EBOOK

WINNING THE WAR FOR TALENT:

Crafting the Ideal Recruitment Process for the Hospitality Industry

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The hospitality industry is the UK's third largest employer, with 3.5 million people working in the sector directly and a further 3 million people employed in support services. It contributes £93 billion annually to the UK economy and, despite difficulties over recent years, has shown great resilience, demonstrating faster economic growth than any other sector. VisitBritain, for example, estimates that 2024 visitor numbers will reach 39.5 million – an increase of 5% on 2023 – and that international visitors will spend around £34 billion.

The industry's greatest asset, however, is not the UK's historic heritage, the stunning scenery, the amazing food, from Michelin starred restaurants to independent cafés, or the diverse range of accommodation available to visitors, but the people working within the industry.

In this guide, we'll be examining the current challenges and best practices in hospitality recruitment, and providing practical solutions for decision makers working within the industry to improve recruitment strategies, align with the evolving expectations of candidates, and attract top talent.

THE WAR FOR TALENT IN HOSPITALITY >>

BREXIT:

Despite its successes the hospitality sector currently faces several serious challenges.

An article by Hospitality and Catering News earlier this year highlighted the problems facing the hospitality industry in the wake of Brexit, reporting that around 120,000 EU workers have left the sector since 2019, leading to serious talent shortages which mean that almost a million vacancies need to be filled.

The summer of 2024 saw almost 1,000,000 hospitality vacancies thanks to a bumper season of Taylor Swift, The Olympics and Paralympic Games, and the 2024 Men's Euros. However, recruitment difficulties still linger.

According to a 2022 report from the Migration Advisory Committee hospitality vacancies were 72% higher than pre-pandemic compared to an average of 42% in the general economy. It puts this down to 'the decision to leave the European Union (EU) with the consequent ending of Freedom of Movement' which, it says has had a significant effect on the employment of non-EU workers. Despite evidence that there is a shortage of hospitality staff from the EU, the committee did not recommend that hospitality be included on the Shortage Occupation List (SoL), instead requiring that vacancies be filled by domestic recruitment means.

A UK Hospitality response to a BEIS report clearly states that since the UK departed from the EU the hospitality sector has seen significant labour shortages, particularly among chefs (including chef managers and kitchen managers), hospitality team members, team leaders and management across all hospitality employers, events and conferencing (including exhibitions and visitor attractions, and hotels (from concierge to reception and housekeeping).

To counteract this depletion of the workforce the previous government announced £60 million to fund apprenticeships which it hoped would encourage up to 20,000 young people to take up an apprenticeship in the hospitality and catering industry and support small businesses. However, optimistic this funding is, it did not cover older workers who might wish to retrain to join the industry – something the industry is calling for the new labour government to address urgently.

The fact that at the end of 2023 there were still 112,000 hospitality vacancies waiting to be filled is cause for concern for an industry that is vital to the UK's economy and its global reputation.

MISCONCEPTIONS:

This situation is also exacerbated by misconceptions about the industry. A report by Caterer.com found that half of people in the UK believe that hospitality wages are low, and that 17% consider jobs in hospitality to be merely a 'stepping stone' while people look for a 'proper job'.

However, for those working in the sector, the reality is very different. The same report notes that 90% of employers within the hospitality industry pay above the living wage and that hospitality specialists are enticed into the industry because of the wide variety of perks it offers. Hospitality also offers intangible benefits to workers, such as a social, fun element, as well as more practical elements such as flexible working.

These include:

- High interests rates
- A cost-of-living crisis
- Rising energy and food prices
- Lower profit margins
- High staff turnover
- A widening skills gap
- The changing requirements of a diverse workforce

There is little doubt that eight years after Brexit and four years after the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns the pool of top talent has dwindled, despite training and development initiatives within the industry and on behalf of successive governments and an increased uptake of technological solutions for booking and ordering.

Recruitment has become more challenging and enticing someone into the industry poses difficulties simply because of the perceived lack of stability the sector faces.

We've already
seen that there are
numerous challenges
within the hospitality
recruitment process
and employers
must adapt to the
changing landscape
to attract the very
best talent available.
One way to do this is
to understand exactly
what candidates
expect within this
rapidly changing
market.

CHALLENGES IN THE CURRENT
RECRUITMENT PROCESS

WHAT CANDIDATES
DO WANT >>

Like most other workers in any other industry hospitality talent has some basic expectations, and some items on their wishlist.

First on the list, surprisingly, is a good work/life balance – in an industry renowned for long and sometimes unsocial hours, it's important that talent makes the most of their downtime to ensure their good mental health.

Second is a competitive salary and a range of benefits – it's the thing most likely to draw people into the industry or encourage them to change jobs within it.

Third is a sense of job security – not the easiest of things to offer in the current climate but imperative if talent is to be encouraged to stay with an organisation in the long term.

Fourth is the opportunity to take part in training and development – this benefits not only the individual but the company too. Talent needs to know that they'll be able to progress their careers if and when they want to, and that they'll be rewarded and recognised for all their hard work.

Finally, it's the opportunity to work for employers that offer equal opportunities to everyone, regardless of their gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.

WHAT CANDIDATES DON'T WANT >>

Among the most common complaints from talent about the recruitment process is a lengthy interview process. An interview is the first opportunity for employers and prospective employees to meet and come to an understanding about whether they're suited to each other so it's a crucial event. Many people in work who are thinking about changing roles are already time-poor and will have to make special arrangements to attend an interview, perhaps juggling childcare or arranging shift cover, especially if multiple or lengthy interviews are required. Many candidates will perceive a lengthy interview process as a red flag seeing it as an indication of a lack of respect for their valuable time. Employers, however, may value the opportunity for a long interview process, highlighting the disconnect between their own expectations and those of the candidates and drawing attention to a perceived lack of efficiency on the employer's part.

Another common criticism of the recruitment process is the Low Ball Offer (LBO). This is when a candidate is offered a salary at the very lowest end of the average salary range, or even below what was offered in an advertisement. There may be very compelling financial reasons for the employer to do this – as we've already discovered the cost of stock, energy and rent/business rates is significantly higher than in recent years and organisations must make a profit or risk going out of business. However, it can and will backfire.

The candidate may have several reactions:

1. They feel undervalued – if an employer starts with an LBO and then later raises it to meet the candidate's expectations it suggest that the employer thought they could 'get away' with a low offer initially. A higher offer later suggests that the employer realises the candidate's worth but that they were reluctant to pay for their expertise and experience.

2. They accept a higher offer from a rival – if forced to decide between two similar organisations, one of whom was happy to pay more, and one who was reluctant, most candidates will choose the former. In these days of talent shortages an LBO puts an organisation at a disadvantage in terms of recruitment and retention which will almost certainly have repercussions among hospitality specialists.

3. They have a negative impression of an organisation – hospitality is a close-knit community and people talk about employers, whether good or bad. An LBO will negatively impact on an organisation's brand and potentially deter talent from applying for vacancies within it.

Making LBOs either as a cost-cutting measure or simply because they can will lead to a severe deterioration in an organisation's ability to attract and retain talent.

CRAFTING THE IDEAL RECRUITMENT PROCESS

1. STREAMLINE THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

This involves strategic thinking before the interview stage even begins to determine exactly what a company's recruitment needs actually are. Companies should utilise AI-driven talent acquisition platforms to accurately define their recruitment needs. These platforms can assess current staff performance, identify skills gaps, and even suggest internal candidates who could be upskilled for new roles, reducing the need for external hires. If you do need to hire, spend some time writing a clear and simple job description. Crafting the right job description can now be enhanced with AI tools that analyse successful job postings to suggest optimal keywords, phrasing, and role requirements.

This ensures that the description aligns perfectly with both the company's needs and candidate expectations. Include critical information like salary, benefits, and growth opportunities, while ensuring clarity and precision that attract the right talent.

Once applications are received, applicant tracking systems (ATS) can filter candidates based on customised parameters, such as required skills, qualifications, and relevant experience. These systems not only save time by automating initial candidate screening but can also use machine learning to rank applicants based on likelihood of success in the role, ensuring that your shortlist comprises the top talent available.

During the interview process, you must ensure that a standardised procedure is in place. A structured interview will include a consistent order to the questions you want to ask, a mixture of open and closed questions as well as those about situations and competency, all within a designated amount of time allocated to each person.

From application to interview, technology can enhance the candidate experience. Automated scheduling tools, personalised email updates, and virtual interview platforms ensure a smooth, seamless experience for applicants, reducing drop-offs and increasing engagement. Candidates appreciate clear, concise communication, and technology ensures that this communication is delivered at the right time, keeping candidates informed and engaged throughout the process.

2. RESPECTING CANDIDATES' TIME

Many candidates now accept that this first interview may be conducted on Zoom or Teams, which will speed up the interview process. Those candidates that show the greatest promise can be invited to the premises for a face-to-face second interview, sometimes combined with a practical test. This not only saves everyone's time but also shows awareness that you understand the realities of busy lives in which full-time jobs, family commitments and leisure pursuits have to be juggled effectively, and time for extended, multiple interviews is limited.

Unless the role is an executive position, two interviews should be enough for the interviewing panel to decide on the right person. Asking people to return for a third or even fourth interview will deter candidates and your organisation may develop a reputation for being overly 'fussy' and wasting people's time.

Post-interview it's vital that you communicate quickly with all the candidates that you've interviewed.

Keeping them in the loop, whether they've been successful or not, demonstrates that you're as invested in them as they are in you and that you respect the time and effort they've gone to.

Clear and quick communication will also result in more effective recruitment – if you fail to let the successful candidate know that they've got the job they may already have moved on to another company that responds more rapidly.

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3. COMPETITIVE COMPENSATION

As we've already discovered, the Low Ball Offer can often backfire, leading to the forced resumption of an already expensive and time-consuming process. In today's competitive recruitment market, employers must get the balance right to attract top talent. But how does an organisation structure an offer that attracts top talent without undercutting the value of the position?

The secret lies in the balance of salary and benefits.

A competitive salary is essential to attract the right calibre of candidates – too low and top talent won't apply, too high and employers run the risk of being unable to justify the cost while maintaining a high enough profit margin. Benchmarking can assist you with finding the ideal salary for vacant positions, and the services of a trustworthy and experienced recruitment agency will be invaluable in gauging the appropriate salary level.

However, as we've also found, an attractive benefits package – including things such as the ability to work flexibly, training and development opportunities, leadership development programmes, an employee recognition scheme, profit sharing, bonuses, wellness initiatives, the ability to have a healthy work/life balance, and, increasingly importantly, Diversity and Inclusion initiatives – will all help to attract and retain talent.

Remember too that different age groups will be interested in different benefits – Older workers (Baby Boomers and Gen X) are generally more interested in retirement planning, health benefits, and options like carer's leave, which cater to their family responsibilities, such as eldercare and long-term healthcare. They also value traditional benefits like pension contributions and financial stability as they prepare for retirement.

Younger workers (Millennials and Gen Z), on the other hand, tend to prioritise flexible working arrangements, work-life balance, and an organisation's commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Gen Z, in particular, is also interested in mental health support, career development opportunities, and teleworking options.

4. BUILDING TRUST AND ALIGNMENT

Let's look at some strategies to ensure that client expectations are aligned with candidate realities, which will result in fostering mutual respect and ensuring successful hires.

Client expectations and candidate realities may seem poles apart, but with trust and honest and open communication, a middle ground can be found without either party feeling like they've compromised too much.

The employer/employee relationship must be based on effective communication – we've already seen how important a clear job description is to attract the best hospitality specialists. Communication fosters respect and demonstrates that both parties value the other's opinion and stance. It also shows that issues, which may have previously seemed insurmountable, can be overcome. Candidate engagement is vital throughout the whole recruitment process, from the their initial application

through to them accepting the job, and throughout onboarding, and can help manage expectations in terms of timescale, as well as company ethos.

Managing expectations about salary is also important. For candidates, it's one of the factors in them becoming interested in the position in the first place. For employers it shows their commitment to finding the best possible person in not only the experience bracket but based their own ability and willingness to pay.

CASE STUDY >>
MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT IN HOSPITALITY

As we've already seen, a good work/life balance that supports mental health is the number-one issue for hospitality candidates.

As well as being vital to the individual concerned, it's also important to ensure that businesses can offer a first-class customer experience by enabling staff to provide great customer service.

The Burnt Chef Project was launched in May 2019 to create change in the industry and combat and eradicate mental health stigma within hospitality. The project provides education, support and resources to tackle mental health stigma and works to put people's wellbeing at the heart of the industry, making it both healthier and more sustainable.

Since its inception, the project has helped over 6,400 people with free mental health support and therapy. It provides Health and Wellbeing modules and podcasts for hospitality staff all over the world, and works with colleges to provide free stress reduction and mental health techniques. It also trains international ambassadors in mental health awareness, making it easier for staff under stress to reach out and acknowledge their problems and to take the first step in combating them.

The initiative hopes to change the culture of hospitality to one of care and compassion through a wide range of tools, services and education, which it hopes will both improve recruitment and reduce turnover in an industry already under stress.

SURVEY
INSIGHTS

We conducted a survey in September 2024 on candidates' attitudes towards working within the hospitality sector and the recruitment process involved in finding work in the industry.

The results were as follows:

• When asked what factors they prioritised when considering a job offer within the hospitality sector, the majority of our respondents cited salary and career development opportunities.

• The ideal interview process, according to our respondents, was two weeks, confirming that the most significant frustration experienced during recruitment was a long interview process. A maximum of two interviews was considered the ideal.

• Compensation packages were important to our respondents, with a competitive salary, a range of benefits including healthcare and a pension package, as well as a performance bonus, all motivating factors in moving to a new role in hospitality.

• The primary reason for declining a job offer would be a low salary.

• When asked what would make an employer stand out to them during the recruitment process, our respondents said that the speed of the process was most important to them and the potential employer's response was 'very important' in their decision-making.

ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS: STRATEGIES FOR AN EFFICIENT AND RESPECTFUL RECRUITMENT PROCESS

SURVEY FINDINGS >>

Despite the seeming complexities of recruiting top hospitality talent in the current climate, there are actionable strategies that employers can take to make the process simpler, more efficient and maintain the highest levels of respect.

1. It's clear from our survey that candidates want a speedy recruitment process, which should take no longer than two weeks and involve no more than two interviews.

Takeaway: Employers should consider their recruitment process and refine it to ensure talent is not deterred by an overly-long and complicated process. Remember – two interviews, two weeks.

2. In addition to a salary that reflects their skills, experience and ambition, hospitality candidates want a range of benefits, including healthcare and a pension, as well as a performance bonus.

Takeaway: The primary reason for declining a job in the hospitality industry would be a low salary. Remember – benchmark salaries to ensure you attract the best talent for whom hospitality isn't just a stepping stone, but rather a career commitment.

3. In addition to a salary that reflects their skills, experience and ambition, hospitality candidates want a range of benefits, including healthcare and a pension, as well as a performance bonus.

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INDUSTRY TRENDS >>

Hospitality recruitment has been affected by several important industry trends throughout 2024 and it's vital that employers are aware of what impacts their ability to recruit and retain talent. The most influential include:

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT ∨

Elite sports people say that incremental gains are the key to their success. Hospitality can take a tip from them in order to stay ahead of the competition by recognising the importance of training and development for their talent. The gains it brings include better customer service, reduced staff turnover and increased talent attraction (saving money in the long run), overcoming the skills gap, offering a consistent career path, increased productivity and therefore profitability, and enhanced compliance, which all leads to an improved employer brand.

CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE ∨

Applying for a job should be easy and welcoming, therefore it's vital to create a seamless and simple process from start to finish. Employers should consider every aspect of their recruitment, from the initial advertisement to how easy it is to navigate their website and apply online, and from the interview to how well they communicate with candidates.

FLEXIBLE WORKING ∨

Whether it's due to a desire for a better work/life balance or personal commitments increasing numbers of candidates today want to work flexibly. Employers must consider offering flexible work models to accommodate talent in order to gain and maintain competitiveness in a fast-moving race for talent.

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION ∨

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ∨

SUSTAINABILITY ∨

An organisation that doesn't reflect the society in which it functions stands little chance of thriving. It's vital, therefore, that hospitality businesses reflect the rich diversity of the UK in terms of the staff they employ. That means widening recruitment practices to include a wide range of gender, age, ethnicity, disability and sexuality to create a safe and welcoming place not only for talent but also for customers.

In fact, for younger workers, it's one of the most important aspects of an organisation's brand with 78% of 18-24 year olds saying that diversity and inclusion is crucial when considering a new role. Businesses that already have established ED&I initiatives also have 2.5% higher cashflow per employee than those that don't so they're not just window dressing, they really do make a difference.

Apart from its use in enhancing the customer experience in such areas as booking, for example, AI can also be a useful tool for employers with applications in writing job descriptions, candidate screening, eliminating bias, maintaining a talent pipeline, streamlining both the interview process and following up, and ensuring the recruitment process is both efficient and accelerated.

However, the human touch can never be underestimated and for all its wide variety of applications AI comes with a note of caution about its use.

The UK's leading trade body for the hospitality sector, UKHospitality, aims to help the industry to reach net zero by 2040. As sustainability becomes increasingly important both to customers (78% of global travellers intended to stay in sustainable accommodation, for example) and talent, it's vital that the industry reflects this growing trend and works to decrease energy and water usage, cut down on waste, eliminate single use plastics, and focus on locally-sourced produce to reduce its environmental footprint. A by-product of these practices is an uptick in the company's branding and CSR reputation as well as a positive contribution to conserving the world's resources.

ENHANCING EMPLOYER BRANDING TO APPEAL TO TOP TALENT IN A COMPETITIVE MARKET >>

Employer branding is one of the most effective ways to attract and retain top talent in the hospitality industry. But many organisations either don't fully understand what it is or fail to implement it properly.

Let's look at how your organisation can enhance its branding and stand out in a highly-competitive market.

What is employer branding?

Every organisation has its own employer brand – it's how you are perceived as an employer, the value your reputation brings, and what you offer in terms of culture and benefits to your employees. The CIPD defines it as, '...a set of attributes and qualities, often intangible, that makes an organisation distinctive, promises a particular kind of employment experience, and appeals to those people who will thrive and perform best in its culture'. It encompasses what sets you apart from other employers in the same field, connecting with your values, and it's what, when done correctly, will enable you to compete for and retain top talent.

Why is it important?

Today, when competition for talent is fierce, a company's reputation as an employer is vitally important. Good employer branding not only increases the number of applicants who apply for your vacancies thereby growing the amount of people you have to choose from, but ultimately saves your organisation money thanks to you being an employer of choice. In these days of social media good employer branding can help you stand out, again increasing your pool of candidates.

What does it involve?

Employer branding involves highlighting a company's values such as an effective ED&I initiative, or a successful CSR programme, and includes those values you'd like to see in a potential candidate. It relies on good communication, both internally and externally, to reinforce and highlight those values, keeping a consistent and respectful tone of voice throughout. It also involves engaging your employees, whether that's offering them Training and Development to enhance their working or personal lives, or putting on company activities which help build a definitive culture. By developing and effectively communicating your employer branding you will help elevate your attraction and retention rates, improve your employee engagement, increase your productivity and drive forward the success of your business.

EMPLOYER BRANDING CASE STUDY –
MARRIOTT HOTELS >>

Founded in 1927 the Marriott portfolio includes almost 8,900 properties in 141 countries around the world, and promises careers built on a foundation of Diversity & Inclusion and Sustainability & Social Impact principles.

The career section of its website highlights its paid 10-week internship programme which offers study and hands-on experience, a paid post-graduate leadership development programme which provides technology and discipline-specific training towards management positions, and paid apprenticeships offering on-the-job training in an 'inclusive environment that supports your development and wellbeing'.

Marriott employees receive a wide range of benefits which the company describes as generous, and include travel discounts, paid holiday and sick leave, TakeCare programs that support employees' physical, mental and financial wellbeing, Assistance & Resources for Life, offering counselling, education and referral services, learning and development programs, personal and professional development, and continued education.

The company's Sustainability & Social Impact programs focus on four Goals – Nurture (supporting resiliency and sustainable development), Sustain (integrating sustainability and mitigating climate-related risk), Empower (focusing on employment opportunities for youth, diverse populations, women, people with disabilities, veterans and refugees) and Welcome (a commitment to upholding and respecting human rights in order to promote peace and cultural understanding).

By focusing on and promoting its values to potential employees Marriott Hotels not only attracts and retains vital talent in the UK and offers opportunities around the world, attempts to mitigate some of the less sustainable practices of hotels and do some good.

IN CONCLUSION >>

Charles Darwin once wrote, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is most adaptable to change."

Today this holds true for businesses that face an unprecedented range of challenges in the war to win talent.

Businesses must demonstrate resilience, ingenuity, creativity and emotional intelligence to attract the best people but they don't have to do that alone. By utilising the wide variety of services of an experienced and knowledgeable recruitment partner can provide, hospitality organisations can give themselves the competitive advantage they need to not only attract and retain the best talent available but also allow their businesses to thrive in the uncertain times we live in today.

If you're a hospitality decision-maker we can help.

G-nius can offer you a range of recruitment solutions, whether you're looking for full-time, part-time or seasonal talent, that will suit your business perfectly.

Contact us now to arrange a consultation to establish exactly what your recruitment needs are or simply for more information about the range of options available to you. We look forward to hearing from you.