

# First to the Finish Line: How to Attract Top Talent to Your Hospitality Organization

February 11, 2022 / By Court Williams



The hospitality industry experienced thousands of positions eliminated during the past two years, due mainly to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, organizations are embroiled in an executive hiring frenzy as they try to fill the gaps in their executive teams ahead of the post-pandemic recovery. The reasons for this “employees’ market” are complex, but companies are increasingly introducing innovative solutions that will, in many cases, change the face of the hospitality industry forever. Here are some ways to make sure you attract the best executive candidates for your organization.

## Facing the Recruitment Challenges

The hotel and restaurant world has traditionally struggled to recruit suitable executive staff. Research from 2016 shows that, even back then, almost 82% of hospitality employers<sup>[1]</sup> found the task challenging. However, it’s become a lot harder recently.

Since the start of the pandemic, lockdowns and uncertainty across all industries have contributed to older workers retiring in droves to enjoy the remainder of their lives. Meanwhile, younger candidates are quitting because they feel underappreciated. Many are doing the jobs of several people, often at a lower salary and with non-existent benefits.

This situation is not necessarily anyone’s fault—it’s the result of what has to happen during these times for companies to survive. Regardless, employees are revising their priorities and joining the Great Resignation to embrace remote work, digital nomadism, and gain independence from working under a boss.

Additionally, the frenetic recruitment activity impacting economic sectors across the board has made it easier than ever before for workers to switch careers. A 2022 Joblist U.S. Job Market report<sup>[2]</sup> shows three out of four full-time workers plan to resign in the next 12 months, with 79% of employees believing they can make more money by switching than staying in their current jobs. To top it all, hospitality employees are recognized as having strong customer service orientation and training, resulting in their poaching by other industries.

## The Changing Hospitality Landscape

As the world reopens after what I sincerely hope is finally a tapering-off of the pandemic, I see changes taking place that will likely affect the hospitality landscape for the foreseeable future. These changes include reduced business travel and less need for conferences and events. If countries continue to make entry difficult for international visitors, the focus on local marketing will grow as the “staycation” increases in popularity. If not, international leisure travel is likely to resume at a cracking pace.

Technological transformation, already in progress before COVID-19, will continue to flourish as automation reduces human contact and minimizes the risk of virus transmission. Companies have already begun to rely on technology to increase their operational efficiency<sup>[3]</sup>. Most hospitality recruiters now realize they need a whole new breed of executive leadership to lead them through the huge changes facing them in 2022.

### Summary

As the pandemic eases, the hospitality industry faces multiple challenges in recruiting talented employees. This situation is likely to result in some exciting hiring trends in 2022, including a stronger focus on technology use and the overall employee experience. Organizations will have to deploy innovative solutions to attract the human capital they need in this competitive environment.

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## Expected Hiring Trends in 2022

So, what hiring trends can we expect to see happening as we head into this year? I believe the top requirements for hotel and restaurant executives will include:

### 1. A Focus on Employee Experience

According to Forrester's Predictions on the future of work<sup>[4]</sup>, employers will have to enhance their workers' Employee Experience (EX) in 2022 if they want to minimize quit rates, at both hourly and executive levels. Much like customer experience, EX means reviewing the entire employee journey from start to finish to determine where improvements are required.

Currently, only 48% of large organizations have dedicated EX programs, but we can expect to see a rapid increase in investment in this area. For instance, hospitality is already seeing a trend towards more professional onboarding processes for executives, led by both in-house HR and organizational development consultants. Since research shows<sup>[5]</sup> poor onboarding is a major cause of employee turnover, addressing this issue can help ensure a successful transition for incoming personnel.

### 2. Strong Soft Skills

Leaders with well-developed conflict resolution skills, emotional intelligence, steadiness under pressure, and good time management are essential for managing lower-level employees. With workers in every tier of hospitality job-hopping for better opportunities, companies simply can't afford to employ senior workers who can't win the loyalty of their subordinates. Until artificial intelligence (AI) achieves the ability to perform multiple human tasks, hotels and restaurants still need humans to make things happen. Unless you want to be training new people every week, that means staff retention is as important as ever. Since research shows managerial staff is the top reason<sup>[6]</sup> most employees quit, soft skills seem like a good place to start.

### 3. Robust Technological Understanding

Executives don't need to know how to code to have a solid understanding of technological tools and how they can benefit the workplace. Technology has played an important role in global hospitality over the years, including helping to reduce costs, improve operational efficiency, and enhance service and customer experience.

Since 2020, the digital transformation of the industry has been relentless. From online food delivery to accommodation services, technology serving both customers and suppliers has been a business priority. The use of apps as room keys was outstripped only by the demand for contactless check-in<sup>[7]</sup> and other self-serve financial options.

Some hospitality companies have expanded their food services to use robots<sup>[8]</sup> instead of humans, reducing both costs and disease transmissibility. These organizations will need to source candidates with appropriate expertise to head up Food and Beverage divisions that are in the process of making these shifts.

### 4. Innovative Operational Competencies

It's not just about knowledge, either. Mindset and attitude will be vitally important in the hospitality industry of the future. Executives will have to be forward-looking and innovative in attitude, ready to hit the ground running by devising and implementing new ideas before their competition can do so.

For example, in October 2021 **Raising Cane's** restaurant chain assigned half its corporate staff to work in the restaurants<sup>[9]</sup> while it concentrated on hiring 10,000 workers in 50 days—a novel solution to a potentially massive problem.

## Aiming for Success

Hiring the type of people needed will be challenging in the highly competitive 2022 market. Hospitality

organizations will have to be prepared to look at new ways to attract and retain talent. **Aimbridge Hospitality**<sup>[10]</sup>, for example, launched a same-day pay app in June 2021 as a way to address the evolving needs of its workforce. The group's employees increasingly participate in the daily pay option. The company also introduced its new TeamShare program, which allows hourly staff to accept shifts at nearby Aimbridge hotels. The result is a win-win situation for both the workers and the properties experiencing staffing gaps.

Next, Aimbridge deployed market-based recruiters around the country to fill hourly hotel openings. The corporate task force leadership expanded to 70 individuals to help hotels with management staffing, and an H2B visa program was implemented with the company's Mexico office to raise the workforce needed for its managed U.S. hotels.

Other enterprising trends I expect to see more of in 2022 include:

- A shift to internal promotions resulting from upskilling valuable workers and building transferable skills among existing employees. This will enable companies to transfer them to areas with a higher need or greater ROI. Upskilling also gives employees an added boost of confidence, a stronger sense of belonging, and deepens their personal trust in management—all signs of higher levels of engagement.
- More value will be placed on skills previously considered secondary to hospitality roles, such as problem-solving abilities, the capacity for taking a leadership role, thriving under pressure, or competence in dealing with guest issues and concerns.
- Offering real, meat-and-potatoes hiring incentives instead of lip-service. As of September 2021, **Marriot Hotels** had 10,000 vacancies<sup>[11]</sup> in 600 managed hotels across the U.S. The only way the company is likely to fill those spots will be by offering higher wages, better health benefits, 401(k) options, college tuition support for executives' families, childcare, flexible shifts, and referral bonuses.

Wellness programs, access to counseling sessions, or subscriptions to mental health and meditation apps are other popular perks.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Companies Need a Long-Term Plan

Hospitality companies will be competing fiercely for top talent for some time to come, so it's worth your while to make vacant executive positions as appealing as possible. Develop a long-term hiring plan that offers a consistent career path for the right incumbents, and prepare for every possible post-pandemic scenario you can. Higher compensation, better work-life balance, professional orientation programs, and future career growth opportunities are the secrets to attracting the best candidates in these difficult times.

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## About **Court Williams**



**Court Williams** is Chief Executive Officer of HVS Executive Search based in New York and has over 33 years of retained Hospitality Executive Search experience within the Hotel, Restaurant, and Travel/Leisure industries. He also leads the global growth strategy for HVS Executive Search. Court directs his team in senior hospitality executive searches across all functional areas including Operations, Human Resources, Sales/Marketing, Finance, Real Estate, Franchise Development, Technology, and Supply Chain/Logistics, working with clients in the private equity, hotel management, restaurant, hotel investment/REITS, and leisure venue industries. Court is on the Advisory Board of Shift One and remains an active Cornell alumnus through student coaching with Cornell University's Hospitality Leadership Development Institute. Court began his career in the restaurant industry after graduating from Cornell's Hotel School gaining multi-unit operational experience prior to launching a career in Human Resources/Recruiting. Having gained experience in executive recruitment from the brand side, the desire to work with a broader range of hospitality clients led Court to a career in retained executive search beginning in 1990. Court and his wife reside in both Connecticut and Vermont and have two young adult children. He enjoys boating, skiing, and fly-fishing in Vermont, travelling, and food/wine.