

Trained professionals

HELPING YOUR STAFF GAIN SKILLS PAYS OFF FOR EVERYONE, SAY WILL BECKETT AND HUW GOTT

We're in a smart restaurant. Main courses around the £25 mark, more than 100 wines on the list. We've got our consultant hats on, having been called in to help turn around a business on its last legs. To gauge the lie of the land, we thought we'd go in undercover, have dinner and ask a few questions.

To the restaurant manager: "What do you recommend with the sea bream?"

A long pause... "I would have to say the Chablis."

OK, not a particularly inspired choice and a bit of explanation would have been nice, but we're familiar with the Chablis he's pointed at and its delicate flintiness would definitely work well with the bream.

"How about with the braised beef and wild mushrooms?"

Another long pause... "I would have to say the Chablis."

Later on, after we'd revealed our identities, we discovered that the reason he would always recommend the Chablis was because, apart from the paltry number of wines available by the glass, it was the only wine he'd ever tried. He liked it, and customers tended to nod knowingly and follow his advice. More than 100 wines on the list and the only one they sold in any significant volume was the Chablis.

Worryingly, it turned out that the only facts the restaurant manager knew about the Chablis was that it was white wine (he had no idea which grape variety), that it was from France (he had no idea which region) and that he liked it.

This guy had risen through the ranks, so it was clear that training was either non-existent or completely ineffective. A bit of initiative would have been nice – reading wine labels, looking things up in books and on the internet, arranging tastings etc



– but for the sake of this article we will lay the blame firmly at the owner's door. On that night we unearthed a few other horrors, but the complete lack of training was the thing that really stood out.

MULTIPLE BENEFITS

In this industry there are lots of people falling over themselves to provide some sort of training – wine suppliers, spirit brands, even cigarette suppliers. They all understand that the more the frontline staff know about their products, the more they'll sell them. For operators the arguments are even more compelling:

- Skilled and motivated people work harder and better, improving their productivity
- Happier, better staff improve customer

There are many suppliers out there who are only too happy to provide some kind of training

satisfaction, which strengthens your reputation and makes repeat visits and word-of-mouth marketing more likely

- More knowledgeable staff find it easier to talk about and sell products, improving customers' experience and spend per head
- Having a better skilled workforce reduces costs and wastage
- Training people properly aids staff retention.

This last point is important but is often overlooked when thinking about the time and costs involved in training. Nationwide the staff turnover in our industry is 30 per cent per annum. It has been estimated that the industry average cost of replacing an employee is £1,500, taking into account potential

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recruitment costs and fees, reduced productivity as one person finishes and the next person starts a job and costs and time involved in training. So if you’re employing 20 people the likelihood is that staff turnover is costing you £9,000 per year.

It was no surprise when we found out that the staff turnover at the restaurant where “you can have anything as long as it’s Chablis” was insanely high.

And the statistics suggest this isn’t an isolated example. The hospitality sector has the lowest productivity of any sector in the UK, and is significantly less productive than the same sector in other countries. New operators should make sure they take advantage of the free or low-cost training opportunities available. Call your brand representatives and get them to sort out cocktail training sessions. Speak to bodies that are focusing on improving skills in the hospitality industry ahead of the London Olympics: People First, the London Development Agency



and the Learning and Skills Council (Train to Gain) – see box, left.

GET INVOLVED

But don’t just rely on someone else doing all the work. As an employer there’s lots you can be doing to make sure your staff feel happy and motivated. Everyone should understand what their job entails and what you expect from them. We give everyone at our venues a job description that clearly outlines their responsibilities and our expectations. They need the skills to do their job effectively – these could be imparted through on-the-job training, by holding structured training sessions in-house or by a third-party provider.

They need to get feedback on how they are doing, feel that they are developing and understand how they can progress in the future. As well as continual ad hoc feedback, we hold six-monthly reviews with everyone at our venues.

It’s simple stuff, but through our consultancy work we’ve seen that lots of people don’t do it – and the effect this can have on their business. We see particular problems with people who have been promoted to a management job because they’ve been good at a non-management job. These people are usually taught the specific operational skills for their new role (how to do stock checks, cashing up, locking up etc), but the man-management side of things is often neglected. This often leads to poor communication, frustration for everyone involved and that person leaving or being fired and the cycle of high staff turnover continuing.

Taking training seriously is key to running a successful bar or restaurant. If you don’t you could end up with a team of people selling delicate white wines with steak... ■

“IT’S THE NEW MANAGER’S FAULT”

Some people are naturally good at it, others need a bit of help – but man-management skills can be easily taught. Stephen Waters from Watershed, a company specialising in management training for bar and restaurant managers, says the problem normally lies in one of the following.

- **Visibility** – presence on the floor, critical for reassuring staff and customers.
- **Manner** – a way of being with others, “neither above nor below them”.
- **Dealing with status and power** – the ability to manage friends, handle responsibility and enjoy the team.
- **Briefing** – The ability to advocate clearly in a short space of time, generally one-to-one, occasionally to a small group. The ability to lead by explanation and by example.
- **Handling pressure** – staying calm when things get busy.
- **Being a developer** – being able to act on opportunities for development in others.
- **‘Captaincy’** – the ability to take charge, bring order, uphold standards, think ahead, coordinate, see the bigger picture and be proactive and practical.



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