

# Restaurant HR Insights

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## Attracting Restaurant Employees Post-coronavirus

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on many industries — and the hospitality industry is no exception. Now, as lockdowns disappear and restrictions loosen, more restaurants are resuming normal business operations. As the demand for dining increases, the hiring scramble is on for restaurants. In addition to employee and customer health and safety, employee attraction is one of the biggest challenges restaurant owners and managers face.

While millions of Americans are still unemployed, restaurant leadership is struggling to find employees. This

labor shortage impacts dining from quick-service restaurants to five-star restaurants, along with positions from both the front and back of the house. As recruitment and retention continue to be top organizational challenges in the hospitality industry — and notably, restaurants — this article discusses tips for restaurateurs to attract and recruit employees.

### Pandemic Challenges

According to OpenTable, dining out in the United States is at about 90% of pre-pandemic levels. The demand for dining continues to rise as more Americans receive their COVID-19 vaccinations and local establishment capacities increase. However, many restaurant owners are finding that some employees have left

the restaurant industry entirely. The following reasons likely created the recipe for a talent shortage:

- **Expanded unemployment benefits** — As part of the American Rescue Plan, the \$300 weekly unemployment boost is extended through the beginning of September 2021. These unemployment benefits can create challenges for employers striving to persuade the employment market to return to the workforce. However, this may start to shift as some states are ending their participation in federal unemployment programs earlier than the new extension.
- **Health concerns about COVID-19** — Many restaurant workers may not have been comfortable working without an available COVID-19 vaccine. Now that vaccines are widely accessible in the United States, some employees may be ready to return to the industry. However, they could still have concerns about the general workplace and working closely with their peers and guests who may or may not be vaccinated. In addition to health risks, employees may not want the added stress of enforcing health and safety guidelines (e.g., mask-wearing and social distancing) with guests.
- **Economic shift** — While the hospitality industry took a blow, some other industries accelerated in the past year. Essential businesses and industries — such as delivery services, warehousing and manufacturing — have attracted employees away from the restaurant industry and offered stable jobs.

Unfilled shifts can put managers behind, stress out the team, cause high turnover and damage the overall customer experience. As sales bounce back at restaurants, owners will need to get creative to attract and hire to meet the increasing hospitality demand.



## Restaurant Recruitment

Job seekers in the post-coronavirus employment market generally look for safety, competitive benefits and opportunities for career development. Every local market and restaurant have responded differently to the pandemic. Due to a staff shortage, some owners are closing early or opening later in the day. Some on-site dining is still closed so that limited remaining staff can focus their efforts on drive-thru, curbside or takeout services. In an attempt to meet dining demands, some restaurants are attracting and hiring employees with the following strategies:



- **Host hiring fairs.** Many chains and franchises have found success by hosting large-scale hiring events. However, job fairs can be scaled down for independent restaurants as well. To demonstrate the importance of health and safety, some restaurants even interview candidates from their vehicles in a drive-thru style. Virtual job fairs could be another option.
- **Leverage social media.** In today's digital world, it's important to create an engaging story around the restaurant's brand. Not only are guests looking for it, but potential employees are as well. Social media allows restauranteurs and managers to interact with current and potential employees. Be transparent about how the pandemic has impacted the restaurant and share ongoing changes being made. Hospitality workers often post when they're working and encourage friends and family to stop in. Similarly, employees could also post about their positive experiences while working for the restaurant or hospitality group to increase others' interest in applying for open positions.
- **Focus on referrals.** If restaurants are asking for employee referrals, then they should consider offering referral bonuses as an enticing employee benefit.
- **Look for transferable skills.** Many great candidates may not have the hospitality background that restaurant owners and managers typically look for. Some hiring managers are focusing on broad skills — such as sales, client service, multitasking and social media — that can transfer to a restaurant setting. From there, managers provide restaurant-specific training during onboarding. Furthermore, look beyond young candidates' lack of experience and invest in skills training that will help them succeed.
- **Expand benefits.** Along with competitive pay, some restaurants are offering attractive benefits such as signing bonuses, flexible hours, overtime and paid time off.
- **Turn patrons into employees.** Some owners have successfully hired and trained their regular guests to address staff shortages.
- **Use automation.** This may not be the most feasible solution in every case, but some restauranteurs are turning to robots and other technology to help serve and bus tables or even make salads. This investment yields a reliable employee who can tackle some of the hardest positions to hire for and retain.





## Other Considerations

Although employee attraction is critical to fully staffing restaurants, owners should continue to value and reward employees who have stuck around during the pandemic or consistently show up to work. As strong, reliable and loyal workers are hired and trained, it's critical to retain them in the competitive labor market. Restaurant owners are finding success by focusing on simple concepts, doing the best they can with what they have and treating their current workers right.

Restaurant employers would do well to focus on effective retention techniques. Some restaurants successfully retain employees by creating a positive company culture, boosting benefits, offering cross-training opportunities

and providing clear paths for career growth. Transparency is also important. Restaurant owners should be sharing business challenges and any adjustments being made while continuing to work on a long-term solution.

Contact JP Griffin Group to learn how to prepare for employees' return and develop unique recruitment strategies.

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