

RESEARCH INSIGHT:
HIRING & STAFFING

**How Onboarding, Managers, &
Technology Drive Restaurant ROI**

Key insights & findings

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INTRODUCTION

The restaurant industry occupies a uniquely influential position in the labor market. It is the nation's training ground, having provided a first job for more than half of all adults in the United States, and employing more than 67% of them at some point in their lives. **Simply put, restaurants have played a role in the career paths of more people than any other sector.**

It also underscores why, with millions of employment opportunities available in communities nationwide, investing in people is central to creating a future-ready workforce for the restaurant industry. Operators increasingly recognize that building teams capable of growing, adapting, and leading starts by supporting the individuals who keep guests coming back.

While hiring is easier today than it was a few years ago, staffing remains a persistent challenge, even as restaurants continually bring on new employees. This is particularly true for key employees, such as managers, chefs, and other highly skilled specialists. At the same time, the industry is prone to turnover, so there is always a need to staff restaurants.

Operators cite the high volume of applications as a challenge, imposing time and cost burdens that can slow staffing without technological support. Hiring managers often find that reviewing candidates, conducting interviews, and onboarding new staff members consumes significant time.

Ideally, that is time that might otherwise be devoted to daily operations, coaching current employees, and enhancing the guest experience.

Meanwhile, the cooling labor market is offering some relief to the constant hiring demand, at least for now. The era of the "Great Resignation" has given way to the "Great Stay," with quit rates returning to pre-pandemic levels. Restaurants are part of this trend, with most operators planning to keep staffing levels steady in the months ahead. Still, demographic trends suggest workforce challenges will persist over the long term, keeping staffing front and center for restaurants and other businesses well into the next decade.

Last year, in its *Research Insight: Workforce Technology Report*, the National Restaurant Association, with support from Workday, examined how workforce technology could help restaurants address persistent staffing challenges by improving recruitment, retention, and employee development and engagement. That research found that automation, AI-driven applicant tracking systems, and chatbots significantly reduced hiring times, streamlined applicant management, and freed managers from administrative tasks so they could refocus on restaurant operations and employee engagement. By simplifying and accelerating the hiring process, those tools improved the candidate experience while delivering meaningful time and cost savings to the restaurant operator.

This year's report builds on those findings by shifting from the "how" of hiring technology to the "why" and "what's next" of effective staffing—underscoring the importance of hiring the right people and quantifying the real costs of restaurant understaffing. Once again, the National Restaurant Association draws on an operator survey and interviews with leaders from several restaurant companies to provide practical insights on staffing strategies that could empower a future-ready workforce. The findings offer clear perspectives on return on investment (ROI) and break-even points for new employees, the outsized value of great managers, and proven approaches to recruitment and retention. Those best practices equip operators and managers to build resilient teams that can adapt, grow, and lead in a changing labor landscape.



KEY INSIGHTS

Understaffing carries steep and immediate costs. Being short-staffed by even 1 team member could cost hundreds of dollars per shift and tens of thousands in annual sales losses. Nearly 8 in 10 short-staffed operators said it also limited their ability to grow, lead to slower service, reduced sales, and increased overtime expenses and employee stress.

New employees take time to become “net positive”—and timing varies by role. According to Association research, hourly employees begin contributing net value after an average of 31.8 days on the job, while managers and salaried staff become net positive after 72.2 days. Interviews revealed even wider variation, with some leadership roles requiring 3 to 6 months to reap the investment in hiring, onboarding, and training.

New-hire retention hinges on early engagement, culture fit, and strong onboarding. The first 30 to 90 days are critical. Regular manager outreach, clear development pathways, mentoring relationships, and supportive workplace connections help new hires feel valued and reduce costly turnovers.

Operational success depends on developing great managers. Strong managers drive culture, performance, retention, and guest satisfaction. Effective managers build followings, maintain operational consistency, and help drive successful operational metrics—while poor managers quickly erode morale and overall performance.

Technology is reshaping staffing, hiring, and workforce management. Automation, AI-enabled tools, and data driven platforms are streamlining recruitment—reducing time to hire from weeks to as little as 1-3 days, supporting training, and improving scheduling. While adoption is uneven, operators increasingly view technology as essential for future workforce efficiency, productivity, and long-term staffing stability.



PART 1: THE CURRENT STATE OF THE LABOR MARKET

LABOR MARKET STABILIZATION BRINGS NEW STAFFING DYNAMICS

In 2025, restaurant and foodservice businesses employed 15.7M people—about 10% of the nation’s workforce—and are projected to continue growing, reaching 15.8M in 2026 and 17.3M by 2030 (Fig. 1), according to the *2026 State of the Restaurant Industry* report. Job openings in the restaurant and lodging sector in 2025 averaged 908K per month. While the annual rate was above pre-pandemic levels, job openings normalized as the year progressed, particularly from the elevated rates seen during the “Great Recession.”

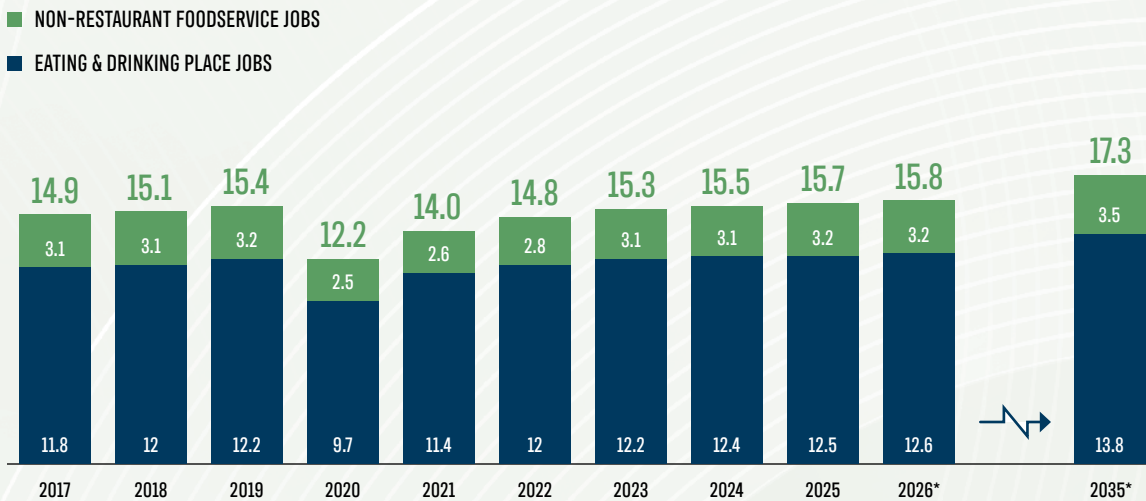
Yet recent data points to a cooling labor market. Hiring has slowed significantly, and the number of unemployed workers now exceeds job openings, reversing a structural trend that had persisted since 2018, except during the pandemic. In July 2022, job openings outnumbered unemployed workers by a 2-to-1 margin, with just 49.8 unemployed individuals for every 100 job openings. Today, there are 1.1 unemployed individuals for every job opening. This shift has made it easier for operators to find candidates.

Understaffing has become a less pressing issue. Only 22% of operators said their restaurants lacked enough staff to meet customer demand in 2025, down from 32% in 2024 and well below the 78% who reported the same challenge in 2021 (Fig. 2). Many operators are now focusing on finding the *right* candidate rather than simply “a warm body,” a stark contrast to the “Great Resignation” era.



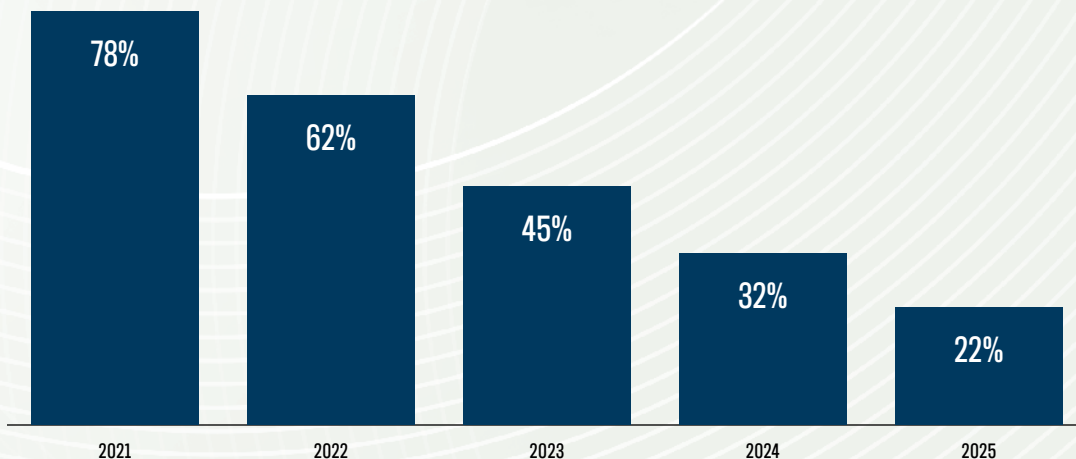
FIG. 1: RESTAURANT AND FOODSERVICE EMPLOYMENT, INCLUDING FORECAST FOR 2035

(IN MILLIONS OF WORKERS, SEASONALLY ADJUSTED)



Source: National Restaurant Association (2026), based on historical data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
Notes: Figures represent year-end employment levels; * represents a projected employment estimate

FIG. 2: % OF RESTAURANTS WHO SAID THEY DON'T HAVE ENOUGH EMPLOYEES TO SUPPORT EXISTING CUSTOMER DEMAND



Source: National Restaurant Association (2026)

TABLE 1: WAS IT EASIER OR MORE DIFFICULT TO FILL JOB OPENINGS IN 2025, COMPARED TO 2024?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
EASIER THAN 2024	26%	29%	24%
MORE DIFFICULT THAN 2024	33%	31%	35%
ABOUT THE SAME AS 2024	41%	41%	42%

Base: Restaurants that filled a job opening in 2025
Source: National Restaurant Association (2026)

TABLE 2: IN 2025, WERE YOUR RESTAURANT’S STAFFING LEVELS HIGHER, LOWER, OR ABOUT THE SAME AS THEY WERE IN 2024?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
HIGHER THAN 2024	16%	15%	16%
LOWER THAN 2024	35%	32%	37%
ABOUT THE SAME AS 2024	49%	52%	46%

Source: National Restaurant Association

62% of restaurant operators said recruiting and retaining employees was a very or fairly significant challenge for their businesses

62%

While labor market improvements have eased some pressure, one-third of survey respondents said it was more difficult to fill job openings in 2025 than in 2024, and another 41% said it was about the same (Table 1). Moreover, 62% of restaurant operators said recruiting and retaining employees was a very or fairly significant challenge for their businesses.

At the same time, slower job growth has heightened consumer caution, leading to more deliberate choices in discretionary spending, including dining out. This helps to explain the more sluggish hiring trends seen over the past year, particularly among nonfarm payrolls. Furthermore, 35% of operators said their restaurants’ staffing was lower in 2025 than in 2024, with roughly half suggesting that staffing levels were unchanged.

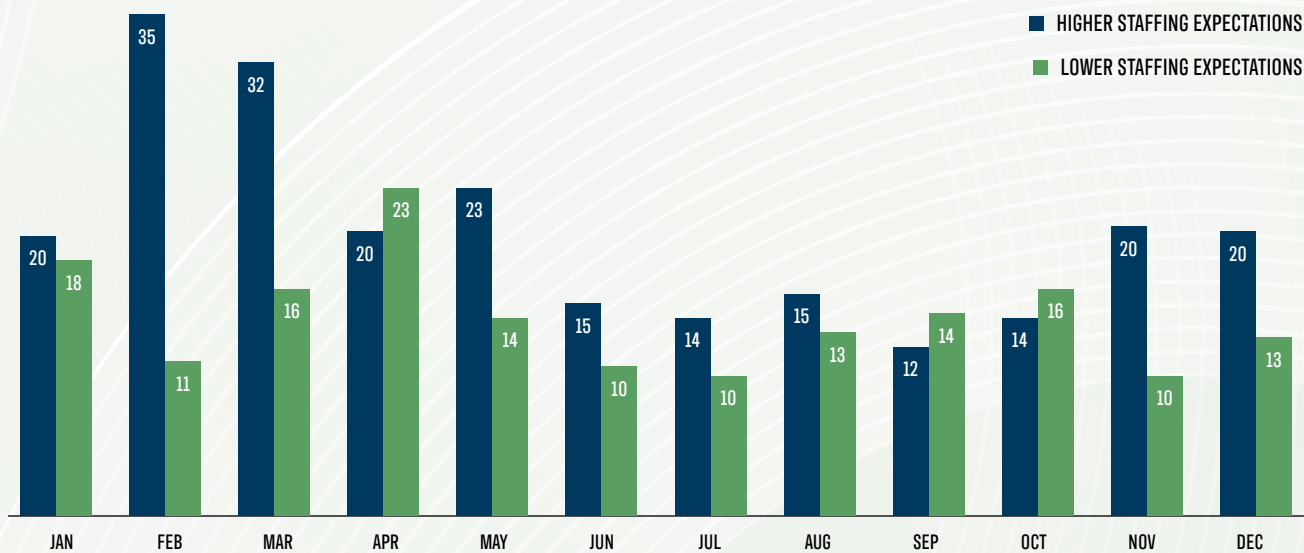
The “Great Stay” is largely associated with fewer people switching jobs, mostly out of worries about economic conditions. But this extends beyond labor supply to include labor demand. Indeed, business operators have been more hesitant to add to their workforce in recent months but are also not reducing it.¹ In the Association’s monthly tracking survey of operators, for instance, two-thirds of respondents said they expected staffing to remain the same over the coming months (Fig. 3).

Shelly Grange of Chipotle described today’s labor market as “the big, scary stay”—a period marked by intense competition for talent even though many workers remain hesitant to switch jobs. Despite broad economic anxiety, she noted that most Chipotle locations are adequately staffed, but demand remains high for specialized roles and strong managers.

¹ Recent data show a modest uptick in layoffs, though not significant, even as the labor market cools. Given the ongoing challenges of hiring—especially finding the right talent—many businesses are likely to hold on to their employees, even if sales soften in the near term, unless economic conditions worsen substantially.

FIG. 3: RESTAURANT OPERATORS' OUTLOOK FOR STAFFING OVER THE NEXT 6 MONTHS, 2025

(IN %)



Source: National Restaurant Association monthly tracking survey of operators

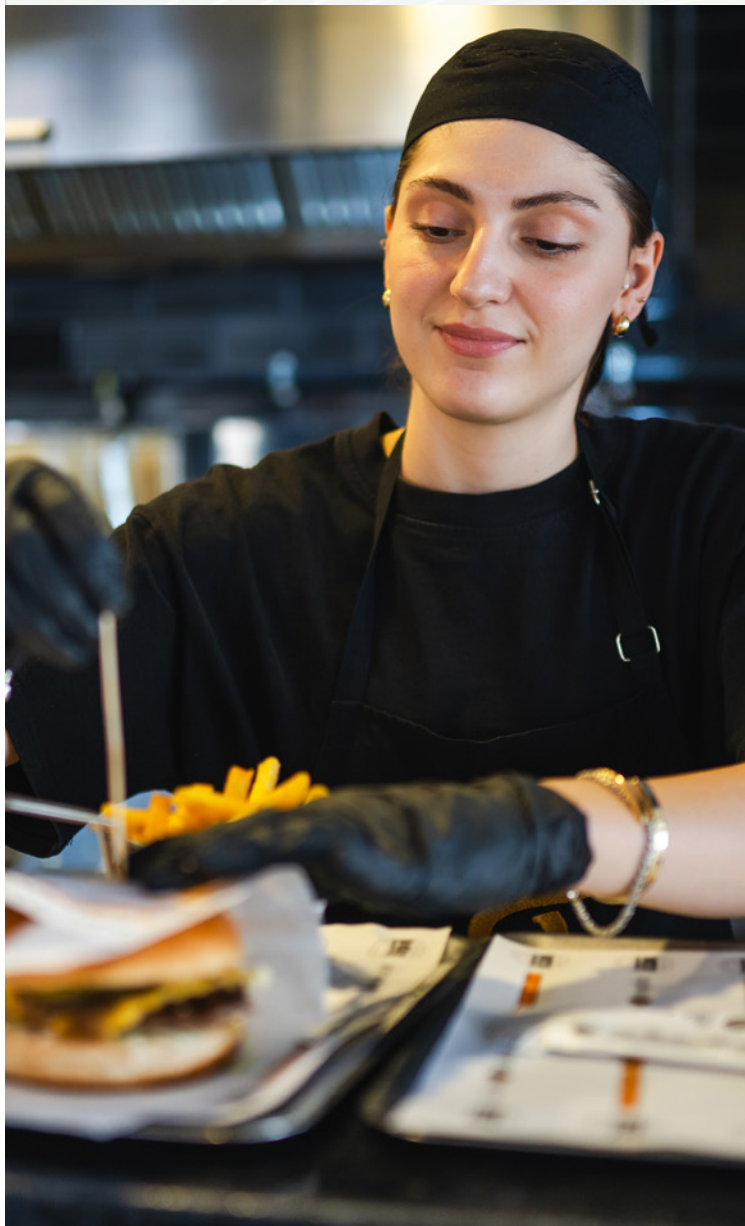
Robyn Jones from Biaggi's Ristorante Italiano, and others, made similar comments. Mary Dahl of Golden Corral emphasized how competitive—and at times frustrating—it can be to fill certain positions.

Damian Hanft from Taco John's offered a slightly different perspective, explaining that staffing rural locations continues to be a challenge, but overall labor conditions have improved, compared with recent years.

Several interviewees stated that today's recruitment challenges are not dramatically different from those seen before COVID, and have eased considerably since the peak of the "Great Resignation." However, late-night shifts are still notably harder to fill. One senior human resources executive from a major brand noted that the industry is currently experiencing its lowest turnover, is more staffed, and has higher retention rates than before the pandemic.

Dave Burrington of Lehigh Valley Restaurant Brands noted that while competition for hourly workers persists, hiring has become less difficult as the labor market stabilizes. He also highlighted that more people now view restaurants as a viable long-term career path. Likewise, Amber Dunlap from the Slatebridge Restaurant Group noted that applicant flow has been strong, with "people wanting to work for them." Many candidates are coming from other industries following layoffs. As a result, her team is now "the pickiest they have been in 10 years," able to focus on selecting the right people.

With this strengthened applicant pipeline, human resources leaders across the board have said they are better positioned, both in resource investments and manager time, to elevate the overall employee experience. This ranges from the time of application to interviews and onboarding to efforts to improve retention among existing employees. In terms of hiring specifically, the stronger flow of candidates allows for greater emphasis on quality and performance.



RESTAURANT TURNOVER IN CONTEXT

The restaurant and foodservice industry plays a formative role as America’s training ground, with 67% of all adults saying they’ve worked in the industry at some point in their lives, and 51% saying it was their first job (Table 3). Those rates are even higher among Gen Zs and Millennials. And, more adults have gotten their foundational job experience and professional skills in the restaurant industry than in any other sector.

While the foodservice industry has a turnover rate higher than the private sector overall, much of the churn is characteristic of a workforce composed predominantly of young adults and early-career workers. In 2025, the leisure and hospitality sector averaged 952K hires and 937K separations each month, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In any given month in 2025, an average of 5.6% of the sector’s employment base was newly hired, with a similar share of exits. That level of movement underscores the exceptional dynamism of the industry’s labor market.

TABLE 3: % OF ADULTS WHO HAVE WORKED IN THE RESTAURANT AND FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY, EITHER AS THEIR FIRST JOB OR AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIVES

	ALL ADULTS	GEN Z ADULTS (18-29)	MILLENNIALS (30-45)	GEN XERS (46-61)	BABY BOOMERS (62-80)
FIRST JOB WAS IN A RESTAURANT	51%	67%	60%	52%	32%
WORKED IN A RESTAURANT - BUT NOT AS A FIRST JOB	16%	11%	14%	17%	20%
TOTAL % WORKED IN INDUSTRY	67%	78%	74%	69%	52%

Source: National Restaurant Association (2026)

TABLE 4: TURNOVER RATES BY SELECT OCCUPATIONS IN THE RESTAURANT AND FOODSERVICE SECTOR, 2025

STANDARD OCCUPATIONAL CLASSIFICATION CODES & TITLES		2025 JOBS	2025 SEPARATIONS	TURNOVER RATE
11-9051	FOOD SERVICE MANAGERS	247,792	113,075	45.63%
35-1012	FIRST-LINE SUPERVISORS OF FOOD PREPARATION AND SERVING WORKERS	1,202,105	638,398	53.11%
35-1011	CHEFS AND HEAD COOKS	185,989	136,605	73.45%
35-2015	COOKS, SHORT ORDER	154,466	113,575	73.53%
35-3011	BARTENDERS	755,586	580,049	76.77%
35-2012	COOKS, INSTITUTION AND CAFETERIA	448,363	345,484	77.05%
35-2011	COOKS, FAST FOOD	666,315	523,581	78.58%
35-2014	COOKS, RESTAURANT	1,483,367	1,267,815	85.47%
35-2019	COOKS, ALL OTHER	27,621	23,868	86.41%
35-2013	COOKS, PRIVATE HOUSEHOLD	1,124	1,009	89.73%
35-3041	FOOD SERVERS, NON-RESTAURANT	277,290	257,995	93.04%
35-9011	DINING ROOM AND CAFETERIA ATTENDANTS AND BARTENDER HELPERS	527,908	522,166	98.91%
35-2021	FOOD PREPARATION WORKERS	890,251	926,242	104.04%
35-9021	DISHWASHERS	473,968	589,525	124.38%
35-3031	WAITERS AND WAITRESSES	2,318,490	3,026,933	130.56%
35-9099	FOOD PREPARATION AND SERVING RELATED WORKERS, ALL OTHER	99,091	169,318	170.87%
35-3023	FAST FOOD AND COUNTER WORKERS	3,837,207	6,646,043	173.20%
35-9031	HOSTS AND HOSTESSES, RESTAURANT, LOUNGE, AND COFFEE SHOP	428,697	1,256,014	292.98%
OVERALL		14,025,629	17,137,694	122.19%

Source: Lightcast using BLS data

The average turnover rate for the restaurant and foodservice industry in 2025 was 122%, with wide variation by occupation (Table 4). Those numbers illustrate why restaurants are continually recruiting and onboarding new workers, but should be taken in context. Following are reasons why the turnover rate might be structurally higher in restaurants than in other industries.

Restaurants are the nation's largest employer of teenagers. One-third of all working teens in the U.S. are employed in restaurants, totaling roughly 1.9M young workers. Many of those employees are gaining their first work experience and will naturally move on to other jobs—either in or outside the hospitality sector—as they begin their careers.

In 2025, the leisure and hospitality sector averaged 952K hires and 937K separations each month, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

A high percentage of employees are students.

Nearly 3 in 10 eating-and-drinking-place employees are enrolled in school, compared with just 10% of the total U.S. labor force. Student workers typically do not work full-year schedules, contributing to predictable patterns of starts and separations.

Seasonal staffing cycles amplify normal churn.

Restaurants boost staffing levels at various points during the year, especially in the summer. The industry is among the largest creators of seasonal jobs, adding more than 500K positions in a typical summer. However, most seasonal hires become seasonal separations.

A higher proportion of part-year employees. Overall, 28% of the eating-and-drinking-place workforce is part-year, nearly double the share for the overall U.S. workforce (15%). By definition, every part-year employee contributes 1 separation annually.

Upward mobility often means moving between employers. Career advancement frequently comes from taking on new roles at different restaurant brands or locations, counting as turnover. With multiple restaurants in nearly every community, workers have considerable opportunities to move up, pursue better schedules, or take on supervisory positions—opportunities far more accessible than in most sectors.



SCHEDULING AS A STRATEGIC TOOL FOR RECRUITMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

Restaurant managers and owners work hard to create schedules that are mutually beneficial for both employers and employees. In many cases, prospective candidates even self-select where they apply based on expected scheduling practices. Accommodating employees' availability can support recruitment and strengthen retention efforts. For instance, Shelly Grange from Chipotle noted the brand's work to improve shift-specific scheduling so it could better match candidates with available roles.² In addition, another HR leader emphasized that a key driver of retention is setting clear expectations about the role, including potential hours, early in the interview and onboarding process.

Many restaurants post schedules 7 to 14 days in advance, and employees increasingly seek greater flexibility—whether that means preferred shifts and hours or time off to address personal needs or illness. At the same time, technology has transformed scheduling. For managers, digital tools can be a major time saver compared with traditional methods, which can quickly become complicated. These automated platforms allow employees to easily enter their availability, swap shifts, or signal when they want to work additional hours, streamlining the process for everyone.

² Employees at Chipotle can communicate with their teams for flexibility as needed using the company's scheduling platform with approval from their leader.

PART 2: THE COST OF BEING UNDERSTAFFED

HIRING ACTIVITY REMAINS HIGH ACROSS RESTAURANT ROLES

Hiring kept restaurant HR employees busy in 2025. According to the *2026 State of the Restaurant Industry* report, 88% of respondents said they filled at least 1 job opening during the year (Table 5). More than half (52%) hired for front-of-the-house or customer service roles, while 43% recruited kitchen support staff and another 43% filled chef or cook positions. Roughly one-third reported hiring for manager roles.

TABLE 5: IS YOUR RESTAURANT CURRENTLY TRYING TO RECRUIT PEOPLE FOR THE FOLLOWING POSITIONS?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULL-SERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
FRONT-OF-THE-HOUSE OR CUSTOMER SERVICE POSITIONS	52%	49%	54%
KITCHEN SUPPORT POSITIONS	45%	45%	46%
CHEF/COOK POSITIONS	43%	54%	32%
MANAGER POSITIONS	34%	30%	38%

Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply
Source: National Restaurant Association

Referrals from current employees (68%), word of mouth from family, friends, or customers (65%), and online job postings (65%) continue to be the top ways that restaurants fill job openings (Table 6). Social media (39%) is also important, but as several interviewees observed, a restaurant's customers can also be an important source for prospective candidates, with roughly one-third of survey respondents saying those who eat at their restaurants often fill their open jobs.

TABLE 6: IN 2025, DID YOUR RESTAURANT FIND PEOPLE TO FILL JOB OPENINGS IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING WAYS?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULL-SERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
REFERRALS FROM CURRENT EMPLOYEES	68%	70%	66%
WORD OF MOUTH (FROM FAMILY, FRIENDS OR CUSTOMERS)	65%	66%	65%
ONLINE JOB POSTING	65%	69%	60%
SOCIAL MEDIA	39%	44%	35%
CUSTOMERS WHO APPLIED FOR A JOB	34%	31%	38%
HELP WANTED SIGN	26%	19%	32%
INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC PLATFORM	19%	17%	21%

Base: Restaurants that filled a job opening in 2025
Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply
Source: National Restaurant Association

47%

47% of restaurant operators said they had **job openings that were difficult to fill** in 2025

HOW UNDERSTAFFING AFFECTS DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS

Though hiring has become easier, being adequately staffed remains an evergreen challenge for restaurants, given turnover and industry growth. The costs associated with turnover and lost productivity from understaffing also add to margin pressures most operators are feeling. Nearly 79% of operators who were short-staffed said it significantly limited their ability to grow and succeed (Table 5), with limited-service restaurant respondents more likely to cite this as a challenge (84%) than their fullservice counterparts (73%).

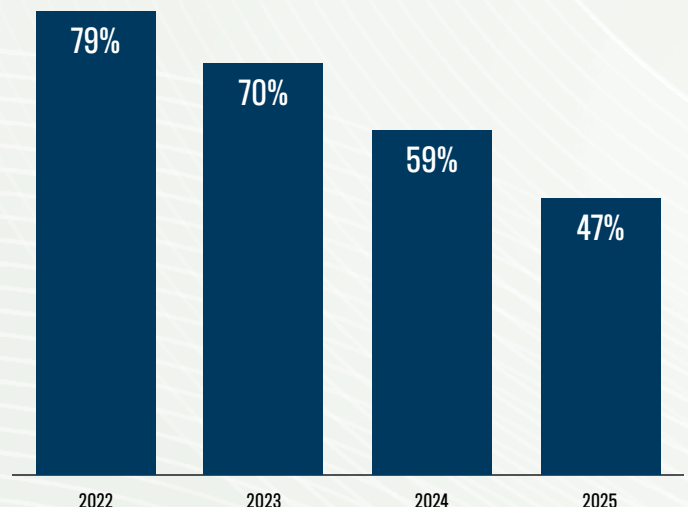
In fact, 47% of restaurant operators said they had job openings that were difficult to fill in 2025 (Fig. 4). That was down from 59% in 2024 and well below the peak of 79% in 2022. In our latest survey, 51% of fullservice operators and 43% of limited-service restaurant operators said they were challenged to fill positions.

TABLE 7: TO WHAT EXTENT IS BEING UNDER-STAFFED IMPACTING YOUR RESTAURANT'S ABILITY TO GROW AND BE SUCCESSFUL?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
VERY/FAIRLY SIGNIFICANT	79%	73%	84%
VERY SIGNIFICANT	45%	34%	55%
FAIRLY SIGNIFICANT	34%	39%	29%
JUST A LITTLE/NOT AT ALL	21%	27%	16%
JUST A LITTLE	21%	27%	16%
NOT AT ALL	0%	0%	0%

Base: Restaurants that do not have enough employees to support existing customer demand
Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply
Source: National Restaurant Association

FIG. 4: % OF RESTAURANT OPERATORS WHO SAID THEY HAVE JOB OPENINGS THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO FILL



Source: National Restaurant Association (2026)

THE PERSISTENT COST OF UNDERSTAFFING

Interviewees consistently echoed the survey findings. They described both the tangible impacts—slower service, reduced product quality, lower customer satisfaction scores, decreased sales, and higher turnover—and the broader operational limitations created by having fewer employees on the floor.

Being understaffed comes with real costs. Nearly 60% of survey respondents reported that it leads to higher employee stress, increased turnover, and greater overtime expenses for existing staff (Table 8).

At the end of the day, there are limits to what a restaurant can achieve when operating with fewer workers while still trying to meet customer expectations as if fully staffed—and those limits become evident quickly. About half of restaurant operators said understaffing results in lower service quality, reduced customer satisfaction, slower operations, and lost sales. Additionally, 28% noted that when everyone is focused on filling gaps and running above capacity, training opportunities suffer.

For example, a restaurant leader from a major quickservice brand noted that severe understaffing could force them to prioritize drive-thru orders, raising the possibility of closing their dining rooms or even shutting off delivery channels. While such scenarios are rare, they carry serious financial consequences. Others described needing to reduce the number of tables they could serve. Another HR executive stressed that “the loss of a cook or server could have a large impact on operations.”

TABLE 8: HAS YOUR RESTAURANT RECENTLY EXPERIENCED ANY OF THE FOLLOWING BECAUSE OF UNFILLED JOB OPENINGS?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
INCREASED EMPLOYEE STRESS AND TURNOVER	60%	53%	66%
HIGHER OVERTIME COSTS FOR EXISTING STAFF	59%	59%	59%
LOWER SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	50%	46%	54%
SLOWER OPERATIONS	49%	47%	51%
LOST SALES	48%	41%	54%
DELAYED TRAINING	28%	21%	35%

Base: Restaurants that have job openings that are difficult to fill
Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply
Source: National Restaurant Association (2026)



Though difficult to quantify precisely, all interviewees agreed that understaffing becomes expensive very quickly. He estimated that being down one employee could cost hundreds of dollars per shift—an amount that compounds rapidly if the shortage persists. Furthermore, another restaurant leader agreed that being consistently down a single employee could reduce annual sales by roughly hundreds of thousands of dollars. Similarly, Taco John’s Damian Hanft estimated the cost of missing one frontline worker at \$3K to \$5K over a 3-month period.

Robyn Jones of Biaggi’s added that if they were down a server, they wouldn’t simply reassign those tables to others, because doing so would undermine service. Instead, fewer tables get seated, reducing sales by an estimated 7% to 8%, or roughly \$800 to \$1.5K per meal period, depending on the restaurant.

The data underscores the persistent cost of understaffing. Nearly half (48%) could not operate at full capacity, and 43% postponed expansion plans or modified their menus. More than one-third reduced their hours, and 1 in 5 had to close on days when they would normally be open (Table 9).

TECHNOLOGY AS A NEAR-TERM SUPPORT AND LONG-TERM INVESTMENT

Notably, despite ongoing industry discussion about technology as a solution to labor shortages and rising costs, only 20% of respondents reported adopting more automation as a direct response to understaffing. This suggests that many operators view automation as a longer-term strategy for persistent staffing challenges, whereas the immediate needs created by understaffing tend to require short-term fixes, such as increased overtime, reducing hours, limiting the menu, and reassigning tasks, among other things.

TABLE 9: DID YOUR RESTAURANT TAKE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS DURING 2025, DUE TO BEING UNDERSTAFFED?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULL-SERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
NOT OPERATE AT FULL CAPACITY	48%	49%	46%
POSTPONE PLANS FOR EXPANSION	43%	33%	54%
MAKE CHANGES TO THE MENU	43%	48%	37%
REDUCE HOURS OF OPERATION ON DAYS THAT IT IS OPEN	34%	28%	39%
CLOSE ON DAYS THAT IT WOULD NORMALLY BE OPEN	21%	18%	24%
INCORPORATE MORE TECHNOLOGY OR AUTOMATION	20%	20%	20%

Base: Restaurants that do not have enough employees to support existing customer demand
Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply
Source: National Restaurant Association



Interviewees also shared strategies that helped mitigate operational strain. Mary Dahl of Golden Corral emphasized the importance of cross-training, which provides managers with flexibility when gaps emerge. Chipotle’s Grange echoed this point, highlighting the brand’s “go-getters” who are skilled in both customer-facing and back-of-house roles. She also noted that because Chipotle operates only company-owned locations, it can redeploy employees across restaurants when needed—a structural advantage in managing local staffing shortages.

Looking ahead, most operators expect to continue hiring if qualified applicants are available. In fact, 76% said they are very or somewhat likely to add staff in the next 6-12 months (Table 10). Fullservice restaurants were slightly more optimistic, with 80% indicating plans to hire compared with 73% of limited-service operators. Nearly half of all respondents (47%) said they are “very likely” to bring on additional employees, underscoring the industry’s ongoing need for talent despite recent improvements in staffing levels.

At the same time, operators remain cautious given the current economic uncertainty. If business conditions deteriorate, 55% of respondents said they would be very or somewhat likely to lay off employees in the next 6-12 months (Table 11). This sentiment was consistent across segments, with roughly equal shares of fullservice and limited-service restaurants acknowledging the possibility of workforce reductions. These findings highlight the delicate balance restaurants face—continuing to rebuild teams while remaining prepared to adjust staffing should demand soften or costs rise.



TABLE 10: IF THERE ARE QUALIFIED APPLICANTS AVAILABLE, HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT YOUR RESTAURANT WOULD HIRE ADDITIONAL EMPLOYEES IN THE NEXT 6-12 MONTHS?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
VERY/SOMEWHAT LIKELY	76%	80%	73%
VERY LIKELY	47%	51%	43%
SOMEWHAT LIKELY	29%	29%	30%
VERY/SOMEWHAT UNLIKELY	24%	20%	27%
SOMEWHAT UNLIKELY	10%	10%	9%
VERY UNLIKELY	14%	10%	18%

Source: National Restaurant Association

TABLE 11: IF BUSINESS CONDITIONS DETERIORATE, HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT YOUR RESTAURANT WOULD LAY OFF EMPLOYEES DURING THE NEXT 6-12 MONTHS?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
VERY/SOMEWHAT LIKELY	55%	56%	54%
VERY LIKELY	28%	27%	28%
SOMEWHAT LIKELY	27%	29%	26%
VERY/SOMEWHAT UNLIKELY	45%	44%	46%
SOMEWHAT UNLIKELY	25%	26%	24%
VERY UNLIKELY	20%	19%	22%

Source: National Restaurant Association

PART 3: OPTIMAL STAFFING MODELS



SALES, TRANSACTIONS, OR GUEST COUNTS: WHAT SHOULD DRIVE STAFFING?

In discussing the costs of understaffing, conversations with interviewees naturally shifted toward optimal staffing models. Some restaurants already rely on internal frameworks—formal or informal—to guide managers on the ideal staffing mix for a given shift based on experience. For many others, when asked what they would like to see in the future, there was strong interest in leveraging data and analytics not only to improve scheduling but also to better predict retention and overall operational performance.

While the concept of a staffing model remained hypothetical for some, Sean MacMillan of Captain D's offered a concrete example. He explained that the company uses a productivity model to help determine scheduling decisions—an approach that has proven both effective and more substantive than a simple managerial guide. The impact has been so significant that he emphasized, "Once you have that sweet spot in terms of optimizing labor models on productivity, anything more or less does not work."

Similarly, Dave Burrington of Lehigh Valley Restaurant Brands shared that his company relies on historical data, including guest counts and employment figures, to help predict optimal staffing levels. “Managers tweak it somewhat, but it works pretty well overall,” he noted. In the post-pandemic era, however, their team has found that total sales have become a less reliable indicator, particularly when not adjusted for inflation. As a result, guest counts have emerged as a more useful metric in their staffing model.

As the conversation on understaffing evolved, interviewees also reflected on the potential value of having extra staff during certain shifts and whether the additional team member would yield a meaningful return on investment through improved customer service, expanded training opportunities, increased prep work, or higher catering sales. While Captain D’s model was precise enough that MacMillan saw little incremental value in adding labor above the optimal level, others believed that an extra employee could enhance the guest experience or strengthen operations in subtle ways.

WHY STAFFING MODELS ARE GUIDES—NOT PRESCRIPTIONS

Still, there is truth to the adage that there can be “too many cooks in the kitchen.” No one wants employees standing idle, and as Burrington emphasized, the return on additional labor often depends on the manager. “An additional worker could do a lot with the right leadership, but they could be a drain otherwise.” He also noted that the benefit could vary based on the individual’s skills and capabilities.

Not all operators subscribed to the idea that optimal staffing models work as advertised. Amber Dunlap of Slatebridge Restaurant Group shared that while it does not use a formal model, it relies on a template schedule based on prior experience. She finds such guides helpful, but not “cut and dry,” reminding managers to see them as inputs rather than prescriptions.

Meanwhile, Damian Hanft of Taco John’s expressed skepticism about the sophistication of current models. Echoing Lehigh Valley’s experience, he raised the question of whether sales or transactions serve as a better predictor. He added, “At the end of the day, there needs to be a human element. People call in sick, and you must prepare accordingly.”



TECHNOLOGY'S EXPANDING ROLE IN STAFFING DECISIONS

As highlighted in the previous study, technology has played a pivotal role in streamlining the hiring process, saving managers time and accelerating the transition from job posting to start date. Beyond recruitment, technology has become deeply embedded in restaurant operations over the past 2 to 3 years, as illustrated in Table 12. Key areas of adoption include:

Customer engagement: On-premises ordering and payment (63%), off-premises ordering and payment (55%), customer feedback tools (56%), and reservations systems (26%)

Marketing: Marketing and advertising platforms (60%), customer data collection (48%), and loyalty programs (47%)

Workforce management: Employee scheduling (49%), recruitment and hiring tools (36%), and training solutions (34%)

Operational activities: Back-office functions (54%), inventory management and food waste reduction (41%), menu design and flexibility (39%), security systems (34%), food safety tools (31%), and food preparation technologies (19%)

This is not an all-inclusive list; additional technologies are widely utilized. A closer look at how restaurants leverage technology and automation reveals even more examples of innovation shaping the industry.

TABLE 12: DURING THE PAST 2-3 YEARS, HOW MUCH OF AN IMPACT – IF AT ALL – HAS **TECHNOLOGY HAD ON THE FOLLOWING PARTS OF YOUR RESTAURANT OPERATION?**

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
% OF RESTAURANT OPERATORS RESPONDING "VERY SIGNIFICANT" OR "FAIRLY SIGNIFICANT"			
ON-PREMISES ORDERING/PAYMENT	63%	58%	67%
MARKETING/ADVERTISING	60%	56%	64%
CUSTOMER FEEDBACK	56%	51%	62%
OFF-PREMISES ORDERING/PAYMENT	55%	46%	65%
BACK-OFFICE FUNCTIONS	54%	56%	53%
EMPLOYEE SCHEDULING	49%	48%	50%
COLLECTION OF CUSTOMER DATA	48%	45%	51%
LOYALTY PROGRAMS	47%	33%	60%
INVENTORY MANAGEMENT / FOOD WASTE	41%	40%	42%
MENU DESIGN/FLEXIBILITY	39%	38%	40%
EMPLOYEE RECRUITMENT/HIRING	36%	36%	35%
EMPLOYEE TRAINING	34%	28%	40%
SECURITY	34%	31%	36%
FOOD SAFETY	31%	26%	36%
RESERVATIONS	26%	43%	8%
FOOD PREPARATION	19%	14%	23%

Source: National Restaurant Association

TECHNOLOGY’S STRONGEST IMPACT IS POST-HIRE

Specific to workforce management, technology usage is more prevalent in supporting employees after they are hired (Table 13). For instance, roughly half of restaurants (49%) that filled jobs in 2025 use scheduling software, and 40% provide digital onboarding resources and tools. Beyond that, 29% utilize training and development platforms, 27% rely on communications applications, and 18% offer employee engagement and recognition tools. These figures underscore that while technology adoption in hiring remains limited, many operators are leveraging digital solutions to enhance the post-hire processes and improve workforce management.

In addition, as noted in last year’s paper, technology has also helped free up time for managers to do what they were hired to do—run their restaurants, train and coach their employees, and ensure that they are successfully achieving their performance metrics.

Among restaurants that use AI, marketing stands out as the most impacted area, cited by 63% of operators (Table 15). Other common applications include administrative tasks (38%), menu optimization (26%), and employee scheduling (26%). AI is also being deployed for customer ordering (25%), recruitment and hiring (21%), and inventory management (21%). One notable distinction is in reservations and inquiries—32% of fullservice operators report AI use in this area compared with just 2% of limited-service restaurants—highlighting how operational priorities differ across segments.

In the interviews with restaurant executives, many spoke about the importance of new technologies to their businesses, particularly as they navigate through the next few years. AI and data analytics are seen as important drivers for improving the hiring process, for monitoring locations that might need additional resources due to understaffing or underperformance, for sourcing and cost efficiencies, and to enhance customer and operational experiences on a day-to-day basis. There is tremendous potential, even if the current implementation is more limited.

TABLE 13: DOES YOUR RESTAURANT USE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING TECHNOLOGIES TO SUPPORT NEW EMPLOYEES AFTER THEY ARE HIRED?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
SCHEDULING SOFTWARE	49%	49%	48%
ONBOARDING RESOURCES AND TOOLS	40%	38%	41%
TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PLATFORMS	29%	25%	34%
COMMUNICATIONS APPLICATIONS	27%	26%	28%
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND RECOGNITION TOOLS	18%	16%	19%

TABLE 14: DOES YOUR RESTAURANT USE ANY TOOLS OR TECHNOLOGIES THAT USE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
YES	26%	28%	24%
NO	74%	72%	76%

Base: Restaurants that filled a job opening in 2025
Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply
Source: National Restaurant Association

Source: National Restaurant Association

TABLE 15: WHAT PARTS OF YOUR RESTAURANT OPERATION ARE IMPACTED BY AI TOOLS OR TECHNOLOGIES?

% OF RESTAURANT OPERATORS WHO SAY PARTS OF THEIR RESTAURANT OPERATIONS ARE IMPACTED BY AI TOOLS OR TECHNOLOGIES	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
MARKETING	63%	66%	61%
ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS	38%	41%	35%
MENU OPTIMIZATION	26%	28%	24%
EMPLOYEE SCHEDULING	26%	21%	30%
CUSTOMER ORDERING	25%	23%	26%
EMPLOYEE RECRUITMENT/ HIRING	21%	19%	24%
INVENTORY MANAGEMENT	21%	19%	24%
RESERVATIONS AND INQUIRIES	17%	32%	2%

Base: Restaurants that use any AI tools or technologies

Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply

Source: National Restaurant Association

About one-quarter of restaurants report using tools or technologies that incorporate artificial intelligence (AI), with adoption slightly higher among fullservice operators (28%) compared to limited-service restaurants (24%) (Table 14). While the majority of restaurants have yet to implement AI solutions, the growing presence of the tools signals an important shift toward technology-driven operations in the industry.

Despite these advances, there is significant room for growth in automation and AI adoption across the industry. Table 14 reflects utilization rates among restaurants already using AI tools, which account for just 26% of all operators. When looking at all restaurants, adoption drops

TABLE 16: IN 2025, DID YOUR RESTAURANT USE AUTOMATION OR AI TO ASSIST WITH THE FOLLOWING PARTS OF THE HIRING PROCESS?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
INITIAL QUALIFICATION SCREENING	12%	9%	14%
APPLICANT TRACKING	10%	8%	11%
APPLICANT SUPPORT AND EXPERIENCE	9%	7%	10%
INTERVIEW SCHEDULING	9%	7%	10%
PRE-START ONBOARDING	7%	8%	7%
CANDIDATE ASSESSMENTS	6%	4%	7%
MAKING A JOB OFFER	3%	5%	2%
INTERVIEWING	3%	4%	2%
HIRING DECISIONS	2%	1%	2%

Base: Restaurants that filled a job opening in 2025

Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply

Source: National Restaurant Association

sharply, as shown in Table 16. For example, only 12% of restaurants use AI for initial qualification screening, and even fewer apply it to interview scheduling (9%) or candidate assessments (6%).

Some operators may use technology for those tasks without identifying it as AI-enabled, but the findings underscore a substantial opportunity for broader implementation moving forward.

Importantly, despite concerns that technology might replace workers, nearly all restaurant operators (94%) reported that their investments in technology over the past 2 to 3 years did not result in the permanent elimination of jobs (Table 17).

BUILDING FLEXIBLE, PRODUCTIVE TEAMS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

The interviewees emphasized that expanding the use of technology would be essential in the years ahead, citing several key reasons. With operating costs continuing to rise, restaurants need to find operational efficiencies wherever possible. As Sean MacMillan from Captain D's put it, "You would be needlessly embracing inefficiencies if you were not looking at technologies and ways to make business more productive and cost-efficient." Technology has already helped increase employee productivity, he said, prompting managers to rethink how best to allocate staff time once routine tasks are automated or streamlined.

This opportunity extends well beyond front-line technologies. As we have noted, recruiting and retention platforms have meaningfully reduced the time and cost to hire. In turn, these tools free up hiring managers to focus more on running their restaurants, developing their teams, and ensuring that customer needs are being met.

Looking ahead, interviewees expect the next generation of technologies, particularly AI and data analytics, to further refine workforce management. Many leaders spoke of advancements in utilizing scheduling and operational service analytical tools. For instance, Robyn Jones of Biaggi's highlighted the potential to use past performance and traffic patterns to determine the ideal labor mix for any given shift. Such tools may also help restaurants better identify future skill needs and proactively address emerging gaps across locations.³

Demographic shifts will also shape how restaurants approach workforce recruitment. According to the Congressional Budget Office, U.S. deaths are projected to exceed births by 2030, making immigration the sole source of population growth.⁴ This dynamic poses several challenges for restaurants, including the prospect of a smaller labor pool and continued upward pressure on wages.

TABLE 17: DURING THE PAST 2-3 YEARS, DID ANY OF YOUR RESTAURANT'S INVESTMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY RESULT IN THE PERMANENT ELIMINATION OF JOBS?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULL-SERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
YES	6%	6%	6%
NO	94%	94%	94%

Source: National Restaurant Association

³ Robyn Jones also spoke about using data analytics for predictive ordering, showing how AI could be helpful in addressing several operational aspects for Biaggi's or other restaurants.

⁴ CBO (2026).

While technology can boost productivity and improve customer satisfaction, leaders must remain attentive to worker concerns and ensure that innovation complements, rather than diminishes, the human element of hospitality.

Over the next several years, especially amid persistent labor shortages, workforce platforms will need to balance staffing needs holistically. In addition, analytical tools that optimize scheduling will play a larger role, and on-demand labor will increasingly become part of the conversation.

In 2024, 1 in 4 restaurant operators said gig workers could be a viable option for meeting staffing needs and expected their use to grow. Still, even as the industry gradually moves in that direction, Damian Hanft from Taco John's observed, "We are not quite there yet."

Hanft noted that restaurants are already competing with third-party delivery services for talent and adopting more flexible, gig-style models could help restaurants remain competitive.

Another strategy gaining traction is same-day pay, which may appeal particularly to younger workers who prefer more immediate access to wages.

Finally, in discussions about AI integration, Dave Burrington of Lehigh Valley Restaurant Brands stressed the importance of considering how these tools will be received by employees. While technology can boost productivity and improve customer satisfaction, leaders must remain attentive to worker concerns and ensure that innovation complements, rather than diminishes, the human element of hospitality. Across all interviews, participants underscored that technology should support, not replace, the service experience that defines the restaurant industry.



PART 4: RECRUITMENT AND STAFFING SUCCESS

HIRING FOR FIT AND LEADERSHIP QUALITY

Hiring the right people is foundational to restaurant performance, especially when it comes to managers. Strong managers shape team morale, keep operations running smoothly, influence customer satisfaction, and play a major role in reducing turnover. Because of their impact, identifying effective leaders often requires more thorough evaluation and onboarding, including targeted leadership development and mentoring.

Finding the right fit is equally important for hourly roles. Poor matches could lead to performance problems, disengagement, and higher attrition—issues that strain operations, inflate costs, and disrupt the guest experience. In a competitive labor market, the ability to hire quickly is essential. Applicants often pursue multiple opportunities at the same time, so delays in responding can easily result in losing prospective employees to competitors. Faster hiring also helps restaurants avoid the operational pressures and lost revenue associated with understaffing.

SPEED MATTERS: TECHNOLOGY'S ROLE IN FASTER HIRING

Technology and automation are transforming this process. Many operators are adopting modern hiring tools to streamline recruitment and give managers more time to focus on running the business. In earlier research, we highlighted Southern Rock Restaurants—operator of 160 McAlister's Deli locations—which reduced its hiring timeline from about 2 weeks to roughly 1 day by moving to an automated system. Director of Research Courtney Dempsey explained that the system now screens candidates and schedules interviews automatically, crucial for a workforce that applies primarily via mobile devices and often during late-night hours.

Ava Cado, Chipotle's multilingual AI powered digital team member, supports the hiring process by engaging with candidates, answering questions, collecting basic information, scheduling interviews, and even sending offers. Since its introduction in October 2024, the system has streamlined high-volume hiring efforts, enabling Chipotle to move more quickly on top talent and improving efficiency for restaurant teams. As a result, it has reduced the average application to start date from 12 days to just 4, nearly doubled Chipotle's applicant flow, and increased application completion rates from roughly 50% to nearly 88%.

THE OPERATIONAL COST OF TIME TO HIRE

Southern Rock also incorporates simple digital tools, such as QR codes and text-to-apply options, for both customers and employees. Those tools complement the industry's most effective recruitment channel—employee referrals—by making it easy for candidates to apply on the spot.

Other operators report similar improvements. Three-quarters of those interviewed said they could hire within 8 days, and all attribute faster timelines to the use of technology. At The Saxton Group, adopting an applicant tracking system shortened the process from more than 1 week to about 3 days, a competitive advantage when demand is high in a tight labor pool.⁵ JRI Hospitality has also cut its hiring cycle dramatically, from 2 to 3 weeks down to fewer than 8 days, largely due to faster communication and automated scheduling.

These tools matter because jobseekers are no longer applying during traditional business hours. Workday data shows that 54% of applications on its platform come in during evenings or weekends. Automated systems allow restaurants to respond immediately, increasing the likelihood of securing candidates in a fast-moving labor market.

For this report, survey respondents reported that it takes an average of 16 days to fill an hourly position and 46 days to fill a manager or salaried role (Fig. 5). Technology has played a critical role in reducing those timelines. Tools, such as automated applicant tracking systems, mobile-friendly applications and chatbots, streamline screening and interview scheduling, cutting hiring times from weeks to as little as 2 or 3 days. This efficiency not only accelerates recruitment, but also frees managers from administrative tasks, allowing them to focus on operations and team support.

It is also worth underscoring a simple, but critical, point: when it takes 16 days to fill an hourly position or 46 days to hire a manager, customers are experiencing the restaurant at less-than-optimal staffing during that time. Running understaffed could strain the operation, leading to slower service, weaker customer satisfaction, and potentially softer sales. It could also weigh on existing employees, who often must absorb additional responsibilities to cover the gap—further affecting morale and overall performance.

FIG. 5: AVERAGE NUMBER OF DAYS IT TAKES TO FILL OPEN POSITIONS AT A RESTAURANT



Note: Survey respondents were asked for the number of days between when a job becomes open to the new hire's first day

Source: National Restaurant Association

⁵ Job site Indeed recommends that candidates apply to 10-15 jobs each week "to increase your chances of receiving attention from hiring managers..." See <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/finding-a-job/how-many-application-to-get-a-job>.

HIRING IS ONLY THE FIRST STEP

Hiring is just the beginning. Retention depends on what happens after a candidate accepts the job. Structured onboarding programs, mentoring, and training are essential to help new employees feel prepared and connected. The first 30 to 90 days are particularly critical, as this is when turnover risk is highest. Effective onboarding builds confidence and sets clear expectations, while mentoring provides a sense of support and belonging.

Survey data highlights the importance of retention strategies. For hourly employees, tenure is relatively short: 3% stay less than 3 months, and 15% remain for 3 to 6 months. Nearly one-third (31%) stay between 1 and 1.9 years, while only 8% remain more than 4 years. The calculated, weighted, average tenure for hourly staff is 18.8 months, with fullservice restaurants averaging 21.7 months and limited-service restaurants just 15.6 months (Table 18).

Managers and salaried employees tend to stay significantly longer, as expected. Only 2% leave within 3 months, and 42% remain for more than 4 years. The weighted, average tenure for managers is nearly 3 years (34.5 months), with fullservice restaurants slightly higher at 35.3 months and limited-service restaurants at 32.9 months (Table 19). Those figures underscore the stability of management roles compared to hourly positions and reinforce why investing in onboarding and engagement is critical to reducing early turnover and building long-term retention.

Ongoing training and career development opportunities play a critical role in strengthening employee engagement and loyalty. By investing in these strategies, restaurants can reduce costly turnover, maintain operational stability, and foster a positive workplace culture that supports long-term commitment. Finding the right people from the outset is equally important, ensuring that new employees embrace the culture, understand role expectations, and fit well with both co-workers and customers.

TABLE 18: WHAT IS THE AVERAGE TENURE OF A NEW HOURLY EMPLOYEE AT YOUR RESTAURANT?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
LESS THAN 3 MONTHS	3%	3%	3%
3 TO 6 MONTHS	15%	11%	19%
7 TO 12 MONTHS	26%	24%	28%
1 TO 1.9 YEARS	31%	29%	33%
2 TO 3.9 YEARS	18%	20%	15%
MORE THAN 4 YEARS	8%	14%	2%
WEIGHTED AVERAGE (IN NUMBER OF MONTHS)	18.8	21.7	15.6

Source: National Restaurant Association

TABLE 19: WHAT IS THE AVERAGE TENURE OF A NEW MANAGER/SALARIED EMPLOYEE AT YOUR RESTAURANT?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
LESS THAN 3 MONTHS	2%	2%	2%
3 TO 6 MONTHS	3%	2%	3%
7 TO 12 MONTHS	8%	8%	7%
1 TO 1.9 YEARS	16%	13%	18%
2 TO 3.9 YEARS	30%	27%	33%
MORE THAN 4 YEARS	42%	47%	36%
WEIGHTED AVERAGE (IN NUMBER OF MONTHS)	34.5	35.3	32.9

Source: National Restaurant Association

WHY MANAGERS MATTER MOST IN RETENTION

One human resources leader noted that retention is an explicit metric in leader evaluations, adding that the “things you measure are the things you tend to do well.” As a result, the company ensures that general managers have the resources they need to recruit and retain talent effectively. Understanding why employees leave is also essential. At Chipotle, for example, the company regularly tracks exit data and sentiment to identify the root causes of departures and address those concerns going forward, according to Shelly Grange.⁶

Leaders also emphasized that employees frequently quit when they feel unsupported, disrespected, or disconnected from their managers. Shelley Wolford of Golden Corral underscored the importance of consistent interaction between new employees and their managers. A typical Golden Corral has around 70 employees, she noted, and managers focus on really getting to know their team members. This level of engagement helps employees “feel like they are seen and listened to, with a strong connection to their manager.” Equally important is ensuring that each new employee has a friend or mentor at work, offering both social and professional support.

In one of the interviews, a restaurant executive emphasized the importance of meaningful outreach between new employees and their general managers during the first 30 days. He noted that from day 1, new team members should feel that the organization is genuinely investing in their success. To reinforce this commitment, managers provide a multiweek schedule on the employee’s first day—an early signal of stability, planning, and support. It is equally important, he added, to communicate that there is a clear path outlining opportunities for development, growth, and recognition within the company.

WHEN NEW HIRES BECOME “NET POSITIVE”

From a cost perspective, every new employee represents a short-term cost to the business: recruiting and advertising expenses, background checks, uniforms, onboarding, and early shifts devoted entirely to training or shadowing. During this period, employees typically contribute less value than the cost of employing them. Over time, however, as they become more skilled and productive, their daily contribution begins to exceed their daily cost. The “net positive” point is reached once enough of those positive-value days accumulate to offset the initial negative-value days.



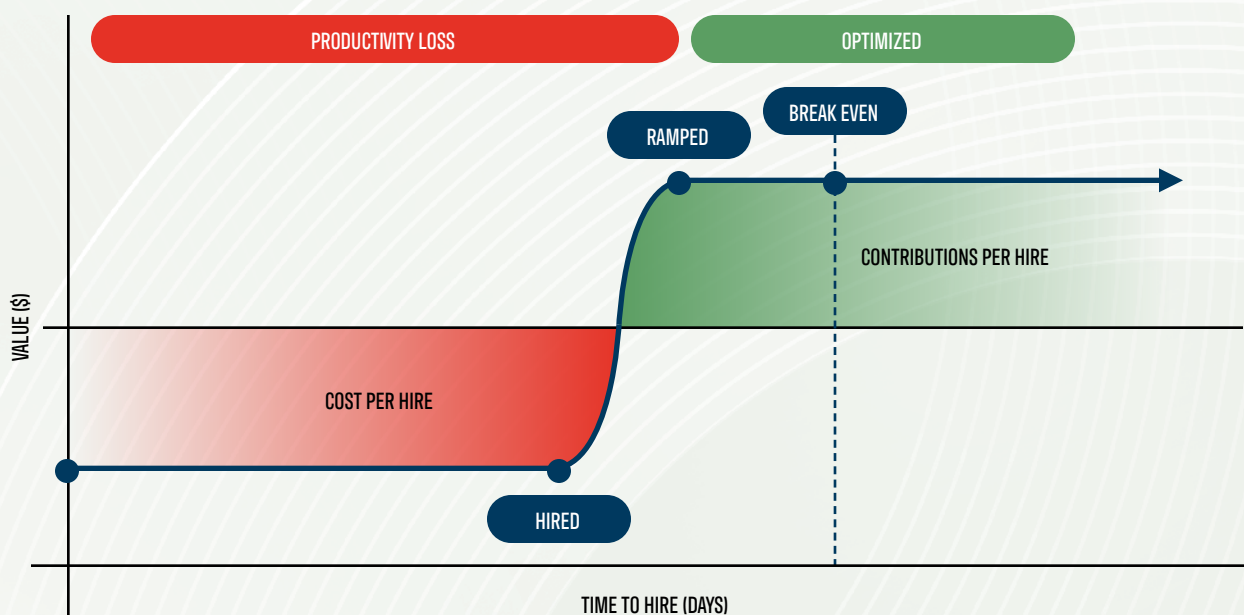
⁶ While retaining as many employees as possible is important, Robyn Jones of Biaggi’s noted that “some turnover is healthy.” When an employee is not a good fit, it is essential for the broader team to see that issues are addressed rather than allowed to linger. Taking timely action can “foster a sense of belonging,” reinforce the company’s culture, and strengthen overall accountability.

This dynamic is illustrated in Fig. 6. Restaurants incur upfront costs as new employees come on board, but at a certain point, those workers begin generating more value than they consume, effectively becoming net contributors to the bottom line. As employees gain additional experience, their productivity accelerates, their skills sharpen, and their overall performance increasingly aligns with that of longer-tenured team members.

Ensuring that new hires remain long enough for restaurants to recover their upfront costs is essential. Operators aim to hire people who will stay beyond the net-positive threshold; if a new employee leaves before that point, the restaurant not only loses a team member, but also incurs a net financial loss on the hire.

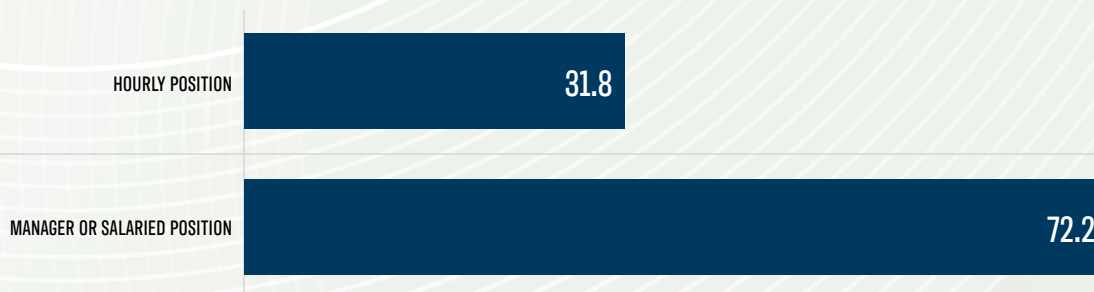
Survey respondents estimated that hourly employees start adding value after an average of 31.8 days, while managers and salaried employees reach this point after 72.2 days (Fig. 7).

FIG. 6: BREAKEVEN ANALYSIS FOR A RESTAURANT



Source: Workday

FIG. 7: AVERAGE NUMBER OF DAYS IT TAKES A NEW EMPLOYEE TO BECOME “NET POSITIVE” FOR A RESTAURANT



Note: Survey respondents were asked for the number of days it takes for a new employee to become “net positive,” meaning that costs of hiring, onboarding, and training are covered

Source: National Restaurant Association

WHY MANAGER TURNOVER IS ESPECIALLY COSTLY

Among the leaders interviewed for this report, there was considerable variation in how they defined the point at which a new employee becomes “net positive” for their restaurants, with many noting that the timeline often depends on the role and location.

Shelly Grange of Chipotle said that new team members can begin contributing meaningfully to their restaurants by around the 3-week mark, though many are able to work independently after just 2 weeks. She noted that some employees struggle because “loving our food and making it are two different things.” Preparing fresh ingredients from scratch every day is more demanding than it may appear, she added, and not everyone is suited to that level of consistency and rigor. Even so, Chipotle’s retention-rate trends continue to move in a positive direction.

Sean MacMillan of Captain D’s offered a similar perspective. He noted that a new front-line employee could be functional within a few days, contributing successfully within a couple of weeks, and performing at the level of more tenured staff within 6 to 8 weeks. For managers, he said the learning curve is longer. It could take several weeks simply to “understand what is going on around you,” with managers becoming functional at around 6 to 8 weeks, contributing effectively by 90 days, and performing at full strength within 6 months.

Likewise, Dave Burrington of Lehigh Valley Restaurant Brands suggested that leadership roles may take 3 to 6 months to become “net positive” to the bottom line. He emphasized that managers who leave before reaching that point can “double or triple” the cost of recruiting, onboarding, and training, since the entire process must start over.

Robyn Jones at Biaggi’s agreed, noting that all new managers are trained outside their home locations for 6 weeks—an investment that includes training resources as well as hotel and travel costs. “If a new manager turns over any sooner than 6 months, it feels like a loss to Biaggi’s,” she said. For that reason, the company is highly selective when hiring new leaders and is prepared to make early decisions if it becomes clear that the fit is not right.

For one leading restaurant chain, those challenges reinforce the value of promoting managers from within. Internal candidates bring existing institutional knowledge, and their abilities are often better understood from the outset. As a result, they may reach “net positive” status more quickly than external hires. All new managers undergo a 4-week training period with mentors and are permitted to run a shift independently after that point. However, internal candidates are not always available, requiring a balance between developing talent and hiring externally when necessary.



PART 5: THE IMPORTANCE OF A GREAT MANAGER

BUILDING THE MANAGEMENT PIPELINE

As the preceding sections highlight, successful staffing (and ultimately a restaurant's overall performance) hinges on having a great manager. Amber Dunlap of Slatebridge Restaurant Group noted that an effective manager "provides peace of mind that they are taking care of things." She emphasized that strong managers must be "problem finders," constantly scanning operations with a critical eye and proactively identifying ways to improve. They should be quick to develop solutions, show respect for the responsibilities of the role, and bring a genuine passion for developing and supporting their teams.

For many restaurants, succession planning plays a critical role, with leaders continually scouting and developing future managers. But that approach is not universal. As Dunlap noted, experience is valuable, yet it does not mean companies should rely exclusively on internal promotions. Bringing in outside talent can infuse new ideas and strengthen overall performance. Restaurants "do not want to only shop from home" when hiring new leaders, she said—highlighting the importance of balancing internal advancement with external perspectives to build a more robust leadership pipeline.

WHY LEADERSHIP AND GUEST EXPERIENCE OUTRANK OTHER ATTRIBUTES

When hiring a new manager, restaurants prioritize leadership and guest experience above all else. The most valued attribute is the ability to build team culture and morale, cited by 87% of respondents, followed closely by enhancing the guest experience at 84% (Table 20). Financial acumen also ranks high, with 75% emphasizing cost control and profitability. Compliance with standards (71%) and boosting productivity (70%) are key operational priorities, while driving sales and revenue is important for 62% of operators.



87%

87% of restaurants said that when hiring a new manager **building team culture and morale** is most important

Interestingly, improving retention and reducing turnover (60%) and strengthening onboarding and training (38%) are less frequently selected, suggesting that while these factors matter, they are secondary to leadership, guest satisfaction, and financial performance. Fullservice and limited-service restaurants show similar patterns, though limited-service operators place slightly greater emphasis on cost control and productivity.

TABLE 20: WHEN HIRING A NEW MANAGER, WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ATTRIBUTES ARE MOST IMPORTANT FOR YOUR RESTAURANT BUSINESS?

	ALL RESTAURANTS	FULLSERVICE RESTAURANTS	LIMITED-SERVICE RESTAURANTS
BUILDS TEAM CULTURE AND MORALE	87%	85%	88%
ENHANCES GUEST EXPERIENCE	84%	84%	84%
CONTROLS COSTS AND INCREASES PROFITABILITY	75%	72%	78%
ENSURES COMPLIANCE WITH STANDARDS	71%	68%	74%
BOOSTS PRODUCTIVITY AND PERFORMANCE	70%	65%	74%
DRIVES SALES AND REVENUE	62%	66%	58%
IMPROVES RETENTION AND REDUCES TURNOVER	60%	60%	60%
IMPROVES ONBOARDING AND TRAINING	38%	36%	40%

Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply

Source: National Restaurant Association

EMPOWERMENT, TRUST, AND CONSISTENCY ON THE FLOOR

Finally, 2 comments from the interviews offered especially compelling insights into the impact of strong restaurant managers. Shelly Grange of Chipotle noted that “good managers have a large following.” Effective leaders build strong connections with their teams, earn respect, and consistently deliver strong operational results—performance that reliably shows up in their restaurant metrics. She added that “a great manager’s restaurant will have a feeling of calm and organization upon entry, even when the general manager is not present.”

This reflects not only effective delegation, but a comprehensive management philosophy. As Grange explained, “They empower their staff to own the restaurant, including deployment, prep, ordering, inventory, and scheduling. A great general manager acts as a mentor to all levels of employees in the restaurant, utilizing manager meetings, 1:1s, and coaching to uncover employee motivations and foster an environment of development and promotion.” As a testament to this leadership influence, when a high-performing manager is reassigned to support a location with leadership gaps, it is not uncommon for employees to want to follow them. Poor managers, by contrast, can have an outsized negative impact on both operations and morale.

The second example, which may be unique to one restaurant chain, highlights a different dimension of managerial leadership. The manager role can be stressful, so the company offers a flexible option allowing leaders to decide when they want to manage and when they need a break. When acting as managers, they are paid at the manager’s rate; when they need downtime, they can temporarily step back and be paid as crew members. This model requires developing team members who can step up when needed, helping cultivate future managers while giving current leaders a structured way to decompress. The goal is to support well-being, strengthen the leadership bench, and reduce burnout.

CONCLUSION

The restaurant industry has entered a period of greater stability, with stronger applicant flow and improved staffing levels compared to recent years. Still, long-term labor pressures, demographic shifts, and rising operating costs ensure that workforce challenges will remain ongoing priorities well into the future. The insights shared by operators underscore the high cost of understaffing, ranging from lost sales and slower service to higher turnover and employee stress, and they highlight why hiring the right people and retaining them long enough to become “net positive” is critical to operational and financial success.

The industry’s workforce economic significance extends even further. Restaurants occupy a uniquely influential position in the labor market, serving as the nation’s training ground, providing a first job for more than half of all adults in the U.S. and employing over 67% of adults at some point in their lives. Simply put, restaurants have shaped the career paths of more people than any other sector.

This legacy underscores why, with millions of employment opportunities available in communities nationwide, investing in people is central to building a future-ready workforce. Operators increasingly recognize that building teams capable of growing, adapting, and leading begins with supporting the individuals who keep guests coming back.

Technology continues to play an essential role in supporting these goals by accelerating hiring, reducing administrative burdens, and enhancing post-hire processes through better scheduling, onboarding, and communication tools.

At the same time, the industry’s future depends on strong leadership. Across all interviews, operators emphasized that great managers are the backbone of restaurant performance, shaping culture, building teams, ensuring consistency, and driving both guest satisfaction and profitability. With managers often taking months to reach full productivity and representing a substantial investment, identifying, developing, and supporting the right leaders is paramount. Balancing internal promotion with external talent, leveraging data-driven staffing tools, and fostering relationships that make employees feel valued will position restaurants to strengthen retention, improve performance, and build resilient teams in an increasingly competitive environment.



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