

# Expectations of Today's Hospitality Human Resource Professional

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## **The hospitality industry currently faces**

**a talent crisis.** Hotels and restaurants are facing serious staffing challenges as business begins to return in the aftermath of post COVID recovery. But the reasons for the apparent shortage of talent might surprise you. The extended period of closures and

loss of business required difficult decisions to be made such as which workers would stay and which would lose their jobs. But when the time came to increase staffing levels and call back some of these workers, many refused to return. To further compound matters, the existing workers that stuck it out during the past 18 months and had to assume multiple jobs, often with reduced pay and long hours, are starting to resign and leave the hospitality industry. Any hotel or restaurant operator that has not yet come to the realization, should read this article.



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**Who hasn't experienced** going out to a restaurant for lunch and discovered that restaurant now is only open for dinner on select days of the week? Or walked into a restaurant and been told by the host that the wait will be 1 hour, even though there are numerous tables open for seating? Why are some hotels closing their reservation system to not accept same day reservations? Is it because they don't have adequate housekeeping workers to get the rooms cleaned? Why are group clients unable to get hotel sales and catering staff to return their sales inquiry calls and emails? Is it because the team is busy helping check guests in at the front desk, waiting on tables in the restaurant, or helping clean guestrooms? If you are asking these same questions, you are not alone. The authors of this article have encountered all of the above issues while interacting with these venues.

**Typically, as hospitality consultants,** we are asked to focus tasks that ultimately relate to improved revenue generation. Leadership development, succession planning and labor management all play a part in achieving such goals. Unfortunately, these areas of focus require a fully staffed team in place to service their customers. This article will review why team members have been hesitant to return to their jobs, why others are choosing to leave the hospitality industry, and why these staff shortages are impacting revenues and brand reputations. To address these opportunities, a sound and well-executed talent recruitment and retention plan, led by strong human resource leadership, is required.

**Key components of an effective talent recruitment and retention plan** for a service-oriented business must include the following:

- **OWNER COMMITMENT:** The commitment of owners and operators to support the implementation of the above short-term and long-term strategies
- **STRONG LEADERSHIP:** Human Resources Leadership with the skills and creativity to help develop and manage the actions and processes defined
- **A PLAN TO FIND TALENT:** Specific strategies to seek out and attract the necessary talent for all open job classifications

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- **A PLAN TO RETAIN TALENT:** The development of creative and "out-of-the-box" retention strategies to prevent workers from wanting to leave the industry and encourage new hires stay for an extended period

### **OWNER COMMITMENT:**

**Owners and operators must shift their focus** from short term damage control to long term investment planning:

- Hotel and restaurant owners and operators faced one of the most difficult and challenging periods in recent history when the COVID 19 pandemic caused world travel to come to a standstill.
- Individual and group hotel room cancellations quickly followed along with restaurants being asked to limit or close their stores for an indefinite period.
- The reduction of variable or hourly labor was immediately adjusted, when it was initially projected the pandemic might last 3-6 months.
- Salaried managers were first told their positions were being furloughed, but a short time later, many were advised they were officially laid off, with no guarantee of when or if they might be asked to return.
- Now that demand has returned, restaurant seating limitations have been reduced or eliminated and active recruitment is taking place.

**It is time for** owners and operators to shift from operating their businesses in a cost-containment mode to a fully staffed operational mode. We continue to encounter hospitality operators who try to limit staffing levels to recapture some of their revenue loss from last year. They are not strategically planning to regain revenues by competitively improving their product as market demand returns. It is time to assess the losses in revenue now occurring by not be responsive to their target guests' needs.

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## **STRONG LEADERSHIP:**

**This might seem obvious**, but we have encountered quite a few hospitality operators who have elected to lay off their human resource leadership at the start of the COVID pandemic. It's a dangerous assumption to believe that HR tasks can be redistributed among other leaders within the organization. Many have still not brought back this vital position. For a service operation to not have some level of human resource leadership, at either at the property or corporate level, places these businesses at a competitive disadvantage. Ideally, the human resource leader in place is not just experienced in human resource development, training and recruitment, but also familiar with the hospitality industry. A qualified human resource leader should be hired first and tasked with development of talent recruitment and retention through a strategic plan.

## **Recommended actions to counter these challenges:**

1. Consistent leadership, performance and accountability are needed more than ever. Not all managers and supervisors have been properly trained, or held accountable, to effectively lead the day-to-day activities. Workers often receive conflicting guidance and information. Best practices, executed consistently, lead to high-performing teams.
2. A post pandemic interim adjustment of job functions may have to be made until we fully return to some semblance of normalcy. Initially, it is not logical to expect workers to perform the exact same functions pre-lockdown. Job-redesign may be needed to exceed guest expectations. This includes getting more support from supervisors and managers on daily tasks, particularly when dealing directly with guests. It is time to think differently and get creative!
3. Enhance daily communication strategies. Pre-shift meetings done consistently and correctly are powerful ways to share information and understand guests' changing needs. Use this time to also celebrate moments, recognize individuals, prepare employees for daily shifts, and focus on common objectives and goals. These daily pre-shift meetings should follow a consistent format to reinforce desired behaviors and customer service expectations.

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## **A PLAN TO FIND TALENT:**

**Why is it so difficult to attract past or new talent for your business?** For starters, we need to understand what is driving their concerns:

- Sudden staff reductions and layoffs created high levels of uncertainty.
- They questioned their self-worth, and loyalty to the hospitality operators they had supported without question previously.
- As the weeks turned into months with no signs of the hospitality industry returning to any sense of normalcy, many workers were placed in serious financial distress. These individuals now struggled to support themselves and their families, while also working through feelings of frustration from being so quickly discarded by their employers. They now lacked self-confidence and questioned their career choices.
- These workers had no choice but to consider other industries and professions. They had to retool their skills and find new sources of income to make a living.
- Some operators chose to first reach out to the workers they felt would be most appropriate and needed initially. Their intent was to increase staffing gradually in conjunction with future demand. If the workers were unwilling or unable to return, the operators then sought applicants externally.
- Other operators viewed this extended period of layoffs as an opportunity to explore what other talent was in their market and advertised their select job vacancies. This action also sent the hotel's past workers the perceived message that they were not wanted nor of any value to their hotel, since they were not being given the opportunity to return.

## **Recommended actions to counter these challenges:**

1. Partner with local unemployment offices and establish a hiring presence at their locations. As unemployment benefits decrease, individuals will have no choice but to return to work. At these locations you can engage directly with candidates. A personalized experience has an advantage to any online advertisement, especially for back-of-the-house roles.

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2. Give past workers a reason to return to work. Consider a "welcome back" strategy and implement changes such as:
  - Offer enhanced benefits to attract talent from nearby competitors, such as recognition of past seniority for time worked, waving the waiting period for insurance, or possibly a signing and / or retention bonus.
  - Share with them the individual recognition and appreciation programs your business offers on a weekly and monthly basis. This would include individual recognition for positive guest comments in which they are named, departmental appreciation breakfasts, and monthly team member appreciation events.
  - Review what further benefits or perks you can offer to attract and retain quality talent. Examples may include free or discounted parking, bus tickets for workers using public transportation, gift cards that can be earned that will further help offset cost of living expenses.
  
3. Partner with non-profits and local organizations currently supporting unemployed individuals in some fashion or another, as a source for talent referrals.
  
4. No one will service your customers better than your own workers. With that said, however, the use of temporary labor during short term high demand periods will most likely be necessary. Maintain a positive relationship with key temporary labor serves near your business.
  
5. As an employer, don't take hard work for granted from your team. Recognize their value through hand-written notes, share during one-to-one meetings, and show how much you appreciate their hard work in front of their peers.
  
6. Full-time workers are typically far more loyal to their place of employment, compared to part-time workers. Supervisors should consider this when scheduling and in the development of these workers and encourage future advancement

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## **A PLAN TO RETAIN TALENT:**

**Why are hospitality workers choosing to leave the industry?** We have spoken with various hospitality clients on this issue. We wanted to understand the reasons these workers were resigning from the industry. Common reasons include being overworked, under-paid, and underappreciated. The workers retained to stay on board, rather than be laid off, were continually asked to work multiple jobs and deal with difficult or angry guests due to the operation being understaffed. Interesting to note, that when we questioned operators as to why they were short of staff, they stated it was due to a lack of applicant flow and candidates wanting higher rates of pay. When we asked the workers that have resigned the same question, their response was that the owners / operators would not approve the hiring or staffing of the additional workers yet. We suspect that both perspectives are contributing to understaffing. Launching a strategic plan with actionable items and completion dates would resolve the conflict.

## **Recommended actions to counter these challenges:**

1. Employees do not leave companies; employees leave supervisors. We know this has been true even during pre-pandemic days. Now more than ever lack of compassion, gratitude, and appreciation are the leading causes for call-offs and job abandonment. Appreciation is not the same as recognition activities. Appreciation should be conveyed verbally and through supportive actions.
2. Meaningful recognition and appreciation. Recognition can be done daily and on-the-spot. Recognize the right behaviors and celebrate daily! Make work fun! Demonstrating appreciation, by taking the time to find out all of the new jobs associates are handling under hybrid positions, will mean more to your workers than simple compliments. It also communicates an awareness of the problem, so that associate knows a plan is underway to correct the staffing levels.
3. Make the team a part of the solution! Engage team members from different departments to participate in work groups to find solutions to daily challenges. This

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strategy also creates buy-in and commitment from the team. It is also an excellent way to identify associates with leadership skills and open advancement options.

**In summary**, we identified that the hospitality industry currently faces a talent crisis in terms of recruiting and retaining good managers, supervisors, and hourly workers. The COVID pandemic, challenged owners and workers. This has created some other dynamics in terms of why workers are hesitant to return to their previous jobs and why others are seeking alternate jobs outside the hospitality industry. We identified the four key elements of a sound Talent Recruitment and Retention Plan that include: Owner Commitment, Strong Leadership, A Plan to Find Talent, and A Plan to Retain Talent. For each of these elements, we identified several recommended actions with the option of learning more by contacting Hospitality Performance Systems and Destination HR.

### **About Hospitality Performance Systems, Inc. (HPS)**

*Hospitality Performance Systems (HPS) was created to provide operational and sales support to the hospitality industry globally. Founded in 2009 this enterprise takes advantage of its founder and President, Stanton D Jacobs, CHA, with over 30 years of proven success in the hospitality industry and strategic relationships globally, HPS is affiliated with a wide array of professionals specializing in their respective disciplines, enabling HPS to provide a wide range of services. <https://www.hps-strategic.com> <https://www.linkedin.com/in/stantonjacobs/>*

### **About Destination HR, LLC**

*Founded by Adriana Giselle Cooper, a bilingual human resources executive with progressive multi-disciplinary experience in domestic and international markets. With a coach and mentor approach, Adriana is a business partner to senior leadership. She is known for building and leading high-performing teams and implementing efficient compliant best practices driving ROI. Adriana excels at assessing and identifying innovative people solutions for companies experiencing significant change and rapid growth and is passionate about finding amazing talent and building organizational excellence. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/adrianacooper>*