

Raw recruits

WILL BECKETT AND HUW GOTT OF THE UNDERDOG GROUP SHARE THEIR WISDOM ON EMPLOYING STAFF

We'd just opened the Marquess Tavern. The overall feel was 'old England' and the head chef had been scouring through Huw's collection of old recipe books to find unusual dishes. He stumbled upon a chicken, leek and cider pie from Kent called 'Kentish Chicken Pie'. We did a tasting and it was so good it had to go on the menu.

That night, the waiter responsible for writing the menu on the blackboard was French and somehow something got lost in translation.

There were a few sniggers from customers throughout the evening, but it wasn't until a rather embarrassed well-to-do man pointed out the mistake towards the end of the night that we realised what had happened. The 'K' of Kentish had become a 'C' and the 'e' a 'u'.

Which kind of leads us on to our topic for this month and next: staffing. This month we're going to focus on hiring the right people and next month on how to manage them effectively.

ENGLISH LESSONS

Just before we set up our first place we spoke to a guy who'd been bankrupted by the bar industry. His verdict: "I'd have been all right if it hadn't been for the staff."

From a few other things he said it was clear that it wasn't the staff that had been the problem, it was how he'd selected and managed them.

We didn't really have a clue how to go about hiring decent people. In the end we decided to go down a slightly unusual route: hire people we liked and then train them up. ➤

Will had been teaching English at a school on Oxford Street and we decided to approach students who had a friendly outgoing personality. We ended up with a team of lovely people, but none of them had any experience of working in a bar and their level of English suggested that Will's teaching skills weren't quite as good as they could have been. The first few months were a challenge.

We'd made it difficult for ourselves, but the friendly amateurishness of everyone (including ourselves) helped create a special atmosphere that appealed to customers. In every way we were the opposite of slick, corporate chain bar.

It certainly wasn't the easiest way to go about things though and we now generally look for people who have the necessary skills and experience to do the job, with a personality that fits with our business – and who don't require impromptu mid-shift English lessons. ➤



THREE SIMPLE STEPS

FIRST INTERVIEW

With line manager e.g. a bartender is interviewed by the bar manager. Assess candidate's technical skills.

SECOND INTERVIEW

Interview with next person up the hierarchy e.g. a bartender is interviewed by the general manager. Assess their 'fit' within your company.

UNPAID WORKING TRIAL

This could be a three-hour working shift on an averagely busy evening, for example. This person should be paired with a current member of staff for assessment. If the person is taken on we add this period to their first wage packet. If you don't take them on you don't have to, as long as this is made clear from the beginning.



“If different people are conducting each interview, it’s important that they speak to each other before the second interview to avoid too much crossover”

fit you need to think about what kind of company you are and what you value. Think about the kind of people you want, what they can reasonably expect from you and whether they value the same things. It’s difficult, and takes a lot of practice to get this right. And if different people are conducting each interview, it’s important that they speak to each other before the second interview to avoid too much crossover.

INDUCTION

The final thing in the recruitment process is the induction. There should be a set way for someone new to settle into the job/venue/company. Make sure they know what paperwork they need, give them a job description and some initial training and make your expectations clear from the beginning.

The whole process will vary from company to company and we don’t claim that our method is the best, just that it’s something that works for us. We use this process to streamline the number of applicants at each stage, get varying opinions on an applicant’s suitability.

We’ll leave you with this thought: ensure the job you are offering is perceived as worth getting – jobs that are easy to get tend to be easy to leave. ■

▶ GETTING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Recruitment is hugely important, an enormous responsibility and a very difficult task. You’re taking on individuals who will represent your business, have a direct effect on how much – or little – money you make, and affect the working lives of everyone else in the building.

You are also responsible for people’s happiness at work, so you need to try and put together a team of like-minded people who are likely to get on and work well together.

So how do you go about finding the right people? We’re lucky enough to get lots of people speculatively approaching us for positions, so word-of-mouth has become our most effective recruitment tool. And where possible we try to recruit from within, promoting people who show potential, giving them the tools and support to take on new challenges.

But we do occasionally use Gumtree (cheap to put an advert on, but time-consuming and painful trawling through the millions of inappropriate responses). And recently for the first time we started working with a recruitment agent.

Agents will always be an expensive option, but if you find the right ones they

can be useful in filling key positions quickly with good-quality people. Two that we’re happy to recommend are Salt Recruitment and The People Tree.

INTERVIEWING

In the early days we’d get people in for a chat and base most of our decision on likeability and gut feeling, which worked sometimes, but we also had some spectacular failures. Over time we’ve got much better at interviewing.

We now have a more structured process. In an initial interview we concentrate on the candidate’s technical skills, and then if that goes well we invite them back for a second interview where we concentrate on their ‘fit’ with the company.

Technical questions should directly ascertain a candidate’s understanding of the job and the skills they have. The interviewer should also be looking for self-awareness of their limitations. As a general rule people who claim to be good at everything rarely are and those who answer questions about their faults with poorly disguised strengths (“I’m too much of a perfectionist”) are not particularly self-aware.

When you’re considering whether they



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