It takes merely 27 seconds on YouTube for three youthful managers at Hilton Madison Monona Terrace to explain why they like their jobs. “You get to cross-train in all different departments, to really find your niche,” says one. “Every single day is a new opportunity to learn and grow,” says another. “Free parking” and “free food” count too.

Their enthusiasm is clear, the tone is chatty-casual and the message sounds authentic. “Check out our job opportunities—we want you!” is how the succinct “Hospitality Rocks” video ends.

Count Dr. Lynea LaVoy, director of Madison College’s hospitality management program, among the fans of this employer and its simple, straightforward recruitment tool. “People look to social media to make decisions about where they’ll earn their paychecks,” she observes. “They look to see the culture, how you’re treating your employees, how you’re treating your guests and what you’re doing to make a difference in your community.”

Finding and keeping good employees are persistent challenges in the foodservice industry. Gone are the days when a “help wanted” ad, “now hiring” sign or Craigslist.com posting was enough. The number of people employed in Wisconsin has reached record highs, says the state Department of Workforce Development, and the unemployment rate was nearly a full point better than the national rate in late 2017.

That means more competition among employers. “When the economy is strong and the restaurant business is as brisk as it is now, high-quality service employees are in high demand and short supply,” says workforce researcher and author Eric Chester of Colorado, keynote speaker for the 2018 Midwest Foodservice Expo. “Smart restaurant operators need to be as savvy with their recruiting skills and tactics as they are with their marketing tactics and menu selection.”

Take time, stay positive
You can’t afford to treat employee recruitment and retention as an afterthought, says Drew Nussbaum of the state Department of Tourism. “Make time to find the right applicants, and stop interviewing the wrong candidates,” the former restaurant manager advises. The selling point is not wages, he believes, but talking up “your reputation as a great restaurant and your personal reputation as an
employer. Great employees want, and need, to work for great owners and managers.”

Workforce Development staff say restaurants whose owners/managers are visible community contributors (offering school tours, participating in job fairs and career days) are seen as desirable places to work. At Driftless Café, Viroqua, owner Luke Zahm focuses on “growing our younger employees internally,” which includes work-release employment through school districts. He attributes retention success to “higher-than-normal compensation, health insurance and the push to four-day work weeks.”

Bob Prosser of Ishnala in Lake Delton (recently voted Wisconsin’s number one supper club in the Department of Tourism’s Supper Club Showdown), considers current employees the best resource for recruiting new hires: “If your restaurant has a great team already that is very proud of where they work, it raises their value by bringing in somebody

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good.” Motivate everyone on the payroll to seek out new team members, Chester advises, and that means becoming the best restaurant in town for work. “Not easily achieved, but well worth the effort,” he says.

Realize that customers notice everything, so “take the ‘help wanted’ and ‘now Hiring’ banners off the front of the house, and get it off your marquee,” Nussbaum says. “It’s about staying positive when you’re short staffed, not desperation.” Use such signage strategically, and “say what you mean,” especially via social media and your website. Example: “Join Our Team. We Need GREAT People.”

LaVoy says employees should feel as welcome as paying customers; that means work flexibility and choices. “It starts with culture,” she says. “You have to be the employer of choice so people want to work for you and then will work to keep your guests coming back. If you operate under the culture of fear in the kitchen, or that the loudest voice gets things done, you won’t inspire or encourage your employees to want to work with you.”

**Cultivate the right culture**

An engaging and nurturing culture is vital in employee recruitment, training and retention at Cousins Subs, where the employee turnover rate is below the industry average. “We’re here to help people reach their goals. I think a lot of people miss that,” says Matthew Somoles, director of field services, who describes the right culture as “the key to success—culture helps eliminate high turnover” but “you can’t fake it—you have to truly care about your people.”

The Menomonee Falls-based company’s People Development Plan is a bible for franchise operators, and new hires “know they have growth opportunities right away.” CousinsU videos explain company history, values and beliefs before moving to fun, interactive instruction. “We try to make a new employee feel comfortable instead of being thrown to the wolves,” Somoles says.

Learning how to build a sub sandwich, for example, is presented as a game. Other workshops—baking, leadership growth, continuing education—are ongoing. Employees get product sales incentives ranging from gift cards to

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Milwaukee Bucks tickets.

It’s important not to sidestep the realities of the restaurant industry (weekend and holiday work, physical demands, entry level wages for some positions). And conversely, don’t downplay the potential for huge satisfaction when an ordinary workday helps make a customer’s day exceptional. “The industry is not ideal for everyone,” says Matt Martin, director of talent acquisition at Marcus Hotels and Resorts. “However, if you love it, you will always love it and very little in life will please you more professionally.”

Another challenge for the restaurant industry is acknowledging and addressing common misconceptions. “Each and every one of us is a steward or role model for our industry,” Martin says. “We need to get away from bad habits that become urban myth, like chefs that are mean and angry or restaurateurs and owners that don’t take care of their employees.”

**Age spectrums**

Laws limit the number of hours that younger teenagers can work, but think beyond that age pool, to retirees who might welcome a part-time income supplement. Martin considers near-retirees as the fastest-growing pool of job candidates; around 10,000 Baby Boomers turn 65 each day.

A multigenerational work culture need not complicate employee dynamics. “Knowing what makes each generation tick and understanding the values of each is important,” Somoles says. At Cousins Subs, bread is baked daily, and retirees tend to prefer the early-morning hours and work.

“Mature workers often bring a sense of stability and responsibility to the workplace,” says Amy Hansmann of the state DWD’s Division of Employment and Training. “They may like the sense of belonging and camaraderie that is a part of restaurant work.” For a retiree whose career was a desk job, restaurant work might be a refreshing change of pace.

**“Mature workers often bring a sense of stability and responsibility to the workplace”**

Amy Hansmann  
Wisconsin DWD Division of Employment and Training

Pair individuals from different generations as equals who each has a skill to share with the other, she advises. Try to understand what motivates each and tailor work to reflect personal strengths. Chester says age doesn’t matter much when deciding how to treat employees well: “Everyone who works for you wants the same basic things, a fair paycheck, to be accepted, a fun environment, respect, clear expectations. Their age simply gives you a clue as to how they’ll go about asking for or demanding those things.”

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Now Hiring Signs from WRA

WRA has created some spiffy and fun “Now Hiring” signs as a resource for restaurant operators.

Just click and print. Or customize and print. It’s easy!

Visit wirestaurant.org and click on “Now Hiring: Resources for Restaurants”
**Tech Advantages**

Jim Sullivan, CEO of Sullivision.com, says companies that leverage the newest technology to hire, train and improve their workforce have an advantage over competitors. “If I can apply for a job through my smartphone, be trained with short videos via a tablet and arrange my work schedule though an app, I am going to be more attracted to that company than one who is still paper-based and fails to leverage how I use technology into my job role,” Sullivan says. That’s particularly true for Millennials, which he notes are now a majority of US workers and customers.

Sullivan is a foodservice consultant whose clients include Walt Disney Company, American Express, Coca-Cola, Culver’s, Taco Bell, The Cheesecake Factory, Starbucks and Panera Bread. He says a $15 per hour wage is inevitable, “so smart operators are looking at ways to leverage technology to automate tasks that people traditionally held. Restaurants are being designed to minimize labor, positions and workers as a result.”

Example: digital ordering from tableside or fast-food kiosk. “When you replace waiters with iPad menus and put a runner in place to deliver food and beverage to the whole dining room, we’re seeing both three fewer waiters needed and higher check averages ranging from 8 to 12 percent. Tablets sell better with pictures, video and volume/peak pricing capabilities.”

**Challenge stereotypes**

The public has misconceptions about foodservice work, and you may have ill-conceived notions about where else to find capable employees. Consider David Brann, a pre-cook at Lucille, a downtown Madison restaurant. “From the first day, I just started loving it more and more,” he says of his job.

Brann, winner of the 2017 Wisconsin Job Honor Award, has autism and is one of the 1,200-plus people with disabilities who have found work in the restaurant industry within the past two federal fiscal years. “This is actually just an alternative labor force,” Evan Dannells, executive chef, said in a Goodwill of South Central Wisconsin blog. “I can’t stress enough that it isn’t a free ride. David’s an actual employee who has actual expectations, and he’s productive.”

Tax incentives, such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (see page 32) are available to employers who hire targeted populations. Some ex-offenders—people with criminal records—are another untapped but valuable labor pool. When the match is right, you fill a job vacancy while helping somebody establish a stable life.

“While we continue to try to poach and steal new hires from each other, many companies have learned we need to think about the big picture, and focus on our communities and what we need to do to help people who have barriers to employment or have a misconception about the service industry,” Martin says. He volunteers as a judge for the ProStart Invitational management competition for high school students held at the Midwest Foodservice Expo every year, he sits on an advisory board for Employ Milwaukee, serves on the Washington High School Academy of Hospitality and tourism advisory board and supports adult education programs for the restaurant industry.

Jeffrey McAlister, business sector specialist at Employ Milwaukee, helps match labor-force demands with job-seeker supply. The goal is meaningful work, especially among compromised populations in and near Milwaukee County. “One of the biggest issues is competitive wages,” he says. “We want employers who can help lay out a good career path for people. You may start as a busser, but people want to feel like they can earn more by doing and learning more.”

**Your end of the deal**

Violet Rembert says some employers, such as Milwaukee’s Potawatomi restaurants, go out of their way to build relationships. They meet culinary students during career days and show up at graduation ceremonies to make job offers. Rembert is executive director of HeartLove Place, a nonprofit agency with Christian values whose programs aid the Harambee area of Milwaukee.

Many are trying to work their way out of poverty or back into society after incarceration. Since 2002, at least 500 have completed the 14-week ProStart culinary arts and job readiness program and certification.

Rembert says she is not interested in matching her students with employers who don’t demonstrate room for career growth. “The issue is paying a living wage,” she says. “A lot of people in our program are trying to support a family.” WR
“Very often business demands or needs dictate you fill a role with the best available candidate. This practice is fine for a percentage of your openings but you need to always keep an eye out for those with potential, looking for more out of a role than just a paycheck. Always be on the lookout for the host or hostess with aspirations to help market your business or plan parties, a server who wants to manage operations or a dishwasher who wants to be a chef or manage purchasing.”
— Matt Martin, Marcus Hotels and Resorts

“Your standards for hiring, training and leadership should never change, nor should your expectations. Whether your employee is 16, or 86, they expect to be able to respect you, the boss. You have to earn that respect by working with, observing, guiding and learning from your staff.”
— Drew Nussbaum, Wisconsin Department of Tourism

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“Millennials are not the problem. The problem is an entitlement mindset that’s been unfairly attached to younger employees who are bold in expressing what they want and expect from a boss and from a job. That’s a good thing. You don’t have to be Houdini to know what they are thinking and what they want from their manager. Ask them. They’ll tell you.”
— Eric Chester, EricChester.com

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