

Poker tournament helps Caesars pick new hires

By Ron Sylvester, Las Vegas Sun

Most American companies screen and court MBA graduates the same way: They dispatch teams to elite business schools to schmooze and talk up their companies. They host mixers with free food and drinks. Members of the companies' development departments screen students, often with problem-solving tests, then invite a chosen few to corporate headquarters for more interviews.

The best of the best land internships that could lead to full-time jobs and, possibly, corner offices.

Caesars Entertainment does it differently. It screens job candidates during a poker tournament.

Last weekend, as it has for the past eight years, Caesars hosted its MBA Poker Championships and Recruitment Weekend at Planet Hollywood. More than 500 people, most looking to join the company's management corps, attended.

"The cool thing about this is you can be exposed to companies for a whole weekend, meet and talk with recruiters and executives, and play a little poker," said Ashish Gupta, 29, a student at USC's Marshall School of Business.

In Caesars' experience, the MBAs who best understand poker are likely to be the same people best suited to run casinos and hotels.

"Look at the skills required of quality poker players," said Paul King, corporate director of talent and recruiting for Caesars, which runs the World Series of Poker. "They are the same types of qualities we look for in candidates. They are

analytical in nature, strategic in approach to the game and savvy in the way they play. What we're looking for is a critical eye and analytical thinking skills."

Of the hundreds who play in the three-day tournament, only a handful win positions with the company. Last year, 12 candidates from the poker weekend received invitations to work in Caesars' President's Associate Program.

The two-year apprenticeship offers associates a chance to interact with senior executives and participate in business decisions and analysis. It's the first step toward being offered a permanent position managing table games, slot machines, hotels, restaurants, and marketing or finance departments. Four of the 12 president's associates hired at last year's MBA poker event were given full-time jobs.

The idea came out of a poker game among students at the University of Chicago's business school. The friends began playing, then invited students from other business schools to play. King's predecessor, Brad Warga, learned about the game and brought the concept to Caesars. He called it the MBA World Series of Poker.

"When it first started, it was much more a brand-building event, not as focused on recruiting," King said. "In the last few years, we've changed that. We are interviewing people, and some are leaving with offers. We're not a boring company, and what better way to expose people to the fun culture of our company and Las Vegas than a poker tournament?"

"It's now a pretty well-known event across the MBA universe. It has really become a huge part of our recruiting brand in this market."

It also makes Caesars stand out from crowds of companies, including its competitors on the Strip. Caesars says it is the only casino company that markets itself this way.

“Every time I go out and talk about this, they say this is the most creative event they’ve seen,” King said.

The company imposes only one restriction: Poker players must be in the process of earning an MBA or have recently graduated to qualify for the tournament, which draws people looking to enter the workforce, as well as those who want to change careers.

“You’d be surprised how many people we get out of consulting companies like McKinsey or Bain,” King said.

The weekend also has spawned satellite tournaments. Students at the Carnegie Mellon Tepper School of Business, for instance, hold their own tournament, with the winner receiving a free trip to the Caesars recruitment weekend.

It isn’t all fun and games, though. Besides playing poker, candidates meet with Caesars executives, attend company presentations and participate in interviews.

On Sunday, invitations were handed out to those who met the company’s expectations.

“We get people who just want to come and play, hang out with their grad school buddies and enjoy Vegas,” King said. “But we also get a good majority who ... are very actively looking for work.”

It’s easy to spot the job seekers, King said.

“The people who are just here for fun show up in shorts and flip-flops,” he said. “Those wanting jobs bring suits.”

Caesars doesn’t limit potential hires by school, but it does focus on a few key campuses. There’s Harvard, of course – the alma mater of Caesars chief Gary Loveman – as well as MIT, Duke, Vanderbilt, the University of Chicago, Northwestern, UCLA and USC.

John Payne, Caesars' president of enterprise shared services, is the highest ranking executive to have come out of the program. Others alumni, according to their LinkedIn profiles, include Matthew Heiskel, assistant general manager of Bally's, Atlantic City (2007); Jacqueline Beato, director of investor relations (2008); Neera Chanani, head of Caesars' South Asia division (2010); and Chirag Tasker, regional vice president of marketing in Philadelphia (2010).

Caesars also opens the poker tournament to recruiters from other companies. On Saturday, the company hosted a Recruiters' Lounge, where businesses that sponsor the tournament could meet candidates and collect resumes. This year, game manufacturer IGT signed on and sent executives to Planet Hollywood.

The weekend also raises money for charity. Players buy into the tournament for between \$85 and \$225. The top 10 players or so take home prize money from about 70 percent of the tournament fees. The rest is donated to Keep Memory Alive at the Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health.

"We make it productive, and at the same time, it's really, really fun," King said. "It's unique to Las Vegas and our company."