

Employees' Individual Needs, Broken Trust Complicate Hotel Labor Shortage

Shortage Has Led to Staff Burnout and Guests Unhappy



Hoteliers continue to struggle hiring and retaining quality employees, resulting in tougher working conditions for those already on the job and less-than-satisfied guests. Pictured here is a job fair held by Zislis Group job fair at The Brew Hall on June 23 in Torrance, California. (Getty Images)

By [Bryan Wroten](#)

Hotel News Now

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The leisure demand and returning group and corporate business has helped the U.S. hotel industry along its recovery, but it's exacerbating the ongoing labor shortage.

During the “Labor in Crisis” panel at the [2021 Hotel Data Conference](#), hoteliers spoke about how the ongoing challenges in finding employees and how that's affecting those already on the job as well as the guest experience.

The labor shortage has shifted and evolved over the last few months, said Philip Bates, managing partner at TMC Group and CEO of TMC Hospitality. As recently as May and June, applications weren't coming in, and much of that

was because of the enhanced unemployment benefits, he said. The applicants have since returned, but there are questions now about whether the employees will stay, what quality they are and what their career trajectory is.

“Because there’s so many job offerings in the industry, finding good people, retaining good people and getting them to be enthusiastic, to do a good job, I think is part of the challenge,” he said.

The reason it’s difficult to find a solution to the labor issue is it comes down to the individual employees, said Chris Cheney, vice president of hotel performance and analytics at Stonebridge Companies.

“Everybody has gone through just such a wholesale paradigm shift over the last year and a half. Life changed for everybody in some way,” he said.

Now people are evaluating themselves, working on different skills and becoming more well-rounded to elevate their careers or even take a new career path, Cheney said. For others, they’re facing childcare obstacles, or they’ve had to move to different locations and finding new struggles there.

“That’s so hard to kind of triangulate at scale, because it’s just individual stories, and that’s what’s making it so difficult,” he said.

When hotel operators furloughed and laid off employees during the downturn, it broke the sense of trust and loyalty that associates had and given them reason to rethink the hotel industry and whether they can depend on it, said Stan Kennedy, chief operating officer at Remington Hotels.

“Somehow we have to reestablish that sense of trust between associate and operator,” he said.

Staff Burnout

Burnout is occurring more at the property level, Bates said. At the corporate level, employees could work from home or remotely at other locations, such as the beach. The people working at the hotels are having to work multiple shifts, including covering for those who didn’t show up for their shifts.

“They’re having to keep the lights on when things were at their worst, so I think investing in them, whether that’s through pay increases or giving them time off, taking them to dinner — deliberately spending time on them to give them more care at the property level is really something you have to invest in,” Bates said.

The dynamics of each individual property make them unique experiences for the general managers and staffs, Cheney said. The nature of many general managers in the industry is to succeed at all costs to themselves, working long hours and patching all the holes.

“They oftentimes are a little slow to reach out and say, ‘OK, we’re taking on water. I need some resources,’” he said.

Stonebridge has done a good job opening up the lines of communication with regular calls with all its general managers, Cheney said. Corporate teams have been able to visit properties and work with the teams to determine what each hotel team needed.

Keeping that relationship between leadership and the properties lets them know the corporate level isn't there to just put more work on them but to help take work off their plates and give them the necessary resources, he said.

"That's been born out of necessity, but it's something we're going to latch on to as part of our culture going forward," Cheney said.

General managers have had a difficult time because they're always tasked as the leader, so they're like entrepreneurs that own a business, Kennedy said. They can have a difficult time understanding their true needs because they in the trenches all the time, so they're not spending time recruiting, training or developing.

One solution is to add back the middle-tier managers who were stripped away after 9/11 and during the Great Recession, he said. Bringing that role back will give some relief to existing managers who are getting burned out.

Guest Experience

The staffing shortage is both complicating and being complicated by the guests who have stayed in hotels during the pandemic.

Guests are changing, Kennedy said. They were tolerant early on and understood what was going on, but they've been worn down by the pandemic, as well. Hotels have modified their rate structures since that point, and guests are now expecting full-service delivery. They're no longer tolerant of poor service, and the pressure on hotel teams has increased.

"Unfortunately, our staffs are really taking a beating for that short-sighted service component, but there's not a solution to it until we can solve for bringing more associates back into our hotels," he said.

During the summer of 2020, guests understood what hotels were doing from a health and safety standpoint, such as limiting the number of people in a hotel to socially distance everyone, Cheney said. Now that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention changed COVID-19 guidance and restrictions have eased, guests believe hotels are holding back to save on costs.

"Much of that's not the case," he said. "There's supply chain issues. There's a labor supply issue. I think we need to do a better job as an industry communicating that broadly."

There are a lot of postings on social media and in the news about the labor shortage in the restaurant industry and how diners should take it easy on restaurant staff, but there's no similar messaging about hotel staff, he said.

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