

'The Apprentice' Without TV, Trump or a High-Salary Job

SIXTEEN people competed fiercely on national television for a chance to become Donald Trump's apprentice. After all, even the losers received national television exposure, and the winner was rewarded with a job paying \$250,000 a year.

Less clear is why 27 unemployed people would spend nearly a month competing for a \$40,000-a-year entry-level job as a junior programmer in the Jersey City offices of Maple Securities U.S.A.

During the contest, which was held in February, the candidates helped to set up their own training space; learned an arcane computer language called A.P.L. (A Programming Language); and performed a series of complex programming tasks on tight deadlines.

The competition was the brainchild of Brooke Allen, the head of the statistical arbitrage group at Maple Securities.

Mr. Allen is a devotee of A.P.L., which is considered a dead language by many programming enthusiasts, but is cherished by the "geekiest of the geeks," according to one practitioner.

Mr. Allen devised a behavioral finance game to simulate what he called "common irrational" behaviors of stock market participants, and he wanted to hire a junior programmer to maintain it.

"People understood they were taking a risk and could drop out any time," he said.

"No one gave off a sense of desperation."

Some workplace experts said that hiring practices like Mr. Allen's were unusual, but that they resembled the "try and buy" approach that some employers use to test candidates before hiring them full time.

In many companies, including The New York Times, potential employees are given a tryout or a series of assignments to help determine the quality of their work and whether they fit into the office culture. Robert I. Sutton, a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford University and the author of "Weird Ideas That Work: 11 1/2 Practices for Promoting, Managing and Sustaining Innovation" (The Free Press, 2002), said he had seen far worse hiring practices than Mr. Allen's.

"It's better than what you see in the average corporation," Dr. Sutton said. "Everyone knew upfront about the risks when they signed on."

Other experts, however, described extended job tryouts as bordering on exploitive. "Looking for a job is stressful and demanding work in a recovering economy," said Joanne Murray, a management consultant and the director of the Center for Work and Service at Wellesley College, "and I question the advisability of devoting so much time to something like this. Not pay-

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Marko Georgiev for The New York Times

In Brooke Allen's contest, 27 people competed for an entry-level job in Jersey City.

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ing someone for that much time is also problematic."

Mr. Allen may not have been required to pay the Maple Securities job candidates because he was giving them an opportunity to learn A.P.L., according to Lawrence Z. Lorber, a lawyer specializing in labor and employment law at Proskauer Rose in Washington.

Mr. Lorber said that in general, companies offering extended job tryouts were required to compensate participants, while those offering education were not.

Several other employers have recently experimented with their own "try and buy" hiring based on the tactics used on reality shows like "The Apprentice" and "Survivor."

In May, the Stamford, Conn., office of the Regus Group, a provider of office space, began a three-month competition among eight paid interns for a chance at a full-time job. The company would not say how much that job would pay.

"You'd have to be under a rock not to feel the buzz of 'The Apprentice,'" said Shari Aponte, a company spokeswoman. "We thought this would be a clever way for attracting additional candidates to our program, and we've received great publicity. We don't want to criticize or demean anyone."

She said that the interns work on "entrepreneurial" projects involving sales analysis and creative design and that they are reviewed weekly by senior management.

The Maple Securities recruiting effort began in January, when Mr. Al-

len ran a newspaper ad describing the kind of person he was looking for. He received 300 responses. He invited the 300 to download a 500-page computer manual on A.P.L. and an accompanying quiz. The 38 applicants who returned the quiz were given a chance to learn the language and take a chance at one or possibly more available positions.

By the end of the three-week training period, only 13 candidates remained. Mr. Allen ultimately hired two programmers from the tryout program, one for \$40,000 and another for nearly twice that amount.

Mr. Allen decided to help the "surplus" programmers whom he could not hire. So he introduced the remaining applicants at a New York City A.P.L. conference in March, in the hope that other employers might hire them. At least two of those applicants found jobs related to their A.P.L. experience and the contacts they made at the March conference.

Mr. Allen described the program as an unconventional hiring strategy with benefits both for the employer, the employees who were ultimately hired and even those who were not.

Not every applicant was happy with the process. Tony Bozanich, 28, an unemployed programmer with a master's degree, attended several weeks of A.P.L. training before dropping out. He had been looking for a job for about four months before he saw Mr. Allen's cryptic ad and decided to take a chance.

"Going to those sessions was like watching a train wreck in slow motion," Mr. Bozanich said. It was, he said, "a testament to the bad economy that so many overqualified people would come in for one lousy pro-

gramming trainee position."

Mr. Bozanich said he thought Mr. Allen was genuinely motivated to help the trainees find work, but he also considered the process inevitably exploitive.

Ben Dattner, an adjunct professor of organizational psychology at New York University, said that while employers using extended tryouts need to be candid with candidates about whatever methods and criteria they are using, some applicants might view these types of job competitions as more enjoyable than exploitive.

That was the case for Karine Ng, who was part of a job competition last September modeled on "Survivor" at DiMassimo Brand Advertising in New York. Ms. Ng was one of 10 people who participated in a week-long competition for an entry-level advertising job. The group worked on making pitches and it devised a promotional campaign for Crunch Fitness. Every night, management voted two contestants out.

Ms. Ng survived four days before she was asked to leave. Though disappointed, she called the experience a win-win situation. DiMassimo, she said, gained more insight into candidates, and she received some on-the-job training and made contacts. DiMassimo referred her to Jericho Public Relations, where she is now an account coordinator.

But Ms. Murray of Wellesley College warns that a job contest may be a sign that a cutthroat work culture awaits prospective employees.

"It's a statement of culture and values and not to be taken lightly," she said. "The job search process is something that should not be made cavalier."