

# Captain D's Creates Friction-Free Experiences to Build Great Frontline Teams



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# America's Largest Quick-Service Seafood Chain

Captain D's is a U.S.-based quick-service seafood restaurant chain founded in 1969. The brand specializes in affordable, high-quality seafood and is best known for its signature hand-battered fish, grilled shrimp, and salmon. Captain D's is the largest quick-service seafood chain in America by average unit volume. The company owns, operates, and franchises 517 restaurants in 23 states and is headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee.

While franchisees operate as independent employers using Captain D's tools, structures, and guidance, the company-owned restaurants employ roughly 4,500 people. Of these, just over 100 work in the Restaurant Support Center, supporting the broader workforce across company-owned locations. The remaining frontline team includes approximately 3,400 hourly employees and 1,100 leaders who collectively shape the guest experience and drive the brand's day-to-day performance.

Given this frontline-heavy operating model, Captain D's continued expansion into new U.S. markets—and more recently into Canada and the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>—depends on having the right frontline team members and leaders in place to consistently deliver exceptional guest experiences.

“*It starts with people, and it always starts with making sure you have the right people taking care of the guests.*”  
Phil Greifeld, CEO, Captain D's

## The Pursuit of Innovation across Diverse Frontline Practices

Captain D's need to modernize its frontline talent approach was rooted in a deliberate effort to align technological innovation with organizational needs.

“With new AI-powered HR technologies emerging rapidly, every company seems to want the latest and greatest new tools. There's a race to push innovation forward. Our goal,

1 ["Captain D's to Open First U.K. Location," QSR Magazine, March 14, 2025.](#)

### Summary

#### Challenge

- Modernizing talent practices and adopting AI-enabled tools without overwhelming managers.
- Shifting from simply staffing restaurants to building high-performing teams through right-fit hiring.
- Facilitating continuous leader development for general managers who were previously in undersupported complex restaurant environments.
- Reducing friction throughout the frontline employee experience, from hiring through development and career growth.

#### Solution

- Conducted a job and gap analysis to build evidence-based buy-in for new talent practices and identify the skills and behaviors that predict success.
- Implemented Paradox for high-volume hiring and Traitify assessments to give managers objective data for better hiring decisions.
- Launched the Kickstart postplacement program and introduced a Plus-One succession model with an intermediate assistant restaurant manager role to strengthen leadership development and career paths.

#### Results

- Improved staffing levels from about 88% to 97% over two years, ensuring restaurants are fully staffed with high-quality guest specialists.
- Reduced time-to-fill for general manager roles (including training) by over 50%.
- Decreased turnover by 60% in two years, while maintaining a strong internal leadership pipeline.

though, was to ensure we're innovating with the lens of moving the organization forward,” said Sean MacMillan, Vice President of Human Resources at Captain D's. “This meant first understanding our company's needs and gaps, and having that understanding inform what innovations we implement. That formed the genesis of a job and gap analysis we underwent in 2023.”

The analysis surfaced several fragmented frontline practices and systemic issues that limited the company's ability to attract, retain, and grow the right people at scale. These included:

- **Diverse standards for what “great talent” looks like.** Captain D's relies on strong field autonomy and deep internal promotion pipelines. While this model reinforces loyalty and preserves institutional knowledge, the absence of standardized hiring and interview practices led to highly localized, subjective definitions of “great talent.” Different areas and restaurants used varying criteria to evaluate team members and leaders. Some managers used structured interview questions and clear expectations, while others relied on informal conversations and personal judgment. This autonomy produced fragmented hiring standards, uneven succession planning, and inconsistent team quality across locations.
- **Development and training that stopped too soon.** The gap analysis surfaced two major issues in training and development. First, development effectively ended at the point of placement. New general managers trained in a prototype environment then stepped into real restaurants with distinct customer mixes, team dynamics, and community contexts that formal training had not prepared them to navigate. Second, the skills Captain D's valued and those it systematically developed were not fully aligned. Managerial skills, for example, were highly valued but significantly underrepresented in training. “We did very little training on managerial skills because we had a presupposition that if you ran a good restaurant, you managed people well,” said MacMillan. The analysis showed that continued development was needed after promotion and placement.
- **Talent acquisition (TA) pain points and clunky legacy systems.** Captain D's continued to hire over 10,000 people annually for its company-owned restaurants, while grappling with high turnover and excessive ad spend despite strong organic applicant flow. Leaders relied heavily on their instincts to assess fit, without standardized data to support or challenge their judgments. “The hiring system was too difficult on the candidate and administratively burdensome for hiring managers,” said MacMillan. The gap

analysis revealed a stark contrast between the sophisticated systems used to run restaurants and the legacy systems used to hire and support the people who operate them.

These diverse frontline practices, the lack of continuous development, and high-volume-but-inconsistent hiring combined into a single strategic challenge: How could Captain D's build a modern, scalable frontline talent system—one that attracts, selects, develops, and grows the right people—without losing the autonomy and individual human judgment that had always been central to its success?

## Removing Friction to Elevate the Frontline Experience

The HR and operations teams were inspired by *The Friction Project* by Bob Sutton.<sup>2</sup> In the book, “friction” is described as the unnecessary effort, delays, and complications that drain energy from people and processes without adding value.

Guided by both the book and the job and gap analysis, the HR and operations teams systematically identified the frictions that slowed critical workflows and undermined frontline employees' ability to excel and grow. The teams then implemented a series of concrete interventions across TA, training, careers, and workforce management to minimize these frictions and elevate the frontline employee experience.

### Talent Acquisition: From Filling Seats to Building Teams

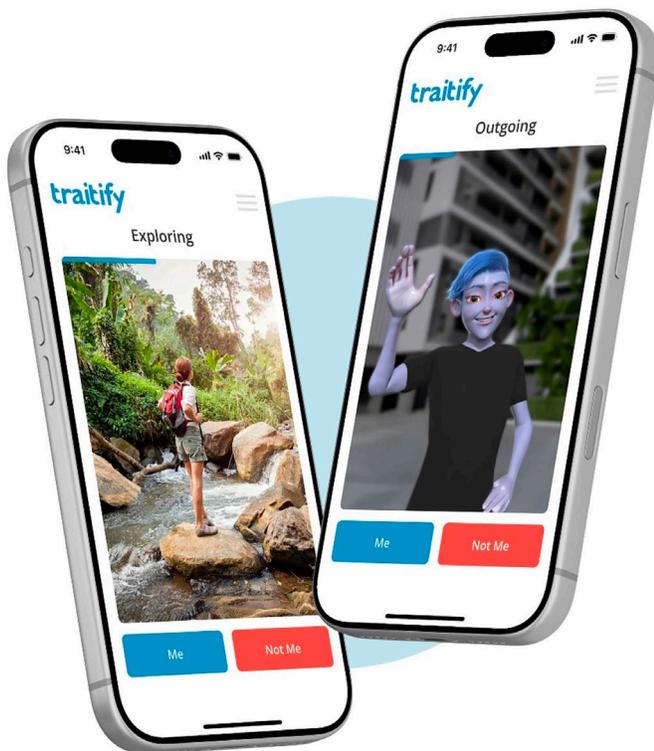
“If you need to change long-established ways of doing things, you need proof, and you need trust,” MacMillan explained. “We established trust by interviewing our internal teams to do the job and gap analysis. Once we had our own data as proof, we used technology to jumpstart the change.”

As a first major step, Captain D's implemented Paradox, a conversational AI hiring platform, to modernize TA at scale. The platform automates candidate communication, interview scheduling, and new-hire paperwork—removing administrative friction and giving managers more time for higher-value conversations and better hiring decisions.

<sup>2</sup> [The Friction Project: How Smart Leaders Make the Right Things Easier and the Wrong Things Harder](#), Robert I. Sutton and Huggy Rao/St. Martin's Press, January 30, 2024.

Simultaneously, Captain D's implemented Traitify assessments to establish a common language for "what good looks like" using custom-calibrated personality profiles that reflect the company's specific culture, values, and operating model rather than a generic quick-service restaurant (QSR) profile. The assessment scores provide a consistent, objective data point alongside managers' judgment, increasing their ability to build great teams rather than fill roles quickly. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Examples of Captain D's Right-Fit Assessments**



Source: Traitify, 2026

"What's also great about these assessments is the nondiscriminatory way in which they're delivered. The personality profiles are simple image-based scenarios asking if this is you, and the cognitive assessments are puzzles that assess your problem-solving capabilities. These are not questions that could be weighted toward someone's background," said MacMillan.

Candidates applying for guest specialist roles complete a 3-minute personality profile, and all managerial candidates

complete a combined personality and cognitive assessment that typically takes 10 to 12 minutes.

While many high-volume frontline employers are optimizing for "click-to-apply" minimalism, the assessments were deliberately added to introduce "good friction," described in *The Friction Project* as "deliberate pauses, checks, or hurdles that protect quality, ethics, safety, and learning." The assessments momentarily slowed down the hiring process at the point of ensuring candidate fit, reinforcing the shift from staffing restaurants quickly to selecting best-fit team members and building great frontline teams.

## Onboarding and Training: "D-izing" Development and Extending Support

Captain D's redesigned its onboarding to embed company culture from day one. New hires now complete paperwork and orientation scheduling digitally through their recruiting platform, then learn essentials like clocking in and basic procedures before joining a tablet-led scavenger hunt. The activity encourages them to explore the restaurant, introduce themselves to colleagues, and learn where to find key resources, with the manager serving as a guide. This simple practice transforms a potentially stressful first day into an engaging, low-stakes experience that builds connection and confidence—critical elements of Captain D's culture.

For ongoing learning, Captain D's evaluated several external training options but ultimately decided to build and maintain its own proprietary training system, customized—or "D-ized"—to its business. In response to feedback that the original training was overwhelming, especially for internal candidates juggling full-time responsibilities, Captain D's converted the large curricula into modular levels that managers can complete while running their restaurants. Content is delivered through mixed modalities—videos, documents, short quizzes, and on-the-job coaching—so learning remains accessible and embedded in daily work.

Of particular significance—and directly addressing the postplacement development gaps identified in the analysis—Captain D's introduced the Kickstart program, turning training into real-world leadership experience for new managers. The program extends support through structured follow-ups, targeted coaching, and practical tools in areas such as conflict management, performance feedback, and team-building.

## Career Architecture: Making Growth Visible and Attainable

To sustain a strong internal talent pipeline, Captain D's formalized its frontline career architecture. The company crystallized the assistant restaurant manager (ARM) role as a clearly defined bridge between the shift leader and the general manager. It set explicit performance standards and eligibility criteria, tying the role to specified training milestones so aspiring ARMs can earn the position through demonstrated performance and learning. This role serves as a pipeline for internal promotions and gives employees a visible, attainable path to career growth (see Figure 2).

At the multiunit level, Captain D's launched the Plus One succession initiative. Each area director is now expected to identify at least one designated successor and actively develop that person.

Succession plans are reviewed in quarterly and semiannual sessions, turning succession from an informal conversation into a managed process. This simple step ensures that every critical leadership role has an emerging pipeline behind it and that great frontline teams and leaders are built from within.

## Workforce Management and Operations: Data-Driven, Locally Owned

On the operations side, Captain D's built a continuous, cross-functional labor planning loop. It begins with the finance team creating annual labor allocations using forecasts, seasonal patterns, and prior-year data, then partnering with IT and TA to translate those plans into staffing health dashboards. These dashboards track key indicators like staffing percentage, open roles, and supervisor coverage by restaurant. When gaps appear, TA and operations trigger targeted recruiting and scheduling actions (e.g., ramping up hiring in understaffed markets or adjusting plans when demand diverges from forecasts). This approach centralizes heavy analytics while helping restaurants maintain near-optimal staffing levels (see Figure 3 on the next page).

Decision rights are deliberately pushed as close to the restaurant as possible. General managers and area directors own most day-to-day people decisions, including staffing, scheduling, and performance management. HR intervenes only on serious employee relations issues, such as terminations, policy violations, or to provide guidance and partnership. This model allows frontline leaders to operate with autonomy and individual human judgment—truly acting as “CEOs of their own restaurants.”

Figure 2: Captain D's Frontline and Corporate Structure



Source: Captain D's and The Josh Bersin Company, 2026

Figure 3: Captain D's Continuous, Cross-Functional Approach to Workforce Planning

Activity	Owner	Description
Annual Labor Planning	Finance	Establish labor allocations based on sales and traffic forecasts and historical patterns.
Rolling Forecast Updates	Finance and IT	Apply seasonal patterns, prior-year comparables, and a one-period look-back to adjust expectations.
Staffing Health Dashboards	IT and TA	Monitor staffing levels by restaurant: staffing percentage, open roles, general manager, ARM, and shift leader coverage.
TA and Scheduling Actions	TA	Increase recruiting in understaffed markets; adjust scheduling or hiring plans when trends diverge from forecasts.
Field Decision Rights	General managers and area directors	Own day-to-day staffing decisions, with HR and TA as strategic partners; feed real-world data back into the planning cycle.

Source: Captain D's and The Josh Bersin Company, 2026

## Frontline Technology Ecosystem: Lean, Integrated, Accessible Technology

To prevent technology from becoming a friction point, Captain D's streamlined its tech stack. The company uses UKG and InfoSync for core HR and payroll, DailyPay for earned

wage access, D's Net as the training and communication hub, and Paradox for recruiting and onboarding. The overarching technology strategy simplifies frontline access: for personal matters, employees use the UKG mobile app; for company information and operations, they use D's Net on restaurant tablets (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Captain D's Frontline Technology Ecosystem

Layer	Tool/Platform	Frontline Purpose
Assessments	Traitify	Personality and cognitive assessments tailored to Captain D's success profiles
Recruiting and Onboarding	Paradox	Conversational hiring, automated scheduling, digital paperwork, and embedding cultural context early
Payroll and Benefits	InfoSync	Backend payroll processing, benefits enrollment, and accounts payable
Earned Wage Access	DailyPay	On-demand access to earned wages, increased transparency, and flexibility
HRIS	UKG	HRIS and mobile app for pay, tax forms, benefits, and personal details
Training	D's Net (internal intranet)	Training modules, policies, and operational resources, accessed via in-restaurant tablets.

HRIS: Human Resources Information System

Source: Captain D's and The Josh Bersin Company, 2026

# The Business Impact of a Friction-Free Frontline Experience

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By pairing a rigorous job and gap analysis with technology innovation, Captain D's shifted from "filling seats" to deliberately building great restaurant teams. Turnover has declined by roughly 60% over two years, signaling that improved hiring, clearer career paths, and postplacement development are translating into meaningful retention gains.

Staffing health has improved from roughly 88% to 97%, meaning restaurants now operate mostly fully staffed, with the right mix of guest specialists and leaders. Shift leader coverage has risen from about 85% to 95%, closing a critical gap in frontline leadership and ensuring more consistent on-the-ground support for teams.

Leadership pipelines are both stronger and faster. Internal talent now fills the majority of leadership roles, including about 80% of general manager positions, 90% of area director roles, and every director of operations position. Time-to-fill general manager roles (including training) has fallen from well over 100 days to about 40, allowing Captain D's to stabilize restaurants faster with high-performing managers who deliver great guest experiences.

## Sustaining a Relentless Focus on Removing Friction

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Looking ahead, Captain D's remains committed to eliminating friction in frontline work, particularly in areas where legacy practices still slow down guests and teams. A key lever in this next phase is the upcoming Fast Feedback initiative. Using short, three-question, tablet-based pulse surveys, frontline employees will have a direct channel to share what is—and isn't—working in real time.

The goal is to provide general managers with one clear insight and one actionable step based on employee feedback. Over time, this listening system will enable Captain D's to quickly identify emerging frictions and respond with greater agility at the restaurant level.

## Lessons Learned

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- **Accelerate change with trust and technology.** By conducting an internal job and gap analysis, Captain D's established evidence-based trust, then leveraged technology to jump-start change. Without trust and shared buy-in, most technology investments fail.
- **Use technology to augment, not replace, judgment.** Technology was implemented to reduce administrative friction, but managers retained decision rights. Leaders still determine who joins their teams, supported by objective data points.
- **Introduce "good friction" to test fit.** By adding a combined personality and cognitive assessment to the hiring process, Captain D's deliberately introduced a test to assess candidates' commitment and fit—rather than simply rushing to fill seats.
- **Enable learning on the job.** The Kickstart program provides structured postplacement development, enabling continuous growth for managers—a critical factor in delivering exceptional guest experiences.

## About the Author



### Nehal Nangia

Nehal is senior director of research at The Josh Bersin Company. In this role, Nehal leads research on talent management topics, drives empirical thought leadership, and facilitates the development of actionable insights, tools, and powerful stories for today's talent executives. Nehal brings in 17 years of professional experience in human capital, with a focus on talent management, L&D, leadership, performance management, employment value proposition, and inclusion. Nehal was the lead global advisor for clients at Deloitte, where she provided consultative advice to global HR and talent leaders on advancing key talent priorities. Nehal has also led deployments of benchmarking and diagnostic products at Gartner for clients based in EMEA, APAC, and ANZ. Nehal lives in India and has a master's degree in psychology, an advanced specialization in artificial intelligence, and the GPHR® certification.

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