

Attracting and retaining food servers: How internal service quality moderates occupational stigma

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Abstract

This study examines the abilities of internal service quality (ISQ) to moderate occupational stereotype for restaurant food servers. Food servers at restaurants responded to two surveys measuring ISQ and occupational stereotype. It was concluded that ISQ overcomes occupational stereotype to attract and retain food servers in the hospitality industry. This investigation contributes to the hospitality literature and to a better understanding of the world of waiters, especially in reference to employee turnover, employee retention, and motivation to work in the food service industry. This research used an integrative model which may be applied to service sectors outside hospitality.

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1. Introduction

Job opportunities for servers in the food and drink industry are very strong, but recruiting and retaining employees is reported to be one of the biggest challenges food service operators face. The quandary between employee supply and demand transcends national borders and, while employee turnover figures vary from region to region, the overall picture is alarming. While business remains steady the number of applications received for jobs as food servers has “dried up” (Herrera, 2005).

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1.1. Turnover statistics

Studies show the median annual turnover rate of all restaurant servers in the US is 117% (Ebbin, 2000). A 1997 study conducted by the Institute of Personnel and Development within the United Kingdom found a national turnover rate in restaurant and catering of 42%; turnover rates as high as 300% are reported in the fast-food sector in both Europe and the US; and, Asian rates of employee turnover in the hotel and catering industry are reported around 30% annually, rising to more than 50% in Hong Kong (International Labour Organization, 2001).

1.2. Job creation statistics

Yet, restaurants lead job creation in many countries. In the US employment of combined food preparation and serving workers in the US, which includes fast-food workers, is expected to increase by 36% or more by the year 2010 (US Department of Labor Statistics, 2005). Government statistics for New Zealand and Australia also predict buoyant job opportunities accompanied by relatively high staff turnover (Kiwi Careers, 2005). New Zealand also reports that almost 30% of people employed in food service work part-time and are predicted to move on to other full-time employment. In France, the hotel and catering profession represents nearly one million jobs, yet the industry also reports difficulties recruiting workers (Meriot, 2000). In Slovenia, government statistics show a 5.7% increase in job creation for all hotels and restaurant employment; however, employee turnover is high (Republic of Slovenia Yearbook, 2004).

1.3. Costs of employee turnover

Managers of food service employees well know the expense, aggravation, and untold lost sales associated with the difficulty of recruiting staff and the associated high staff turnover. For example, the cost of replacing hourly employees is reported at between US\$3000 and US\$10,000, while the average figure for restaurant employees is similar, at US\$5000 (Woods et al., 1998). Other reports place the median cost of losing an employee is \$2400, which includes expenses for training, recruiting, administration fees, and lost opportunities, such as failing to generate repeat clientele (Herrera, 2005). In the UK, the estimated cost of replacing a worker in the hotel and leisure industry was £1922, and an average of 10 weeks was required for training (International Labour Organization, 2001).

1.4. Reasons employee leave

Employers and employees cite different reasons for staff turnover. Employers attribute turnover to the transient nature of the workforce, namely students, young mothers, and young people as a whole, as well as to the general difficulty in retaining staff. Employees, on the other hand, cite low pay, job stability, career prospects, long work hours, and benefits as reasons to leave their jobs (Olsen, 1999). Seasonality further adds to an ongoing need to train and retrain employees. These constraints of the hotel, catering, and tourism industry—long, antisocial working hours, low pay, unstable, seasonal employment, low job status—make employment within the industry appear unattractive to many.

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