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Frontline Human Capital Trends in Restaurants

Introduction

The convergence of new digital tools, shifting customer demands, and escalating workforce expectations is pushing restaurants to fundamentally rethink how they manage staffing and operations.

Deloitte's [2025 Global Human Capital Trends](#) report finds that as leaders face hundreds of new technologies and use cases that are rapidly transforming the nature of work, they need a new calculus to achieve value from their workforce investments. This paper highlights three Human Capital Trends that inform how restaurant companies can most effectively equip the frontline workforce to drive improved business and guest outcomes.



Trend 1: Preparing for a new era of AI and human convergence

One of the central questions raised in our 2025 Global Human Capital Trends report is how organizations identify noncritical work that pulls employees away from higher-value tasks. While many companies are turning to AI and other advanced technologies to address this challenge, the outcomes are not always positive. In fact, about 60% of workers report that turnover has increased as their organizations collect and use worker data through AI and related tools.

A Deloitte survey highlights growing concerns around blurred boundaries between humans and technology, data privacy, and the erosion of meaningful human interaction in the workplace¹—concerns echoed by many restaurant leaders who fear losing the human touch that both employees and customers deeply value.² At the same time, adoption continues to accelerate—nearly 75% of surveyed restaurants are already piloting or deploying AI solutions to enhance the crew experience—underscoring the opportunity for efficiency but also the critical need to balance innovation with the human connection that both employees and customers value.³

How can AI help restaurants optimize their operations?

- **Anticipate staffing gaps:** Leverage AI to anticipate fluctuations in demand and dynamically optimize staff schedules. By analyzing different staffing combinations, AI can identify which team structures deliver peak performance across shifts and stations. AI-enabled scheduling helps rightsize teams during busy periods, prevent understaffing, and ensure consistent, high-quality customer service. Beyond scheduling and analytics, AI is also transforming talent acquisition. For example, a fast-casual restaurant partnered with Paradox to launch an AI-powered virtual assistant that streamlines hiring. Since its late-2024 rollout, the brand has increased application completion rates to 85%, reduced time-to-hire from 12 days to just four and provided critical support in onboarding up to 10,000 new employees annually.⁴
- **Clearly delineate between human and AI work:** Identify where people should play an essential role based on your company's values and the customer and employee experience you want to deliver. Consider how consumers interact with technology and whether franchisees are equipped to provide a consistent, seamless experience across locations. For instance, a major restaurant chain revamped its digital ordering kiosks to give them a crisper visual appeal and options that allowed for greater product discovery—putting those parts of the experience in the customers' hands and freeing up workers to boost kitchen efficiency.⁵ As technology, customer preferences, and workforce expectations continue to evolve, revisit this human-AI division of labor on a regular basis—at least annually—to help ensure it still aligns with business goals and enhances both the employee and guest experience.
- **Automating back-of-house operations:** Instead of flipping through repair manuals or summoning a technician, workers could describe an issue—like a blinking fryer light—and instantly receive step-by-step guidance. AI could suggest actions like resetting the machine or replacing a part, reducing downtime during busy shifts. In addition, AI-powered vision systems could monitor stock movement in real time, cut manual labor, and enable automated ordering.

Trend 2: Reinventing the role of the manager

Some of the tensions managers contend with are enduring, such as the responsibilities of hiring, training, and upskilling employees. Yet, even as tasks such as order-taking can be automated, thinking on your feet remains one of the skills that will continue to require experience and practice. In fact, a Deloitte analysis suggests that judgment is the core skill managers need to resolve tensions.⁶

A key aspect of developing strong restaurant leaders is creating opportunities for hands-on learning across a variety of roles and locations. Expanding rotational assignments allows managers to build new skills, gain cross-functional insights, and better understand operational challenges—fueling both their personal growth and career advancement. Leadership development programs that emphasize real-world experience help ensure managers are not only present but deeply engaged with the day-to-day realities of restaurant operations, positioning them to lead more effectively and drive continuous improvement.

How can companies find better ways to support their managers?

- **Expand rotation opportunities:** Rotate high-performing managers across multiple restaurants within a franchiser's network to expose them to varied operational challenges and leadership styles. Use rotations to close performance gaps and stretch managers' capabilities. Design incentives and clear career benefits to offset commuting costs and retention concerns.
- **Fuel leadership excellence:** Invest in leadership development programs that combine formal training with real-world coaching, emphasizing the cultivation of sound judgment to help managers navigate competing demands and frontline complexities. Judgment is a core skill for resolving tensions, making it essential to include personalized development plans and regular check-ins that build both leadership capacity and confidence. For instance, one restaurant brand launched leadership training programs through a university partnership, with more than 900 participants receiving training to prepare frontline managers for executive roles.⁷

Trend 3: Creating stability for workers

The demanding nature of restaurant work—exemplified by long shifts, physical labor, and unpredictable schedules—creates fertile ground for high staff turnover. As of January 2024, the industry's annual employee turnover rate approached 80%, up from about 74% during the decade leading up to the pandemic.⁸

This level of churn adds pressure to the constant tension between balancing schedules and labor costs in the restaurant industry. To complicate matters, recent global workforce analyses show that labor shortages could intensify by 2030, placing great pressure on restaurants.⁹

How can restaurant leaders create the stability workers crave while simultaneously enhancing organizational agility in the workforce?

Stability comes from understanding expectations at work, feeling well supported, and seeing long-term opportunities in spite of ongoing change.

- **Prioritize experiences and benefits:** Corporate teams should design restaurant workflows with employee strengths and working styles in mind—identifying the skills and preferences best suited for each station. By equipping managers with simple tools to assess these traits, they can place team members where they are most likely to thrive. This thoughtful alignment not only enhances individual performance but also drives higher engagement and smoother operations. When employees are empowered to use their natural abilities, they are more motivated and committed—fueling stronger team performance.

To further support engagement and retention, it's essential to keep employees well-informed about available benefits such as tuition assistance and training opportunities. Corporate teams and restaurant managers can promote benefit awareness through daily shift meetings, breakroom signage, and digital tools like scheduling apps. Regular communication, manager role-modeling, and easy access help normalize benefit usage and encourage participation. Managers should also understand company policies and actively guide staff in taking advantage of these resources, which not only support employee growth but also reduce turnover. According to our 2025 Global Human Capital Trends survey, financial rewards and a sense of teamwork are key drivers of high performance. These motivations can be strengthened through consistent communication, visible growth opportunities, and by delivering on promises made to employees.

- **Invest in long-term growth and career potential:** Identify individuals with long-term potential—those who demonstrate reliability, adaptability, strong customer service skills, and a willingness to learn—and align with the educational and professional profiles of employees who have historically succeeded in long-term careers within the company (more on this below). In the restaurant industry, investing in high-potential

employees through ongoing training, mentorship, and clear career pathways not only can enhance their skills but also can prepare them for future leadership roles, reducing the need for external hiring. This commitment to development cultivates a loyal, motivated team that delivers consistent guest experiences and contributes to long-term operational success.

Additionally, organizations should take a strategic approach to talent by examining their current workforce to identify employee personas—combinations of traits, backgrounds, and behaviors—that have consistently contributed to long-term success in restaurant roles. These personas, which may include adaptability, reliability, customer empathy, or prior frontline experience, should inform both hiring and professional development strategies. For example, a retail associate's interpersonal skills and ability to navigate unpredictable customer needs can translate seamlessly into a restaurant environment that demands quick thinking and strong emotional intelligence. Recognizing and hiring for these transferable traits helps build a resilient, high-performing team ready to meet the dynamic demands of the industry. Expanding the talent pipeline through nontraditional channels can further support this goal—such as recruiting hospitality students seeking hands-on experience; former military personnel with proven discipline and teamwork; stay-at-home parents reentering the workforce; or rideshare drivers who bring flexibility, reliability, and customer-facing experience. These targeted approaches can broaden the candidate pool while enriching restaurant teams with diverse strengths and perspectives.

Finally, cultivating strong community ties can further strengthen both recruitment and retention. Franchisees often highlight that building meaningful relationships with local organizations—such as schools, youth programs, and charities—not only deepens trust within the community but also positions restaurants as employers of choice. Community involvement can enhance employee pride and reduce turnover while creating natural pipelines of young talent, especially as many individuals find their first job in restaurants through these connections. By giving back and serving as community anchors, restaurants can reinforce loyalty among both employees and customers, ensuring long-term resilience and sustained success.¹⁰

Hospitality starts from within

As the restaurant workforce evolves, success hinges on retaining talent through meaningful engagement, the strategic use of new technologies, and experiences that unlock leadership potential. The path forward will require leaders to embrace change with intentionality—blending innovation with humanity, and efficiency with empathy. By leveraging AI responsibly, empowering managers with judgment-driven leadership, creating stability through career pathways, and strengthening bonds with local communities, restaurants can motivate their teams with the same spirit that draws customers in: delivering consistent, attentive service while adapting to individual needs. Those who succeed will not only enhance operations but also create workplaces where employees feel valued, customers feel connected, and long-term growth becomes sustainable.



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Endnotes

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