

Restaurant Hiring: How to Find the Perfect Employee





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Introduction

Hiring is not easy.

One of the most difficult and important things you have to do as a restaurant operator is build and maintain a staff. Employees are the people into whose hands you entrust your investment, your assets, and your passion. And yet, according to the National Restaurant Association, our industry experiences a 72.1 percent turnover rate on average.¹ That means for every four employees you have right now, odds are, you'll be replacing three of them within a year.

Think about that for a minute. You could be replacing three employees for every one you hold onto.

That kind of turnover causes disruption in your processes, in the morale of your remaining staff, and for the experience of your diners. Hiring also takes time away from other things that demand your attention as an operator. There's got to be a better way to keep your business running.

With each chapter that follows, we dive into the process of hiring, starting with figuring out precisely who it is you want to hire — not the specific person, of course (if only it were that easy!), but the qualities and skills they must possess to impress.

Then in Chapter 2, we'll move onto tips regarding where to look for new employees and who or what might be a great resource for recruiting help. Chapter 3 is a practical guide to interviewing candidates, listing out the 10 questions employers **MUST** ask each applicant invited to the restaurant for an in-person interview.

Lastly, in Chapter 4, we narrow in on one subset of employee — the chef — and talk about specific recruitment challenges for that specialized position.

Let's begin by asking ourselves, **"What am I really looking for?"**



Chapter

Who do you want?

Your favorite server just quit.

The line cook you thought would be with you forever is moving away.

You've decided it's time to buckle down and hire a manager.

Before the job postings, before the interviews ... before any final decision, now is the time to ask yourself one very simple question: Who are you really looking for?

Simple, yet not easy to answer. Every restaurant owner likely has a swirl of ideas in their head about what kind of employee will perfectly fill the open role. Some ideas are based on observation of your workers. Maybe some ideas are even based on having done the job yourself once upon a time. But in all likelihood, there are some assumptions at play, too.

Before you commit to your next hire — and potentially the wrong person — there are some key steps you can take to start your hiring process off on the right foot.

Think about the entire organization.

This may seem like a ridiculous question, but before you ask “Who can I hire as my next server?” it's important to ask, “Is a server who I really need to hire?”

That's not the same as asking, “Do I really need to rehire?” Like most small businesses, the number of staff you employ is likely either less than ideal or exactly what you need to function. But that doesn't mean everyone is occupying their ideal position.

Every job opening is an opportunity to rethink how an organization is configured,

and restaurants are no exception. Has the current structure of your restaurant staff been working? Are there employees working for you now that seem underutilized (or in over their heads) in the roles they have? The answer could be as simple as shifting one employee over to fill the open role and rehiring for a different one. Or it could end up being a much more strategic — and complicated — restructuring.

This new opening could be your opportunity to re-org. It's a little bit like musical chairs, and taking a high level view of your entire organization to see what's missing and how you could better use the talents you already employ. The process takes some time and effort. But in the end, you may end up with a more efficient mix of employees delivering stronger customer service and better results for you as a business owner.

Look for candidates to interview who mimic the skills and aptitudes of your most successful employees.

Consider your best employees.

Is your vision of the best candidate really what's best for that position? Often, small business owners look at outside sources to see what works best for their competitors



or even in totally different industries. Sometimes, managers can get stuck looking for some Platonic ideal of what the perfect waiter, waitress, hostess, or chef is, when reality is so much more diverse and full of potential greatness.

It can help to look to the inside of your restaurant and assess who your very best employee is. What skills does that person bring to the table? What personality traits make them the type of employee other employees (and the public) love to work with? That person may not match the ideal version of a server or chef or host in your head, but they produce success — and that's what counts.

Look for candidates to interview who mimic the skills and aptitudes of your most successful employees, although not necessarily the superficial aspects of those people. Focus on what those great employees do, the backgrounds that got them to this point, and the attitude with which they accomplish their tasks, not who or what they are. And then look for more people like them!

Write a great (and accurate) job description.

Key to attracting the right kind of employee for your establishment is describing the job properly. This is not the time to use canned language or go short on details. A strong job description can make or break your recruiting effort. In fact, 77% of candidates say that the job description is the real basis for their final decision.²

Some things to consider when first putting pen to paper:

Are you being honest about the job responsibilities? Write down what the job REALLY entails at YOUR establishment, not just what a typical server, host, manager, or line cook would do in another restaurant. This will help eliminate surprises down the road, and may attract staff who are genuinely better matched for you as an employee.

A strong job description can make or break your recruiting effort.

Write about what the job has to offer the employee, not just what the employee has to offer the job. Employers who do that tend to attract much better job applicants.³ It's not simply about money, of course. It's about hours, benefits, environment, what

your restaurant does differently than other restaurants, and any opportunities for learning or growth.

Talk about your mission. Why do you do what you do every day? What are the goals for the business beyond just making money? What are you trying to say with your food and your hospitality? Employees — especially millennial applicants — love to know that they're making a difference on top of earning a paycheck. Let them know upfront that they will be.

Distinguish between the must-haves and nice-to-haves you're looking for in a candidate. This can save a lot of applicants (and you) a lot of time in the process. If you are utterly convinced that you cannot hire any server without 3+ years in the fine dining segment of the market, make that a clearly defined requirement. Otherwise, list it as "preferred experience" so candidates with and without that experience will understand the expectation and only apply if they think they match or can rise to the occasion.

So, what happens if you hire the wrong person?

No one goes into this process determined to find anything less than the perfect person, but mismatches and bad hires do happen. The problem is, these mistakes cost your business money — quite a bit more than you'd imagine.

It's not just about the time you've now put in to acquire this person who is underperforming. It's the time, energy, and resources you'll put in to trying to make

them fit, whether in their original position or somewhere else in the organization — upwards of 17 percent of your time as a manager, in fact.⁴ There's also the time and resource toll this disruption takes on the rest of your team, who were hopefully used to working like a well-oiled machine before the vacancy popped up.

And then there's your reputation as a restaurant on the line. Customers yearn for consistent service and quality of product, and are fairly unforgiving when those fall off, even for a short period of time. Getting the right person through the door the first time can help keep your business running smoothly and should improve your reputation online and off with your customers.

Starting your search with the right job description and clear expectations is crucial . But where do you even begin looking for the right person once you've decided who they are? In the next chapter we break down exactly **where you can find your next great employee.**





Chapter

Where do you start looking?

Knowing what kind of employee will suit your establishment best is only half the battle, unfortunately. Actually finding that perfect chef, line cook, server, host, or manager is a real challenge in itself.

The job market for restaurants, no matter what economists have to say about employment overall, is always competitive. With turnover throughout the hospitality industry around 72 percent, it's fair to say there's a lot of deliberate movement happening within the restaurant space for employees looking at better wages, better environments, better hours, or simply a better fit.⁵

Combine this sense of mobility with an actual chef shortage in the United States and you have the makings of a difficult

recruitment process. Even well-known operations like Block 16 Hospitality have walked away from job fairs with one-quarter of the applicants they expected for a brand new 12,000 square foot restaurant.⁶

Today, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects 9 percent annual job growth for chefs and head cooks over the next 10 years, and 7 percent annual job growth overall across all industries.⁷ More available jobs, a smaller pool of chef applicants, and a propensity for remaining staff to turn over quickly means it could take more work for restaurant owners to acquire the best staff possible.

Where does one begin?



5 places to find fresh talent:

1. Current Employees
2. Your Customers
3. Online
4. Schools and Job Fairs
5. Training from Within

With Current Employees

Often the best place to start looking for new hires is by talking to the people who know your business best: your current employees. They have a unique perspective on what it takes to be successful working for you, and in reality, have as big a stake in your decision as you do.

Consider this: your current employees have to work alongside the person you hire, and for that reason they will want the best possible candidate, just as you do. It's not simply about finding someone to get along well with your staff, but about finding someone who will hold up their end of the work load and not disrupt the flow of your environment. Wanting a smooth work shift is, by itself, a great incentive for your employees to help you find the right person among their friends and acquaintances to fill any open position.

Another great incentive, of course, is cash. A lot of restaurant owners find it's helpful to offer a small signing bonus to employees who refer candidates that ultimately get hired. Of course, the candidate must be qualified, and once hired, they have to stay on for a proscribed amount of time. That caveat should avoid any abuse of the system, and give your current staff even more reason to identify reliable candidates for your review.

With Your Customers

Beyond your employees, no one knows your brand as well as your devoted customers. While it's probably gauche to go table-to-table asking patrons if they know anyone interested in work, there are some subtle ways you can get the message out there to customers who love your establishment enough to want to work in it.

A variety of signage can be printed to alert the public that you're looking for new employees, but be wary of sending the wrong message. A traditional "Help Wanted" sign in your window may seem innocuous, but it could be saying to potential customers that you're understaffed and the quality of your service will be diminished.

Instead, consider taking a more positive approach with signs and table tents that ask you to “Join Our Team!” and then list some of the benefits of working for the company. It may seem like a small difference in tone, but this kind of approach focuses much more on what you have to offer a potential employee and doesn’t specify the immediate need. The interest it can drive up, however, remains the same.



Online

Like job openings in every other industry, there are places online that an interested candidate will go to search out jobs. The website they choose depends a lot on the position. A qualified senior manager probably wouldn’t look for positions on Craigslist.com, and a hardworking bus person probably isn’t expecting to find job listings on LinkedIn.com. Knowing the right place to advertise for the specific job you’re looking to fill is going to produce faster results, and inevitably, save you money in listing costs as well.

There are a number of restaurant job boards and online communities devoted to the hospitality industry that can help employers and applicants connect, particularly in large metropolitan areas. These will likely be more useful for filling higher-paid positions, such as head chef, maître d’, or restaurant manager, than for locating servers, kitchen staff, and bus persons. For those positions, you’d be better off listing on Indeed.com (or relying on word of mouth via employees or customers).

At Schools and Job Fairs

Many institutions like the Culinary Institute of America are designed to help with job placement for its students as they reach the completion of their programs. And with chefs in such short supply these days, going directly to the source of new, unbridled talent is a great opportunity for both you and the next generation of young cooks and chefs.

And while many culinary students are fresh in the industry, many students have worked in kitchens as cooks prior to enrolling, but went to school to refine their skills — so not all students/recent graduates are completely green to the industry. Even graduates who went to school without being in the industry first have to do internships towards the end of their programs, and they’re pretty much always occupying paid kitchen positions in restaurants.

There may even be opportunities to bring on students for part-time work, to fill gaps you have that don’t require a full-time employee.

True, you are unlikely to find someone with enough experience to head up your kitchen at a job fair. But for larger establishments employing multiple assistant and sous chefs, seeking candidates just out of school is a great way to ensure your next employee has sharp skills and a bundle of fresh ideas to bring to your head chef's kitchen. The real test will be temperament and fit, so make sure your head chef and restaurant manager are both in on the decision-making process.

By Training from Within

Ultimately, one of the best ways to continuously acquire strong employees for your restaurant is to cultivate that talent from within. Talk with each and every one of your staff and find out what their aspirations are. Does your dishwasher work on his knife skills in his spare time? Does your best server have the necessary temperament and sense of responsibility to manage the entire front of house? Could that bus person who noticeably gives 110% every day be your next best server if given the chance?

Take the time to share knowledge about your business if that's something that interests a particular employee. Every job, from top to bottom, can be an opportunity to learn something new and to progress. If you put in the time, and have a little bit of luck, you could be grooming employees for advancement, reducing your turnover, and minimizing the need to hire brand new, higher end staff — all at the same time!

And don't forget about your most valuable resource: yourself. Always have business cards on hand to share with retail workers or other service professionals that impress you. If you are at a community meeting or talking to other business owners or managers in the market, ask if they know anyone who may be right for your open position. Be prepared with your brand pitch and specific reasons why a talented person should want to come work for you. But always remember: hiring starts with you.

And in the end, setting the tone for an interview does as well. Read on to the next chapter for **10 questions** every interviewer MUST ask ANY candidate coming in to interview for a position in your restaurant.



What do you ask?

With hospitality industry turnover rates commonly around 72 percent,⁸ it's no surprise many restaurant managers feel like they're constantly interviewing candidates. It can be that much harder if you're trying to custom create an interview process for each kind of employee. Believe it or not, whether it's filling positions for kitchen staff, front of house servers, hosts, or managers, there are **ten essential questions** that can really help assess an applicant's fit for your organization.

1. Why us?

It's seems like a simple question, but it can instantly identify who is serious about the position. Why does your restaurant stand out against your competitors to this applicant?

Have they looked into what people say about you online? Have they heard about how the company is run — and thought, “yes, this is for me”? This can show you which applicants are determined to make the most of the opportunity your restaurant is offering — and which ones only want to clock in, clock out, and pick up a paycheck.

2. What do you think will be the biggest challenge of the job?

This may seem strange, because discussing the requirements and conditions of the job you're offering is usually YOUR responsibility as an interviewer. But asking this question will require the candidate to speculate about your environment in a safe way. In turn, you

can see how insightful they are, or take the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings about the work at hand.

3. Ever had a difficult customer?

C'mon, if the answer to this softball question is "no," the candidate is 100% not telling the full truth. It would be inconceivable to work in the restaurant industry without ever dealing with an irritated or even irate customer. So how did they resolve the issue at hand? Did everyone walk away happy? And it's OK if they answer no to THAT question! You can't please everyone all the time. But being able to admit that some customers are challenging is never a bad thing.



Being able to admit that some customers are challenging is never a bad thing.

4. Who was your best boss ever?

And what did this boss do that made them so great in the applicant's eyes? On the surface, this question may seem irrelevant, but how a candidate answers will give you some great insight into the type of management they will need from you. It can also show what they value in authority, and how this job seeker would fit into your pre-established company culture — or change it for the better!

5. Why did you leave your last job?

This question isn't about getting an answer. It's about seeing how the question is answered. Quit, laid-off, fired for cause. These are all things you can find out through other sources. What you're watching for here is the attitude about a previous employer and the professionalism someone cares to show under the pressure of an interview, that will be most informative of all.

6. What makes you angry?

Specifically ask about a time in the past where something made the candidate particularly angry. What provoked them and what did they do to resolve it? An employee

getting angry on the job in the food industry can very well be justified, but you want to hire someone who can manage that anger in a professional manner. Identifying potential triggers during an interview is helpful, but so is observing how they describe the offending circumstance. Are they cool-headed and collected while describing it, or does talking about it seem to resurface all the negative energy all over again?



7. What about working with people who don't pull their weight?

Every workplace involves teamwork, and every responsibility —no matter how mundane or individual — likely has an effect on someone else's performance if not met. The key to a candidate's answer is simple: what did they do about it? Make note of any creative solutions, developed interpersonal skills, and leadership potential right here.

8. What makes you want to come into work every day?

Not everyone loves their job. We know that. But as a manager, you should be striving to create an environment where employees actually like the place they spend the bulk of their waking week. Having some insight on a potential employee's work motivations will help you provide what they're looking for long term. Many employees value work-life balance, a quality working environment, and the camaraderie of co-workers more than, or at least as much as, the size of that weekly paycheck.

9. What do you want to learn here?

Part of what this question assesses is whether or not a candidate (regardless of age) believes they can always learn something new from their job. It reveals a level of intellectual curiosity and possibly even humbleness. The other advantage to this question is identifying what a candidate values in the face of growth opportunities — or lack thereof. Even from the very start, can you as a manager start preparing for potential career advancement opportunities for this particular employee?

10. What was the best compliment you ever received?

This one is going to throw a lot of candidates off guard, which is ok. Seeing what happens when you crack the veneer of a polished interviewer could put them over the top in your estimation. This also sends the message

that you value employees who pride themselves on their good work, giving them an opportunity to honestly open up about their strengths. If they have a genuine answer to the question, and don't come off as overly bragging, you're likely to get some great insight into what makes your next server, host, line cook, or senior manager tick.

Let's be honest, however. Hiring a great chef — one who combines masterful cooking skills with leadership skills and an even temperament — is a horse of a different color. Keep reading into chapter 4 for our advice on recruiting the very best talent for your kitchen — your **very own "Top Chef"**.





4

Chapter

What about your chef?

Finding cooks for your restaurant can be tough. Finding a head chef to lead your restaurant can be even tougher.

Having a competent, experienced head chef in charge of your back of the house staff is a major key to success in the restaurant industry. Ideally, head chefs train and supervise line cooks so that shifts run smoothly and each plate meets the highest standards.

They handle supply ordering so that the menu has what it needs while still staying within the budget, and they communicate effectively with front of the house staff to ensure guests have the best possible dining experience. Whether originally trained in culinary school or learning from master chefs in the workforce, the best head chefs

are diligent, detail-focused, knowledgeable, and creative.

However, the years of strict dedication required to hone their culinary craft, combined with the time it takes to learn the business side of a restaurant, can make developing oneself into a head chef an immense challenge.

The additional day-to-day stresses of running a kitchen are often not worth it for many modern cooks, especially if the restaurants in their area aren't offering sufficient compensation. This has led to far fewer head chefs in the market, with the really great chefs getting snatched up quickly.

In its 2015 industry forecast, the National Restaurant Association stated that "growth

in the number of hospitality job openings accelerated sharply [in 2014], a development that was out of sync with the pace of hiring.”⁹

With so many job openings and so few professional chefs looking for work, it’s more important than ever that you put your best foot forward when listing open positions at your establishment. If you’re struggling to hire a head chef, look at these aspects of your business for clues on where you’re hitting the mark and where you’re missing a beat.

Your Restaurant’s Reputation

The culinary world is very small. Word of mouth travels fast when it comes to your reputation as an employer. Do you keep a positive attitude around your employees? Are you consistent in scheduling? Do you allow your head chef the flexibility to try out new menu dishes? Are you willing to brainstorm with your chef so that the restaurant doesn’t stagnate? Do you empower your employees and reward them for success?

Googling your business or checking sites like Indeed.com can give you insight into what former employees are saying. If you’ve struggled to create a positive work environment for your kitchen staff, those issues might be the first things potential hires hear about your restaurant.

Chefs want things to run smoothly in the kitchen, and that includes how you interact with them. The ability to be open and flexible when addressing employee concerns can help ensure that your employees view their daily interactions with you as an overall

positive experience, which is a key part of building a strong reputation within the industry. Establishing your reputation as a boss takes time, but it’s also crucial part of finding (and retaining) great employees.



Wages

If you’re having difficulty keeping chefs on staff, convincing applicants to take your job offer after the interview, or even just getting qualified candidates to reply to your job listing, the problem could be as simple as how much pay you’re offering.

Research into the market could reveal that you’re below average for hourly wages in your area. If a chef can get better pay at one of your competitors with the same or better prestige, they could pass you by. Even if you’re able to hire, your chef could jump ship if other restaurants are offering them a paycheck in line with their level of skill.

Raising wages for your head or sous chefs means adjusting your budget, but

the money and time saved by avoiding constantly training new staff — only to have them take better offers — is huge.

A recruiter can do the research needed to find precisely the right chef for your business.

Benefits

There are more perks to taking a restaurant job than just the hourly wage. Do you have any benefits in place? For instance, does your establishment offer dining discounts for staff? Do you provide staff with a free meal during shifts? Are you careful to set up schedules so that staff can have two days off in a row? Do you offer new head chefs the chance to bring in their own assistant staff?

These benefits can seem small, but they add up in a positive way for potential recruits. Implementing even a few of them in your establishment (and then including them in the job listing) adds up to potential employees considering more than just paychecks alone.

Providing any of these benefits can make you more appealing to experienced chefs looking for work. If you're trying to reel in those top notch cooking professionals, consider implementing these or similarly creative programs.

Should you hire a restaurant job recruiter?

Even after putting these suggestions in motion to make yourself a more desired employer, you might not have the time to go searching for new chefs. How do you even know where to look, right? This is where recruiters can come in handy.

Hiring a food service recruiting agency is an investment that could pay off for you down the line. The recruiter can do the research needed to find precisely the right chef for your business.

Recruiters can take the changes you've made and help sell your business to potential hires. Look for one who has been in the industry for years and has searching for great chefs down to a science. By leaving that work to the recruiter, you can go back to what you do best – running your restaurant.

Look for the three Cs.

If you want to catch a big fish, you have to cast your line into the ocean. You don't wait for them to wash up on shore. If this sounds tricky, well, sure it is. Finding the right person for the right job always is.

The reality is, by the time you hire an employee, there's no changing who they are. No employer is going to be able to change a working adult's personality or attitude. The best you can hope for is that your passion for your business will be infectious to those who are already passionate about other things.

With that in mind, there are three core things you can identify in a potential employee that will build your team into a powerhouse crew over time:

- They are solidly **competent** (as opposed to necessarily experienced).
- They exhibit strong **character** (don't judge anyone simply based on looks).
- They will represent your **culture** appropriately (i.e., that elusive thing called "fit").

It's important not to just start and stop with experience. The employee who has 20 years of experience in service or has made a career at big name restaurants isn't necessarily the best choice for you.

Questions you should be asking yourself include: Will they adapt well to my way of running a restaurant if it's different than what they're used to? Do they speak positively about their last employer(s) and

their previous experience? And how will they mesh with my existing staff?

It's important to stay ahead of the curve as every single one of your competitors have the same laundry list of needs and challenges regarding turnover that you do. It's difficult to be the employer that always pays the highest wage, so understanding what motivates your ideal team player in addition to money is key. Your clarity on expectations, opportunities, and the culture you want to build can go a long way toward assuring someone they're ready for a change.

But no matter what you encounter in an interview, treat every applicant with respect. They may not be the right applicant for the job, but they are still potential guests of your restaurant. Even an unsuccessful interview can be a positive, loyalty-building experience someone shares with their family and friends.

The Three Cs of Hiring



Competent



Character



Culture

Endnotes

¹ "Hospitality turnover rose to 72.1% in 2015" – Nation's Restaurant News; nrn.com

³ "The Simple Change That Attracts Great Job Applicants" – The Wall Street Journal; wsj.com

⁴ "What Really Happens When You Hire the Wrong Candidate" – Entrepreneur

⁵ "Hospitality turnover rose to 72.1% in 2015" – Nation's Restaurant News; nrn.com

⁶ "Restaurants struggle with chef shortage" – Nation's Restaurant News; nrn.com

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ "Hospitality turnover rose to 72.1% in 2015" – Nation's Restaurant News; nrn.com

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