

Sink or Swim

Short-staffed hotel companies test new hires early while still providing career development opportunities

By Nick Fortuna
July 2022

DURING A RECENT DRIVE TO THE AIRPORT, Sarah Saracino counted half a dozen hotels within shouting distance of the parking lot, all competing for the same travelers and the same jobseekers. As senior vice president of human resources for Meyer Jabara Hotels, she immediately thought about the staffing challenges those properties must be facing amid historically low unemployment rates and rising wages.

If employees at any one of those hotels were feeling underappreciated, she wondered, what's stopping them from quitting and going to the hotel next door, where they likely would be greeted with open arms?

To Saracino, that moment reaffirmed the importance of her company's career development initiatives, aimed at retaining talented workers, building a pipeline of future managers, keeping employees engaged, and giving Meyer Jabara Hotels a leg up in recruiting. The Danbury, CT-based company has 28 hotel properties under brands such as Marriott, Hilton, and Hyatt.

"If they're not going to get career-development opportunities from us, they're going to go to a different hotel group that can give it to them, so you basically get what you give," Saracino said. "Someone who feels that we've invested in them is more inclined to stay."

Early in the pandemic, when occupancy rates and staffing levels hit record lows, many hotel companies used cross-training programs to get more from the employees who remained. As a result, ambitious workers emerged with new skills that could lead to better opportunities within the company or elsewhere.

TEACH THEM WELL

Facing a persistent labor shortage as business picks up, hotels now find themselves with limited time and resources to train new and existing employees, according to Gary Gobin, director of operations for hihotels by Hospitality International. The Tucker, GA-based company has about 230 hotels under the brands Red Carpet Inn, Scottish Inns, Master Hosts Inns, Downtowner Inns, and Passport Inn.

Gobin said that in addition to teaching basic job functions, hihotels is training employees to clean and sanitize facilities according to elevated standards and to recognize signs of human trafficking. The company has used AAHOA's online training resources to address human trafficking, and at a recent regional conference, a Houston police officer spoke to company employees about the topic. Subsequently, hihotels made his presentation available to all of its employees online. But besides covering those "hot topics," Gobin said, hotels generally are providing a lean training program designed to get new hires contributing to operations almost immediately.

Hotel executives readily acknowledge the benefits of robust onboarding, cross-training, and employee-development programs, but when you're severely understaffed, who has the time?

"I believe that with the present labor shortage and higher-than-normal turnover of employees, hoteliers more than ever have had to rush employees into jobs because they need a body there to work, often not taking the necessary time to fully train new hires," Gobin said. "They're not getting the full experience. They're being taught the basics, and then hopefully somebody's around to assist them should they need deeper knowledge."

LET THEM LEAD THE WAY

Despite that reality, hoteliers must find time to train employees and map out a plan for their success if they want to reduce turnover and bolster recruitment, Saracino said. At Meyer Jabara Hotels, there are two main branches to the career development program:

1. Individualized learning plans (from which all employees can benefit)
2. Leadership development for managers in training

The learning plan is a simple form that workers and their supervisors fill out together, outlining new skills the employee would like to learn and setting a timeline for doing so. For example, a front-desk associate might want to become a night auditor, so the employee and his manager will identify the skills he'll need to develop, including mastery of the company's accounting system.

Next, the supervisor will schedule training sessions and job-shadowing opportunities so the employee can learn from the company's top performers. In just a few months, the front desk associate should be ready for his new role.

"The learning plan is about making sure our employees feel that we're committed to them by helping them achieve their goals," Saracino said.

Learning plans are for everyone, but the leadership-development program is strictly for "rising stars," she said. To apply, employees must have a bachelor's degree, at least a 3.0 grade-point average, references, and – in most cases – a willingness to relocate. Once accepted into the program, employees will spend a full year at one of the company's top full-service properties, learning every aspect of the business.

Initially, participants learn about the hotel brand and its overall operations to get an understanding of how each position, department, and division of the company contributes to its success. Then, employees get hands-on experience by spending one month in each of the hotel's departments, including accounting and human resources; the rooms division, consisting of the front office, housekeeping and engineering, food and beverage, and sales and catering.

Participants spend the remaining months assigned to one particular department, performing a deep dive into operations that prepares them for managerial positions. Mentors are assigned to participants at the start of the program and meet with them regularly to answer their questions and provide feedback.

Saracino said a night auditor recently was accepted into the program and is aiming to become an assistant general manager.

"This employee is really interested in doing more," she said. "The program helps us identify people who we think have really strong potential so we can keep them motivated and engaged with us. That's an investment on our part because we're actually dedicating somebody to their growth."

GET ENGAGED

At hihotels, regional managers frequently give supervisors tips for training employees and keeping them engaged, including the gift-card test. If housekeepers aren't consistently checking each room's drawers after guests check out, for example, managers may leave a few small gift cards in random drawers. If the housekeepers find them, then they're rewarded for doing things the right way, and if they don't find them, it's a teachable moment, Gobin said.

Most workers understand that the labor shortage is straining companies of all types, so they're prepared to endure a bumpy ride as long as they feel valued by their employer, Gobin said. In many cases, a sincere thank you makes a real difference, he added.

"Showing appreciation for your staff and treating them right is really the key to keeping turnover low," he said. "This situation isn't ideal. I value training, and I think it's one of the most important things we can do because your employees feel more confident in their job. But at the end of the day, we still have to keep the business running and turn these rooms over."

When hotels compress their training programs, it makes the hiring process all the more important, Gobin said. Hotels should prioritize customer-service skills, professionalism, and a pleasant demeanor when evaluating jobseekers, recognizing that with limited time for training, employees are bound to make some mistakes.

"If you can hire an employee who has great customer-service skills, you can usually recover from just about anything," Gobin said. "We know that more things are falling through the cracks than usual, so during the interview process, hotels need to get a feel for how that employee would handle customer complaints. I always say, 'It's not that you had an issue, it's how you respond to it.'"

