

Too Few Cooks for Our Kitchens

WP-ZAF-107

restaurant

in all its culinary splendor, is an epicurean haven where gastronomic artistry converges with conviviality, where the symphony of flavors harmonizes with the aesthetics of ambiance, and where the act of dining transcends mere sustenance to become an exquisite journey through the realms of taste, culture, and sensory delight.)

culture

intricate tapestry woven from the loom of human existence, encompasses the collective heritage, beliefs, traditions, and expressions defining a society's soul.

restaurant worker

from the maestros of the kitchen crafting delectable dishes to the graceful servers who execute a ballet of service, restaurant workers are the heartbeat of this savory theater, infusing passion, skill, and dedication into every meal served and every memory created.

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Submitted by guest Restaurant Consultant Jesse Brown

Restaurants Are Vital Cultural Connectors

We take restaurants for granted and we've commoditized food particularly in the west where food is generally readily available to most people. Food is more than a source of nourishment – it's a cultural cornerstone fostering connections, traditions, and a sense of identity. It plays a vital role in our social, emotional, and physical well-being, making it a fundamental aspect of human life and civilization.

Restaurants play a crucial role in this by serving as cultural ambassadors, offering diverse cuisines allowing people to experience different traditions and flavors. Why do so many people enjoy ethnic restaurants? Dining experiences, help bridge cultural gaps and even take families back to their roots.

No One Wants to Work in Restaurants Anymore

In the post pandemic world restaurants still face extreme staffing challenges. The main drivers of this reality are low pay, poor management and lack of career growth. As a result of a historic staffing crisis more customers speak out about long ticket times or food not being prepared properly. This only leads to more management team pressure to resolve customer concerns and consequently even more pressure being put on the employees to perform better.

Review platforms such as Yelp, Google Reviews and similar enable customers easy access to create poor ratings. There is little incentive to create a positive review and human nature remains the same despite technology. Let's face it, people are much more likely to communicate adversity than pleasure – think tribe members warning each other about the saber tooth tiger at the river water gathering site!

These circumstances collectively create toxic work cycles for many restaurants. Service workers are harder to recruit and managers overwork themselves to try and make up for the lack of staff completing tasks necessary to keep the business moving forward. As vicious as a cycle can be, managers transfer pressure onto the lower-level staff members in-turn affecting customers. Repeat.

The root of the cycle is lack of staffing. Why? Pre-pandemic restaurant work was already laborious enough. Many career restaurant workers are asking themselves today “is this even worth it?” Those possessing talent to meet the physical and mental demands of the industry find better long-term careers in other fields such as real estate and automotive repair. Now with even fewer employees in the industry the career restaurant workers feel stretched to their limits in ways they never imagined. Potential new hires hear of nightmares working in the industry and opt for other jobs like Uber, Uber Eats, Amazon and other work from home tech gigs. Restaurants are in a very unique scenario where demand is high, and staffing supply is low.

Here is the good news: there is a light at the end of the tunnel and it’s the owner’s choice whether it is an oncoming train or daylight. With the right advice, right mentality, and right plan your restaurant staffing crisis has a positive resolution.

Recommendations

Hire quicker- Reduce the amount of time it takes to onboard employees. This means fewer interviews, less strenuous pre-requisites and less hierarchy to bring potential new hires on the team. My experience suggests little value from employees learning at other restaurants. Restaurants trend towards doing things their own way and truthfully, staff needs to learn systems and processes contributing to the owner’s business model. Convert lack of restaurant experience into a benefit sometimes a blank canvas is a better media.

“...employers seem to be getting more and more cavalier with candidates’ time, pushing well beyond what’s reasonable. At some point, they’re likely to lose their best applicants to organizations with the foresight to streamline what they ask of people.” - Allen Green of Slate.com

Also, instead of hiring duties being spread amongst 2-3 managers, reduce this responsibility to one trained manager. This generation of candidates hates going through a circus of interviews to get a job many people do not even want to do. Hiring them in the first interview shows them belief they have what it takes and excitement about bringing them to be a part of the team. Hiring them quicker means reducing the chance they will look elsewhere for a job.

I typically interview and implement them in the company payroll and POS systems the same day so they are ready to begin working and earning wages as soon as possible. **Retain current staff -** This one should be obvious yet, frequently isn't so obvious. Retaining the current staff has enormous benefits. Increasing retention percentage nearly always delivers positive effects in labor cost and keeping intact a family culture. It is hard to keep new hires engaged in environments where everyone is new.

“When leaders throughout an organization take an active, genuine interest in the people they manage, when they invest real time to understand employees at a fundamental level, they create a climate for greater morale, loyalty, and, yes, growth.” – Patrick Lencioni, President of The Table Group, a management consulting firm.

Human nature is to take for granted what is consistent in our lives; the negative effect is long term employees feel undervalued and unappreciated. Remind long term employees they are valuable and essential to the organization. Recognize and celebrate their efforts. Include them

on key decisions and changes concerning the restaurant so they feel stakeholder interest in their work environment as opposed to changes just being thrown on them with no warning or ability to make suggestions. Other benefits such as insurance, increase in pay over periods of time, and opportunities for growth within the company will also increase the amount of time they work for you. In the event that an employee does find a job or career elsewhere do not banish them or treat them as if they left a cult. Celebrate them perhaps even throw them a going away party showing other staff members you appreciate the work they are doing.

- **Use flexible scheduling** - This may be hard to initialize, however once there are enough staff members it is a fairly easy benefit to add to restaurant working. With the influx of hybrid and remote work, many restaurant workers leave the industry because of lack of flexibility. Allow them to take time off, trade shifts, and go on vacations when they request.

“Time is really the only capital that any human being has, and the only thing he can't afford to lose.” — Thomas Edison.

Through my experience I noticed the greatest negative consequences in rigid work environments with little flexibility – these almost always result in staffing issues. Leveraging part time employees and short time employees is a great way to keep core or long-term employees happy with job flexibility and they will even promote it to other friends and family resulting in better applicants. Flexibility is rare in the restaurant world so when provided it is a positive anomaly.

- **Employee referral program** - Employee referral programs are a great way to staff any business. Incentivizing employees bringing other reliable friends and family can be a great way to create a consistent work environment because those employees acquired by referral realize the friend or family member who referred them not only provided them an opportunity but risked reputation with their superiors. Typically referred employees present far fewer “no call no show” or “call out” less frequently. Whenever an employee refers someone, reward them with incentives such as tickets to a local sports event, increase in pay, bottle of wine or similar.

“Employee referrals are not just a recruiting strategy, they're a retention strategy. When employees refer someone to work at your company, they are saying 'I want this person to be part of our team.' That's a powerful endorsement. And when those referrals result in successful hires, it reinforces the idea that the company is a great place to work, which helps to retain top talent.” - Hung Lee, Founder and CEO of WorkShape.io

- **Provide stable scheduling** - Restaurants self-stigmatize implementing erratic scheduling processes. Calling workers on days off or changing staff schedules at the drop of a dime throughout the week are deal breakers. This makes it very difficult to live a real life and if not solved, employees will seek employment elsewhere in a more stable environment. So, unless the employee communicates they do not mind last minute schedule changes do not ever change their schedule without their consent. Not one time. Ever.

“Stable scheduling is the first step to work-life balance. Imagine life without it. You wouldn't know what your work schedule will be next week — or even tomorrow. You couldn't plan doctor's appointments, childcare, or social activities because you never know when you'll be called in to work.” - Gail Golden (Gail Golden Consulting)

If possible, provide schedules as far as two weeks out as opposed to the typical one week at a time – the standard fare in most restaurants. This gives employees the capability to plan things out in their lives creating better harmony for work and home life. Work conditions bleed into the home lives for many of us and restaurant workers in particular. When things go neglected at home or in their personal lives, they will bring them to work or not be able to perform at the highest level while at work. Be consistent with the scheduling process and they will be consistent in their work-related responsibilities.

In Conclusion, Some Digestifs

In the challenging landscape of the restaurant industry, the ongoing staffing crisis presents a formidable yet not insurmountable hurdle, particularly in the post-pandemic era. As we discussed earlier, the role of food in our culture is multifaceted, from fostering social connections to expressing creativity and identity. In addressing the staffing crisis, empathy emerges as a vital prerequisite. The ability to step into the shoes of restaurant employees, to understand their desires, concerns, and aspirations, is fundamental. It's a practice rooted in the age-old wisdom of treating others as you wish to be treated.

By actively listening, asking the right questions, and creating an open and communicative work environment, restaurant owners can retain their existing workforce and also attract new talent. Embracing this empathetic approach, restaurants can navigate the staffing challenges successfully and continue to play a central role in our culture by providing spaces for social interaction, culinary creativity, and memorable dining experiences.

About Jesse –

*Jesse Brown, a seasoned consultant with over a decade of experience in the restaurant industry comes to us from Orlando, Florida's vibrant culinary scene. His deep understanding of industry challenges and opportunities, along with his commitment to optimizing restaurant operations, enhancing customer experiences, and improving profitability, makes him a trusted partner for establishments in the competitive hospitality landscape. With 15 years in the dynamic Orlando restaurant scene, including roles as a sous chef, executive chef, and general manager, Jesse's contributions make a lasting mark on renowned dining establishments. He is the founder of **Faith and Effort LLC**, a distinguished restaurant consulting firm guided by Christian values, creativity, and purpose, offering tailored solutions to elevate dining experiences and drive success in the culinary world.*

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