



Staffing issues among small hospitality businesses: A college town case

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ABSTRACT

Many studies have reported on the operational challenges that hospitality businesses face, including shortage of skilled labor and high turnover. To date, however, little attention has been paid to whether these challenges differ for small hospitality enterprises (SHEs). In particular, little is known about SHEs located in college towns, where plentiful labor supply of job-ready applicants is available on a constant basis. The present study explores labor issues with 21 small and medium hospitality owners and managers. The findings not only demonstrate that attracting labor is a daunting undertaking among participating businesses, but also that both turnover and other staffing related problems are on top of their list of challenges. These problems are of such nature that other issues, including getting the word out about their businesses or facing competition appear to be rather minor in comparison. Furthermore, only the least participants seem to understand the value of keeping staff for as long as possible; accordingly, these few operators have developed basic yet critical initiatives to promote employee retention. The importance of retaining valuable employees becomes paramount as it may reflect on several areas of the operation, including consistency and quality of service. However, despite its importance, the employee retention component appears to be missing.

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1. Introduction

In college towns across the United States, large numbers of students come and go on a continuous basis creating a sense of seasonality that hospitality businesses (restaurants, bars, cafes) may use to their advantage, both to cater to and employ students. These situations also provide local restaurateurs with opportunities to rejuvenate and re-flourish amidst the potential arrival of new talent. At the other end, seasonality and constant student transience may also create openings that may otherwise remain unfilled and lead to negative impacts, including lack of a consistent service culture, or even in terms of quality food/beverage provision.

Contemporary hospitality research has extensively addressed many of the problems hospitality businesses face, including food providers such as restaurants that live in a constant state of uncertainty due to labor costs (Nelson, 2001), low profit margins (Standard and Poors, 1998, in Nelson, 2001), competition, rising food costs and economic downturn. To add to their woes, restaurateurs also have to deal with the problem of high turnover

(Sunley, 2006), due to a failure by operators to recognize the importance of investing in their most valued employees (Enz, 2004).

While there is an extensive body of literature pertaining to the many problems hospitality businesses face, very few studies have addressed these issues among small hospitality operations in college towns and in particular among owner operated restaurants. Against this background, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- To what extent, if any, is shortage of labor an issue?
- To what extent, if any, is employee turnover an issue?
- What are additional challenges small restaurant operators face in a college town?

The limited extant literature surrounding these questions has implications not only for the research community, but also the hospitality industry itself and its many stakeholders; not least owner-operators. For example, while a number of challenges entrepreneurs face in college towns may be viewed as similar to those faced by the wider hospitality industry; a scarcity of literature may be preventing managers from zoning in on potential solutions to these problems. The main objective of the present study is to explore the challenges these operators face in an attempt to answer the questions previously posed.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Challenges among hospitality operations and consequences

For some time now researchers have concluded that among all the problems facing the hospitality industry, employee retention and turnover constitute fundamental concerns. Studies have also provided different reasons suggesting challenges the industry is up against to attract, retain or motivate hospitality workers (Barron, 2008; Aziz et al., 2007). For example, an argument has repeatedly been made that because of its antisocial working hours, seasonal employment, low job status, its unstable nature or low pay, the hospitality industry has made itself unattractive to many, contributing to its negative image in the process (Wildes, 2007).

At the other end, evidence from contemporary hospitality research illustrates the importance of 'environmental issues,' or critical aspects that relate to atmosphere or work environments; these issues are reasons restaurateurs have cited as being barriers to employee retention (Dermody, 2002). Furthermore, there is a view that self-fulfillment and working conditions are critical attributes valued among employees, even more so than monetary rewards leading to their retention (Milman, 2003; Ricci and Milman, 2003). Clearly, the consequences of having a stable work force can have benefits in the form of employee satisfaction, motivation, self-esteem, and lifting employees' morale. Studies have concluded that being proactive and developing training programs, or nurturing empowerment and autonomy can lead to more benefits for the employees (Ross, 1997; Lashley, 1995; Ashness and Lashley, 1995) and ultimately reflect back on the hospitality operation, including consistency and quality of customer service provision.

So why do restaurateurs not do more to provide a nurturing working atmosphere or non-monetary rewards and thus avoid in many circumstances the danger of losing valuable staff? After all, management's involvement plays a fundamental role in achieving financial success: "Leadership skills may help organizations to utilize the available human resources more effectively and to deal successfully with environmental pressures ... Leadership is at the heart of effective management" (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2006, p. 285, p. 295).

The "tension between enhancing customer satisfaction by investing in employees" (Enz, 2004, p. 329) versus the concerns of cost control in the form of higher wages and salaries appears to be behind restaurateurs' lack of resolution to act in light of human resource problems (Enz, 2004). Such tension or conflict in balancing investment and cost is a demonstration of weak leadership skills. To a great extent, restaurateurs' lack of firm action may be based on monetary concerns, as well as to the perception that part-time, casual staff will remain in the firm for a short time (Taylor et al., 2001). Many hospitality operators thus remain content in an impasse that irremediably will lead to their failure to retain employees, as their lack of commitment to support staff is reciprocated by their employees (Taylor et al., 2001), thereby affecting the business' quality of service provided and consequently its customer base. This "cycle of failure", according to Schlesinger and Heskett (1991, p. 17), is self-perpetuating and is attributable to management's absence of response: "High turnover reinforces the wisdom of decisions to minimize efforts in selection, training, and commitment-building activities" (Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991, p. 17). Employee turnover can also have an effect on organizational culture (Deery and Shaw, 1999).

Hinkin and Tracey (2000) conclude that poor supervision and limited responsibility or authority in the work employees perform is one of the main reasons why they leave their jobs; in contrast, if addressed satisfactorily, employee retention can lead to competitive advantage (Hinkin and Tracey, 2000). Success also entails

and requires education, employment training and development programs (DeMicco and Parks, 1989), all these significant elements in the accomplishment of the firm's objectives.

In an industry that, as in the case of the United States' restaurant businesses expanded rapidly in the last decades, the large number of operations going out of business (Gu, 2002) is a clear reminder of the great challenges operators face. Thus, management's contribution can and should be to identify critical aspects that negatively impact their operations, and in becoming involved in practical strategies that minimize problems and contribute to the business's well-being. For one, restaurateurs could provide more training for staff in different areas of the operation, including skills that like stock control are in demand, and while time constraints can be an issue in conducting on-site training sessions (Barrows, 2000), more knowledge can lead to more retention in the industry (Pratten and O'Leary, 2007).

Having satisfied customers is one of the best strategies to increase restaurants' chances of success. In these situations, the importance of staff is paramount as for restaurants this process is based on the entire consumption experience and not on a few factors (Pratten, 2003). Management should not underestimate the importance that restaurant staff play prior, during and after the consumption experience: "Perfectly cooked food could be badly received because it was badly served" (Pratten, 2003, p. 826). Surprisingly, while one of the greatest challenges for restaurateurs is that many waiting staff are young, do not remain long in their post and do not see themselves as making a career in the food service industry, restaurateurs still seem to pay little attention to the needs of waiting staff even though they meet customers on a regular basis (Pratten, 2003). Moreover, such a lack of vision may be resulting in precious opportunities being lost and eventual business failure, particularly as, once again, human resource "outcomes influence organizational effectiveness" (Koy, 2001, p. 112).

At the other end, there is also an argument that despite many researchers arguing for restaurateurs' need to address training, "Yet none of these writers provides a cost-benefit analysis of the training programme or advises managers how to obtain training dollars from reluctant owners" (Clements and Josiam, 1995, p. 10). Also, because its costs are complex to quantify, "it is difficult to develop specific turnover-cost numbers" (Simons and Hinkin, 2001, p. 65).

In contrast to many different hospitality environments, those businesses operating in college towns may in some regards have an advantage. For example, regardless of economic realities, the student population in college towns stands out and represents a ready-to-go labor contingent. Clearly, there are also downsides of a fluctuating, changing student population for employers: lack of experience, the intention of staying short-term in the industry as a simple way to earning pocket- or bill-paying money, lack of genuine passion for the hospitality industry and therefore a different attitudinal approach.

Much academic research to date has been conducted among medium or large hospitality enterprises. Not surprisingly, Morrison and Thomas (1999) argue that "... until recently, those engaged in hospitality management research had all but ignored small enterprises..." (p. 148). Similarly, limited research has been conducted on small hospitality businesses in college towns. This study sets out to explore this area from entrepreneurs' perspective.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and data collection

During the month of November 2008, 41 small hospitality business operators were initially contacted in and around a college town in the Southern United States. The geographical proximity of

two small cities (total combined population of less than 100,000 inhabitants), the large number – over 100 – of restaurants, cafes and other types of eateries, and the knowledge of the local hospitality industry of one of the researchers were reasons for choosing operations of these small cities. The study sought to include only small independently owned hospitality operations within a six-mile radius. Initially, however, the researchers visited 39 businesses in person and distributed letters informing prospective respondents about the study, including its objectives and an invitation for owners/managers to participate in the study via a face-to-face or telephone interview. In 29 cases the letters were directly distributed to the owners, while in seven other cases it was left with duty managers/employees and in three cases the letters were placed in the businesses' mailbox. In view of its independent management style, its small size and because of its popularity among locals, an additional restaurant located around 20 miles from the researchers' university was also chosen, while another operation was contacted by phone.

During the letter distribution process, it was noticed that one business was part of a small franchise that was beginning expansion, while another business already was part of an 80-strong franchise group present in many of the nation's states. Because of their small size and management style, that is, being run in an independent form, as well as being geographically very distant from sister franchises, a decision was made to include these two businesses. In the following days of November 2008, telephone contact was established with all 41 operations to carry out interviews at respondents' convenience. Special attention was given to organize the interviews at days and times that would not clash with Thanksgiving, Christmas and other potentially busy dates for the businesses.

During and after the visits to the businesses some 34 business owners/managers had expressed interest in participating; however, eventually 21 did so, an overall 51.2% response rate. Only four interviews were conducted face-to-face and 16 (76.2%) over the phone, as this medium was more convenient to respondents. All the resulting interviews were all transcribed verbatim.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Employee turnover and labor shortage

A summary of participating businesses' characteristics is shown in Table 1. Only four businesses had been open for more than one decade, one of them for over three decades and one for over a century. This finding is particularly significant as research and reports suggest that a large percentage of small hospitality operations, particularly restaurants and other eateries struggle to survive long-term (see, for example, Parsa et al., 2005; Gu, 2002). Furthermore, the finding suggests that these businesses appear to have a successful strategy as they continue operating in a very competitive industry year after year, even decade after decade. Most owners and managers (16, 76.2%) indicated having previous working experience in the hospitality industry. Also, the majority (13, 61.9%) of the operations had between 5 and 20 employees, and almost one fourth (23.8%) between 31 and 48. Hence, all these operations fall under the category of small businesses in the United States, that is, businesses that employ between three and 199 people (National Federation of Independent Business, NFIB, 2009).

Asked the extent to which employee turnover was an issue for them, 13 (61.9%) respondents acknowledged turnover as being a current problem for their businesses, with potential negative spillovers into the overall business' bottom line. This scenario has been discussed in hospitality studies (see, for example, Lynn, 2002; Pizam and Thornburg, 2000). As one respondent put it, one of the reasons for having employee turnover was that "lots of people want

Table 1

Summary of operations' and operators' characteristics.

	n	%
Age of operations		
Years		
2 or less	3	14.3
3–5	8	38.1
6–8	2	9.5
Over 8	8	38.1
Number of employees ^a		
Number		
5–10 ^b	7	33.3
11–20	6	28.6
21–30	2	9.5
31–48	5	23.8
Operators' previous experience in hospitality industry		
Experience		
Yes	16	76.2
No	5	23.8

Note: One respondent did not indicate the number of employees.

^a As an average 90% of employees are part-time.

^b No participating operation indicated having fewer than five employees.

more work [hours] ... and so they will leave and I will have to get people that are willing to work such a short work week to make their money. Turnover is every four months or so; I turn over two or three people."

The college town nature of the environment where operations were located also had an influence on operators' staffing problems in that "a lot of students leave when they graduate or find something else." This finding is in line with Wildes (2007) who explains that employers attribute turnover to the transient nature of the workforce, namely students (p. 5). In contrast, another respondent blamed staffing issues on workers' attitude: "Yes, we have a tremendous turnover. I don't think it's because we are a university town... I think it is because people don't want to work."

One cafe manager explained that turnover at times was related to people's unrealistic expectations, or their very poor knowledge of the complexities involved in what seem to be simple tasks: "Having people come on is not an issue; it's not that I can't find them, but it's really hard because of what we do, you single-handedly have to multi-task an entire [café] bar. And it's not just like pushing buttons; you have to learn... And people just come here and they are like 'Oh, yeah, I want to learn this,' 'I can do this,' 'I am so excited.' And they get behind there and ... people cry; once you hit rush hour number two they just freak out and they have to quit." Not being able to cope with pressures at work was also extended to employees' failure to behave professionally in cases when they left the firm, as another respondent pointed out: "... with most food service employees, you find out they are not working for you when they don't come back. There is not a lot of honor and integrity in saying 'I am going somewhere else; here is my two-week's notice.' There is: you call them and 'you didn't come in;' 'well, I went to work so and so.' Just don't show up again; that's pretty common."

Regarding other challenges, Table 2 highlights a number of issues that are clearly attributable or related to employee turnover. For example, five respondents looked for basic quality attributes from prospective employees, a component that based on some of the comments seemed to be missing, while a sixth saw a challenge in making employees 'fit' in the firm through training. Some of these comments follow:

- *The biggest problem we run into is dependable employees and loyal employees, and that's kind of the thing which we run into with the skill level, rate of pay and ... it's a lot of college students that we have, and not always the most dependable and reliable employees."*

Table 2
Business challenges respondents indicated.

Challenges	n	%
Staffing	6	28.6
Getting the word out	3	14.3
Competition	3	14.3
Food and other costs	2	9.5
Current economy	2	9.5
Customer turnover (students)	1	4.8
Parking (for customers)	1	4.8
Staying in business	1	4.8
Paperwork	1	4.8

Note: One respondent did not indicate any challenge.

- “Our staff is [sic] our number one challenge; getting good people. That is the number one thing: getting good people.”
- “... finding reliable steady staff. You can always find bodies because there is an abundance of students, but whether they are reliable and care as much about working and the responsibilities that go with work ... so trying to find ‘good’ help is the main issue.”

As would be expected in a college town, shortage of skilled labor was not a challenge for the majority of businesses. A total of 14 (66.6%) acknowledged that labor supply was plentiful. Of interest were some comments indicating that some employees were ‘choosy’ or wanted to have it their own way as far as their working schedule was concerned: “We do and we don’t [have shortage of labor]. There are always people who need jobs, but then a lot of people want to work specific hours, so it is kind of difficult that [they] would do what we want to do.” The attitudinal aspect continued to be a central (negative) factor that respondents identified. For instance, another operator saw challenges in employees’ lack of initiative and work ethic: “... there is an abundance of help; how seriously they take it, how much effort they put into doing something like serving ... [end of quote]”

Not surprisingly, a different respondent was prepared to train inexperienced individuals, or even preferred these as a way of making them fit into the firm’s culture and procedures: “That is not such a big issue as we like to hire people that are relatively unskilled so we can train them ourselves because we have very specific procedures and we are glad to take somebody who has never worked in a coffee shop or anything preferably and train them.”

The issue of keeping employees was also mentioned: “Filling a spot is not a problem; it’s retaining people.” However, the same respondent saw the positive side after what seemed a trial period for the new business: “... since we have been here in February we built a pretty good foundation of employees that do the job well and do what we ask of them.” This comment suggests that despite a general discontent about employees’ attitude, some operators are willing to become involved in problem solving.

4.2. Coping with staffing problems

Rowley and Purcell (2001) explain that “even in ‘best practice’ establishments,” (p. 164) operators seem “to accept a high rate of labor [sic] turnover relative to other industries” (p. 164). A similar outcome was noticed in this study, as for instance only five (23.8%) operators indicated being successful in their staffing efforts. The five operators’ comments demonstrate their initiatives to promote employee retention, or even a friendly environment to nurture and attract employees long-term: “We don’t see this [turnover] as an issue; some of our colleagues tell us that they have major problems with staff turnover. We really don’t. We have a really good relationship with our staff... we are all younger guys, we are all of college age, so we can kind of understand their needs ... so we get along with them really good, we have a good relationship with our staff so we don’t

have much turnover.” Thus, in accord with some studies (see, for example, Milman, 2003; Ricci and Milman, 2003; Dermody, 2002) ‘environmental issues,’ self-fulfillment and working conditions are critical allies in operators’ employee retention efforts.

A second respondent also implemented a similar strategy in the form of providing a work environment, apparently not only destined to attracting employees to stay, but that also provided positive word-of-mouth to potential future job applicants: “... our average length of stay for our employees is two years. To hire new staff we usually try to work through employees. Most of the time when our employees leave, after they usually spend two years here, quite often they will give us a warning like an internship they are taking, or they are graduating, and they will put the word out that they are leaving to their friends that know they have worked here and enjoyed working here, and usually good people know other good people. So we try to network with existing employees that are good employees to find good employees ...”

For a third operator, building a solid restaurant brigade was even possible in light of working with a student population: “Since I have been here (5 years) I have worked with nothing but students, and you don’t want to choke it up to luck because I don’t think it’s luck but we generally have gotten a lot of kids ... we have been successful with people with not experience. We have good training programs to develop them in the next couple of years... we train them right ... and if they never worked in the industry then it’s almost a little bit easier. They only know how to do it your way. I have never seen turnover be a problem for us.”

Despite losing a substantial number of the business’s employees over a short time frame, another operator’s experience, initiative and understanding of the college town environment were important tools to minimize the retention issue: “Not as bad as it was; right now it’s fairly stable but it turns out at the end of every semester... we will lose at least 50% of our part-time employees at the end of each semester. Full-time employees are not as bad; their longevity can go up to two years. It’s hard work, that’s what it is ... To hire more students we network and we put an ad on the paper if we need to. We have a big market so we really don’t have a lot of trouble attracting employees...”

Flexibility, training, opportunities to experience different areas of the operations and an unusual ‘improvisation’ exercise for kitchen staff appeared to be key strategies for a fifth respondent to be able to retain employees: “Perhaps it’s our scheduling that allows for flexibility a reason for keeping people that long. Our turnover is usually two years to employee, which is extremely well [sic] for a college town. Most of the staff we hire we are able to allow for flexibility in scheduling and allow them the opportunities that I had because when I started at this restaurant I didn’t have any experience. I went to this restaurant to learn to see if I wanted to be a chef, and I give all the new guys the same opportunity; so they are allowed to come in and play and make specials, and [I] allow them to jump from station to station, not just in one spot, so it gives them variety and atmosphere ... they have more motivation than the average college student has.”

Finally, another participant indicated that he was developing a range of initiatives and other skills to improve the business, and combat the staffing challenges his operation faced: “When we just opened up we had gone through a few employee changes, but I feel it now we will have people around for a while.”

4.3. Other challenges businesses face

Overall, the importance of fulfilling staffing needs meant that only a few operators commented on ‘other’ problems that, although potentially equally serious appeared to be of less concern in their list of priorities. For three participants, the economic downturn was clearly a heavy burden and a future concern:

- “I would say with the current economy ... a lot of people cut back on dining out and dine at home in order to save money, so we have to make sure we ‘force’ the interest of the customer in order for them to still want to dine out.”
- “... the biggest challenge and our only challenge right now really is the economy... it’s constant, every single day. If you can’t figure out a way to save ten dollars every day you are not going to make it...”
- “The economy... everybody is feeling it... Our nights when we have specials Monday through Thursday believe it or not it almost seems like we have increased business... So I think people are bargain-hunting a little bit more than they have in the past...”

Another respondent understood the seriousness of the economic situation and was taking an active approach to tackle the problem: “Our major challenge is staying above ... the ‘bar’ as far as expectations, quality, and people’s expectation of our business so we don’t drop off... if we don’t meet that and stay above the bar satisfactory needs are not going to be met with our customers. And also just keep with the progression of the restaurant ... see what other restaurants in other cities do to keep updated.”

Interestingly, for another operator the loss of university students was the main challenge, although not from the perspective of losing employees: “...our biggest problem is customer turnover. Every four years all our customers graduate, so to build a customer base is very difficult. You have to make up every year for those that are graduating and leaving, so unlike a regular business where they continue to grow with new customers all the time, we are continually losing our customers every year, and you have to try really hard to get those incoming freshmen to know what your establishment is and want to come there.” Finally, the recent growth in number of local hospitality businesses was affecting one of the participants: “Competition in this town has increased for us over the last 3–4 years with other restaurants coming. We have seen the decline in business because of all the restaurants that have opened up in this town; it has to be expected with competition... Now the hardest part would definitely be getting new customers to come in.”

5. Conclusions, implications and future research

The contemporary hospitality literature extensively discusses employee retention and other challenges that hospitality business operators face. However, there is minimal discussion when it comes to small enterprises, particularly those located in college towns, where businesses can choose from a large pool of university students. This study attempted to provide more insights and knowledge on this under-researched area.

Most businesses are clearly struggling with employee retention, prospective employees’ attitude towards work, and to a lesser extent with the state of the economy and competition. What is more concerning is that while, as it would be expected, finding employees is not an issue for most respondents, there was a sense of shared frustration at the level of commitment and discipline among job applicants. However, despite experiencing similar problems year after year, only the least respondents appear to have developed strategies and initiatives to combat employee turnover and related problems. In this regard, providing an environment conducive to employee retention, flexibility or simply an employee friendly environment all seem to be paying off for those few operators.

Furthermore, only the least operators acknowledged being able to retain at least 50% of their staff for 2 years despite the difficulties of employing, and particularly retaining college students. This achievement is not only a significant step towards minimizing staff related problems, but also a clear demonstration that if engaged, operators have the ability to retain their staff. Moreover, it appears that some operators are resigned to

seeing college students come and go without little effort to revert the negative consequences of having an inconstant, inconsistent and even unreliable work-force. While keeping stock of one’s employees can be a constant battle, particularly in a college town, operators should understand the implications of not being actively involved in retaining employees. This argument can also be made regarding valuable employees that are looking for a long-term job commitment, but given that they may be experiencing a lack of business leadership they may eventually leave, further exacerbating the operation’s staffing problems.

Despite the very low number of participating businesses, a clear limitation that must be acknowledged, the present study not only identifies the seriousness of staffing issues among college town operators but also identifies and proposes several areas that could be explored in future research. One such area is the identification of initiatives small operators may be utilizing to minimize employee retention problems, particularly using a larger number of participating operations. Along these lines, studies could also investigate the customer dimension between businesses that have successfully implemented employee retention measures against those that continue to struggle in this area. If indeed differences exist in how customers view operations featuring consistent, steady and motivated staff and those operations struggling to retain their workforce, such information could be critical in persuading many operators to work towards an environment conducive to attracting and retaining employees, including college students. Another area that future research could focus on relates to additional challenges operators may be facing, particularly with the current state of the economy. Moreover, in times of much economic uncertainty, it becomes vital for regional, state and national agencies to monitor small businesses’ performance, as they provide employment to a very large number of citizens. In this regard, future research providing updated information of the state of small hospitality enterprises could make a very positive impact.

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