cooking and ironing (let alone nannying and tutoring).

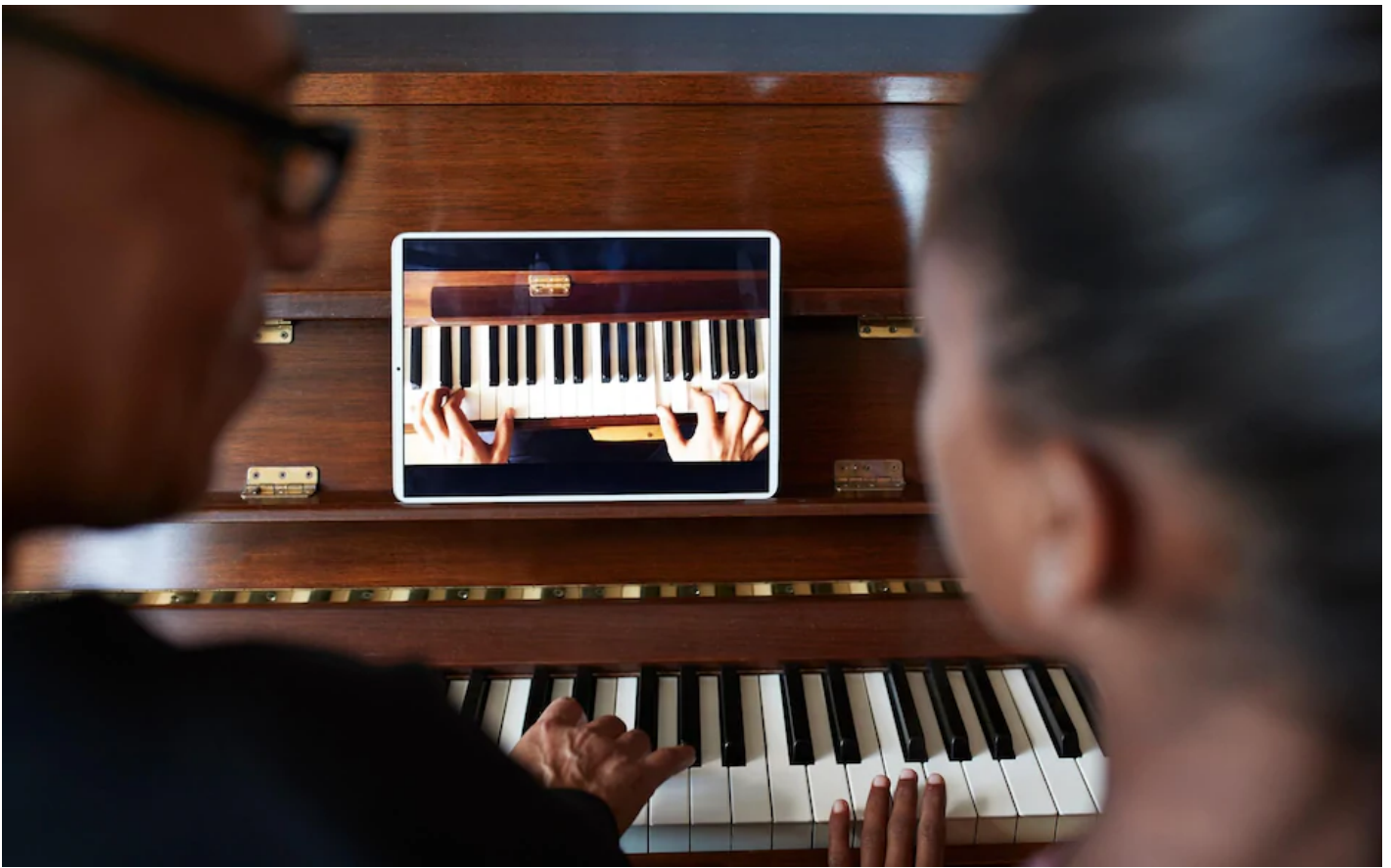
Families with young children were particularly affected. In pre-Covid days, children of the wealthy would have had a full day of school followed by revision (supervised by a nanny or housekeeper) and possibly one or more face-to-face tutoring sessions. In the first lockdown this changed overnight and the same children ended up stuck in front of a screen with only a harassed mother - who might have a job to do herself - to supervise.



Home-schooling has become the norm | CREDIT: Getty Images

Lucy Challenger, whose company [Polo & Tweed](#) specialises in placing VIP staff in homes around the world, says she has heard many reports of deteriorating mental health among children, particularly teenagers, due to lack of contact with their peers.

Having (barely) survived the first lockdown, families rushed out to hire as many staff as they could to save them from further stress. “We were inundated with people looking for highly qualified nannies, particularly those with a degree in education,” says Challenger. “Our clients didn’t just need help supervising online learning: they need someone around for piano, singing and horse-riding lessons.”



Nannies of the super-rich need a roster of skills | CREDIT: Getty Images

Many of Challenger's clients have large country houses or estates where they can house new staff and even keep them in quarantine before starting work, though the agencies Covid-test all applicants before sending them on a job. Usually, the best staff wouldn't be willing to live in the boondocks but most have now adapted a war footing.

"Nannies who might have turned up their noses at doing laundry and so on now roll up their sleeves," she says. Many in fact are paid by the hour around the clock. Nannies whose remit includes getting up at night (which generally only maternity nurses do) can expect a salary of £2,000 a week.

The fact that many wealthy Londoners have decamped from the city means that staff have to take the work where they can find it. This also includes butlers, housekeepers and cooks, says Challenger. Before Covid, families often moved around, leaving a skeleton staff in place in their main home. But now that they're living in one place for extended periods, they want more help while they're there.

"Gardeners are also in demand," says Challenger. "Because they can do other things such as maintenance, errands and shopping."



Many wealthy Londoners have decamped to the countryside, taking their staff with them | CREDIT: Getty Images

In order to keep staff safe many families behave like hotels, testing their staff daily using one of the professional Covid kits normally seen in offices or schools. “One of my clients - who employs 40 people - bought her own £35,000 rapid-testing machine,” says Challenger. “The staff convene every morning in the grand hall, get tested and await the results in separate rooms,” she says. Having a large and draughty stately ensures there is plenty of air circulating about.

My cleaner Mary Selick who runs her own cleaning agency, Maydays, in Gloucestershire with a team of eight women says she is inundated with requests since so many Londoners fled to the Cotswolds.

“Good cleaners are very hard to find in the country,” she says. “If a cleaner doesn’t know what she’s doing she can damage the house. I’ve been called in when the cleaner used products like Viakal on brass fittings which made them all go black.” (Selick has saved a lot of furniture from me and my well-intentioned efforts as well.)



Good cleaners are hard to find in the country, says one expert | CREDIT: Getty Images

Challenger now offers online courses on how to clean their heirlooms as well as how to manage staff. "[During the first lockdown] I literally had clients calling me asking if they should put silver in the washing machine and others demanding 'how do you change a duvet?'," she says. After all, there is a reason why hotel chambermaids usually work in pairs.

I tried to restore our handmade kitchen table myself and instead took off the varnish. Meanwhile I shrunk my favourite Loro Piana sweater, having been told the new Miele washing machines are designed for washing cashmere. They're not - at least in my hands. Though I taught myself how to stretch it back using hair conditioner via YouTube.

A wealthy Cotswold wife whose housekeeper got spooked by Covid and bailed at the beginning of the first lockdown never to return admits it was a bit of an adventure doing her own cleaning at the start but she had soon had enough. "It's a drag," she says. "I enjoyed having the house to myself at first but it rapidly wore off."

As soon as the first lockdown was over she called her usual top agencies to seek a replacement but was taken aback by the applicants. "Both agencies seemed to send us the dross," she says. "We eventually complained and both agencies sent us more appropriate candidates." The salary for a housekeeper working a 40-hour week is now in excess of £45k.



The very best household staff can command significant salaries | CREDIT: Getty Images

For those searching now: you may be in luck as so many people have lost their jobs thanks to the pandemic. A friend who runs his business from home required a new PA to work remotely. He has never seen such well-qualified candidates. “Two are lawyers,” he says. Another friend convinced a London restaurant chef to lockdown with the family in Somerset. The chef’s wife (a musician) took on the role of nanny to the three teenage children.

The latest trend among the wealthy is to employ estate managers even if the estate in question is only a Mayfair flat. This effectively means they have a live-in engineer who spares them the headache of having to call in service providers when the home cinema or infrared sauna glitches.

The same men (it is usually men) are also put in charge of keeping NetJets on standby for when the family eventually decides to leg it. “When my clients heard there was another lockdown many took off,” says Challenger, “taking some of their staff with them.”

I would happily skip the NetJet but my dream would be to have my own domestic assistant who fights BT so I don’t have to. For the pleasure of never having to chase an errant builder again, I should expect to part with around £60,000 per year. Money well spent.

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