



MANAGEMENT CONNECTION

# STAFFING STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

## NAVIGATING LABOR CHALLENGES IN FOOD SERVICE

BY CHRISSY CARROLL, MPH, RD

**IT'S NO SECRET THAT STAFFING** is one of the biggest challenges facing foodservice managers. From recruitment to retention, it can be difficult to find and keep good employees at your facility. By using strategic methods, though, you can navigate the turbulent waters of labor challenges and sail your way to better staffing.

### WHY IS STAFFING SO CHALLENGING?

Several factors can make it difficult to hire in non-commercial food service:

- **Budget Constraints:** As inflation and rising costs continue to pound the wallets of many folks, job hunters are looking for higher compensation. If your budget restricts your ability to offer competitive wages, it can hinder both recruitment and retention efforts.
- **Physical Work:** From the dishwasher to the chef, your kitchen staff are on their feet most of their shift. These physically taxing tasks are not enjoyed by all job hunters.
- **Knowledge Gaps:** From food safety to allergen awareness to volume cooking, employees in noncommercial food service need many skills. If folks aren't sure about the ability to get on-the-job training, they may hesitate to apply. Similarly, if onboarding isn't a comprehensive and supportive process, they may quit.
- **Scheduling Fears:** With long-term care and hospital food service, you need to provide meals every single day of the year. The thought of working holidays and weekends may deter people from applying or affect retention.

These challenges can impact the quality of your program. Research in the *Journal of the American Medical Directors Association* found that many suggested actions to improve long-term care nutrition and meal experience were rated as difficult to implement due to lack of staff or lack of skills among current staff.

### TIPS FOR FINDING AND KEEPING BETTER CANDIDATES

If you find yourself struggling with these (or other) challenges, here are key tips for finding and keeping better candidates:

#### Develop Targeted Job Descriptions

Recruiting the right candidates starts with the job description. Craft detailed descriptions that accurately reflect the demands of the role, along with required skills and qualifications.

It can be helpful to differentiate between non-negotiable qualifications, and those that are nice-to-have. For example, former foodservice experience may be desirable, but requiring it could limit the pool of applicants. You might instead look for other transferable skills (like customer service or culinary knowledge), regardless of past experience.

Remember to highlight any attractive aspects of the role in your job description—for example, daytime shifts (great for parents who want to be home for their kids



after school), or extensive professional development opportunities.

In fact, the Deloitte Global 2022 Gen Z and Millennial Survey found that while pay is the number one reason why Millennial and Gen Z employees left a job in the last two years, good work/life balance and learning/development opportunities were the top priorities when choosing a new employer. Emphasizing these in your job description can attract candidates.

#### Research Compensation Rates

Hourly wage positions typically include compensation in the job description. While your budget will limit wages, it's important to periodically conduct an analysis of other local positions to see what competitors are offering. Don't just look at organizational food service; check into fast food restaurants and other comparable jobs. If your



**IF YOU CAN  
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that increasing  
compensation may  
reduce hiring issues and  
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might be more likely  
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request.**

department falls far below market rate, it may be time for a conversation with administration about increasing your labor budget.

Data is the key to any negotiation. Show the differences between market rate and your current compensation rates. Provide data on turnover in your department and the cost of hiring new employees. If you can demonstrate that increasing compensation may reduce hiring issues and turnover, administration might be more likely to comply with your request.

Including competitive compensation rates in your job postings can increase qualified applicants.

#### Consider Creative Recruitment Methods

Once you've got the job description done, advertise it! While posting it on your website is a good first step, consider other avenues where job

hunters might look—for example, online job boards (like Indeed), your organization’s Facebook page, job boards at local colleges, and social media groups (for example, town Facebook groups or the Nextdoor app).

You may need additional recruiting strategies too. Consider...

- Establishing partnerships with local culinary schools, dietary management training programs, nutrition science programs, and dietetic internships. Students may be looking for part-time hours or internship hours to complete their programming.
- Collaborating with local workforce development agencies. These agencies offer employment initiatives and training opportunities to support unemployed/underemployed residents and stimulate economic growth. Locations may have a pool of job seekers searching for opportunities.
- Implementing employee referral programs. When an employee refers a candidate and they’re hired, you can offer that employee a referral bonus. Some organizations also offer a secondary bonus if the referred candidate sticks around more than six months.
- Participating in local job fairs to showcase open roles and connect with potential candidates. Most hourly wage workers look for jobs close to home to avoid excessive unpaid commuting time, so these local fairs can be effective.

### Conduct Great Interviews

Now that you’ve got applicants, ensure that your interview questions will help you select the best option. Here are helpful tips:

- Ask candidates to provide specific examples of past experiences. Focus on questions that will illustrate competencies relevant to the job, such as teamwork, problem-solving, and customer service skills.

### FOCUS ON QUESTIONS

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- Present hypothetical scenarios related to the role and ask candidates how they would approach these situations.
- Pay attention to candidates’ soft skills during the interview, like communication, adaptability, and listening skills.
- Ask open-ended questions. Ken Hanson, CPM, CDM, CFPP, provided an example at an ANFP Regional Meeting earlier this year: Imagine asking someone “Can you make gravy?” Several candidates might say “yes.” But asking “Can you describe the step-by-step process for how you make gravy?” might differentiate between a candidate that heats up a can of gravy versus a candidate that starts with a roux using pan drippings. Either level of skill might be appropriate depending on the type and style of your organization, but the open-ended nature of the question offers more insight on baseline skills.
- Avoid problematic questions that could be illegal or discriminatory. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, do not ask any questions that relate to race, religion, ethnicity, age (unless verifying age-related legal requirements), pregnancy, family plans, presence of a disability, or genetic information. In addition, federal laws prohibit employers from illegally discriminating when using financial information to make hiring decisions. For example, the question “Do you own a



car?” could be deemed as discriminatory, as car ownership falls under “financial information.” Instead, you can ask “Do you have a reliable way to get to and from work?”

- Avoid unconscious biases that may influence your judgment. For example, you may have had poor experiences with millennial employees in the past, and thus assume most millennials will perform poorly. Try to let go of these biases before interviewing. Evaluate candidates solely based on their actual qualifications, skills, and responses to questions.

## Develop Employee Retention Strategies

Once you’ve got the employee in the door, it’s time to keep them there! According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Accommodation and Food Services industry has had the highest quit rate of any industry sector since mid-2021, consistently above 4.9 percent. This is far higher than the national average of approximately 2.6 percent, illustrating a need for better retention strategies.

An older systematic review in *Work: a journal of prevention, assessment, and rehabilitation* identified nine factors that employees considered part of a healthy and sustainable workplace:

1. **Collaboration and teamwork.** This creates a sense of camaraderie among employees, making them feel part of a cohesive unit and touching on our innate desire for belonging. A strong team means that employees can rely on each other when it comes to workload and support. This creates a less stressful working environment, which may be linked to job satisfaction and retention.
2. **Growth and development of the individual.** This starts with your new hire’s first day on the job with a good onboarding process. It’s easy to gloss over this when you’re busy or short-staffed, but it’s key for employees to feel adequately prepared and comfortable with their responsibilities. It’s also important to provide regular training and in-services to continuously improve your department.

Thinking bigger, you can also offer additional opportunities for professional development. Do you have employees who hope to obtain their CDM, CFPP credential? Perhaps you can cover those training costs. Professional development helps with retention while an employee is completing the program and may enhance their performance.

3. **Recognition.** Proper recognition helps employees feel valued and makes them want to stay at their job. Even among employees with high intrinsic motivation, research in *Behavior Analysis* noted that verbal praise still enhances motivation. Give authentic and specific praise to your

employees when it’s deserved, both informally and during performance reviews.

Recognition could also refer to compensation bumps and promotion opportunities. Remember, pay is currently the number one reason that younger employees quit.

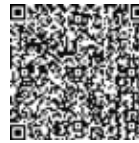
Performance-based increases can help combat this, but it can be difficult to pitch this to administration. One selling point: if you have exceptional employees that can (and want to) handle more responsibility, increasing their pay with added responsibility likely costs less than hiring and training another

employee.

4. **Employee involvement.** Employee involvement seems straightforward in food service—every employee obviously has specific duties that must be done each day. But involvement can also mean engagement in their work and feeling that they can contribute to the department’s success. Engagement creates fulfillment that leads to longer retention.

Engagement can be difficult, but not impossible, to cultivate. Try to include employees in problem-solving processes, encourage them to share their perspectives, and ask for regular feedback. Offer opportunities for skill development and professional growth, as described earlier. Making them feel truly valued in the organization can cultivate a sense of loyalty.

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## REFERENCES

Scan QR code to view the list of resources for this article.

5. **Positive, accessible, and fair manager.** Remember the saying “misery loves company?” The opposite is true too—a positive manager sets the tone for the entire team. Eliminate gossip and aimless complaining. Create an enjoyable work environment where people feel respected. And ensure employees can come to you with concerns without fear of retribution.

Similarly, fairness is key as a manager. If Jane comes in late and receives a written warning, but Jack comes in late often and it’s ignored, employees will feel confused. Inconsistent treatment erodes trust, makes rules seem arbitrary, and breeds resentment about favoritism.

6. **Autonomy and empowerment.** While training and guidance help an employee learn skills, micromanaging takes away their autonomy and leaves them less motivated to perform.

Micromanagement can destroy trust between an employee and manager, as employees feel their every move is scrutinized. This can cause defensiveness, anxiety, and resentment. When multiple employees are feeling this way, it can breed negativity among the whole team.

On the flip side, a management approach that sets clear expectations and provides support – while allowing employees the autonomy to execute their tasks – creates a more positive and productive work environment. It also enhances creativity and problem solving, as employees feel more comfortable suggesting ideas.

7. **Appropriate staffing.** Employees are often forced to take on additional responsibilities when short-staffed, leading to stress and burnout. Appropriate staffing levels with reliable employees ensures a comfortable working environment – after all, “many hands make light work.”

Of course, occasional staffing shortages are still bound to occur. In these cases, reinforce your role as a team player by jumping in to help. This takes the burden off your employees and can improve retention.

8. **Skilled communication.** Employees should feel

comfortable approaching you with questions, suggestions, or problems. Good two-way communication helps them feel valued and heard.

Not all employees will be comfortable giving unprompted feedback, so consider other outlets for communication. For example, a “monthly debrief meeting” with your employees could incorporate these three questions:

- What should we keep doing?
- What should we start doing?
- What should we stop doing?

Encourage folks to come up with at least one answer to each question. If your team culture already embraces communication, staff may be fine verbalizing opinions aloud. If not, you could ask them to write down answers on a sheet of paper, which are put in a bowl and then read anonymously to the group for more discussion.

9. **Safe physical work.** Employees deserve to work in an environment where they can perform their tasks without risk of harm. This includes safety protocols related to dangerous equipment, wet floors, high shelving units, lifting heavy boxes, and any other aspect of the job where improper procedure could lead to injury.

This not only benefits your employees, but is essential for risk mitigation and financial stability of your department. Solid safety protocols help prevent workplace accidents, workers’ compensation claims, and reduce the likelihood of employees quitting because of injuries or risk of such.

## MOVING FORWARD

Staffing challenges are present in every workplace, but food service struggles more than most. While you can’t eliminate all the issues, strategic hiring and retention practices can help you get the best possible results for your department. **E**



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## CE QUESTIONS | MANAGEMENT CONNECTION



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This **Level II PERSONNEL AND COMMUNICATION** article assumes that the reader has a thorough knowledge of the topic. The desired outcome is to facilitate application of knowledge into practice by drawing connections among ideas and using information in new situations.

Reading *Staffing Strategies for Success: Navigating Labor Challenges in Food Service* and successfully completing these questions online in the ANFP Marketplace has been approved for 1 hour of continuing education for CDM, CFPPs. To earn 1 CE hour, visit [www.ANFPonline.org/market](http://www.ANFPonline.org/market) and select **Edge CE Articles** within the Publications section. Purchase the article and complete the quiz.

1. Research in the *Journal of the American Medical Directors Association* found which of the following reduced the feasibility of implementing quality improvement actions in long-term care food service?
  - A. Not enough staff
  - B. Lack of skills among current staff
  - C. Both of the above
2. The Deloitte Global 2022 Gen Z and Millennial Survey found which of the following was the top reason for Millennial and Gen Z employees to *quit a job*?
  - A. Pay
  - B. Team issues
  - C. Safety concerns
3. The Deloitte Global 2022 Gen Z and Millennial Survey found which of the following were the top priorities for Millennial and Gen Z applicants *when selecting a new job*?
  - A. Pay and time off
  - B. Good work/life balance and learning/development opportunities
  - C. Opportunity to work independently and benefits
4. When one of your employees recommends a candidate and that candidate is hired, your department provides the employee with a \$250 bonus. This is an example of a(n):
  - A. Employee referral program
  - B. Workforce development agency
  - C. Interview process
5. Which of the following questions would be acceptable to ask in a job interview for a dietary aide position?
  - A. Do you have a car?
  - B. Do you have plans to start a family anytime soon?
  - C. Do you have a reliable way to get to and from work?
6. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the foodservice industry quit rate is \_\_\_\_\_ the national average for all industries.
  - A. Lower than
  - B. Higher than
  - C. Equal to
7. Which factor was not identified as part of a healthy, sustainable workplace in research in *Work: a journal of prevention, assessment, and rehabilitation*?
  - A. Safe physical work
  - B. Salary of at least \$60,000 per year
  - C. Skilled communication



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