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# How to Reduce Your Restaurant Labor Costs and Save Money



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# Do you have an extra \$146,000 to waste?

Three out of every four employees in your restaurant won't be with you this time next year — that is, if your business follows the average hospitality business statistics.

Industry turnover rates are at nearly 75 percent<sup>1</sup>, and it's caused by more than just the hassle of everyday rehiring that restaurants have to deal with. Restaurant labor costs are growing every day, but it's not just base salaries that you need to worry about.

According to research compiled by RAIL Media, the average cost of replacing an employee — salary aside — is \$5,864 per person. For the average full-service restaurant operator, that could run up to \$146,000 annually.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly \$6,000 goes right down the drain every time someone walks out your door for the last time, between the cost of:

- hours lost to interviewing
- advertising the position
- training a new staff person
- accounting for early mistakes
- the loss of customers from a temporary decrease in customer service
- the cost of overtime to balance it out

And the trouble is, these restaurant labor costs are nearly invisible on your balance sheet. But that doesn't mean they aren't there.



The good news is that hidden restaurant labor costs from turnover are often avoidable, at least to a degree. Yes, very few restaurants can get their employee turnover rate down to zero, any more than they can completely eliminate food waste or over-scheduling.

Very few restaurants can get their employee turnover rate down to zero. However, there are ways you can reduce your restaurant labor costs.

However, there are ways you can reduce your restaurant labor costs. First, we will look at how to accurately forecast your labor needs to avoid the hidden costs of overstaffing and understaffing. Then, we'll focus on three core areas of competency for reducing labor costs: hiring, training, and operational changes.

But before you can make changes, you need to know what actual costs you're dealing with. Enter: **restaurant labor forecasting.**



## Chapter

# Forecasting

Labor costs. It's one of the toughest calculations a restaurant owner needs to make — and the decisions you make in the process can help you achieve success ... or throw your establishment into chaos.

But restaurant labor cost forecasting isn't like throwing a dart and hoping it lands on the bullseye. There's a method to the madness that breaks down how much you should be spending on labor, what "counts" as a genuine labor cost, and then how to use your overall sales to forecast how you'll need to schedule at any given time.

And it all starts with your total sales.

## How much of my total costs should be labor?

In the restaurant industry, ideal labor costs are determined by comparison to your total sales in a given period of time. A common recommendation for cost ratio is to allocate around 60 percent of total sales to food and labor, otherwise known as your "prime costs." The more you spend on labor, the less you have to spend on food, and vice versa, so the general recommendation is not to exceed 30 percent of your total sales on either.

Management salaries should not exceed 10 percent of sales for either full service or quick serve. This amount is included in the

30 percent recommendation, leaving 20 percent of your total sales in a given period for non-managerial staff.

So, for instance, if your restaurant makes \$10,000 in a given week in total sales, your labor costs (hourly, salaried, and management combined) should not be more than \$3,000 (with another \$3,000 allocated to food costs). Of the remaining \$4,000 in sales, keep in mind how much goes to rent, utilities, equipment maintenance, upkeep of small wares, and — most critical of all — federal, state, and local taxes.

It's no wonder the average full-service restaurateur only manages a profit margin somewhere between three and five percent.<sup>3</sup>

### What are the key drivers of my restaurant labor costs?

Central to your restaurant labor costs are hourly wages and salaries for your staff.

You likely pay different employees at different rates, depending on their role and length of service. Most servers will make below minimum wage. The federal government requires a wage of at least \$2.13 per hour be paid to employees that receive at least \$30 per month in tips. This may be higher in some states and local municipalities, however.

But your cooks, dishwashers, bussers, hosts, and any other staff not receiving tips will be making at least minimum wage for your local area. To determine the cost of their labor on a weekly basis, multiply

the number of hours worked by each individual's hourly rate, and then add them all together.

▶ **Hourly wage x Number of hours worked in a week = Weekly cost**

If any of your hourly employees worked overtime — or you see a certain amount of overtime repeating on a weekly basis — be sure to add that up (at the higher hourly rate) as well.

A restaurateur only manages a profit margin somewhere between three and five percent.

Your managers are likely salaried, including the head chef or kitchen manager, so the weekly cost of their labor is determined by dividing their annual salary by 52 (the number of weeks in a year).

▶ **Annual salary / 52 (weeks) = Weekly cost**

You can then add that total to the total of your hourly paid labor to get your base labor costs. Don't forget to add in your own salary as an owner, too!

Unfortunately, that's not all you have to consider when figuring out your total labor costs. The costs associated with any benefits you provide, such as health insurance, employer 401(k) contributions, or paid time



off, also need to be factored in. The base cost (not menu price) of meals you comp your employees is also a significant labor cost, as is laundering and replacing staff uniforms, if applicable.

## How can I forecast restaurant labor costs?

Confidently forecasting your restaurant labor costs requires knowing two big things: the individual (per person) costs above, and a reasonable estimation of how your sales fluctuate on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis.

In other words, in order to forecast your front- and back-of-house labor costs, you need to be able to forecast your restaurant sales, too. There's a really simple formula for forecasting baseline sales on a per shift or day basis for full-service restaurants:

**Average seating per table x  
▶ Number of tables x Average ticket  
size (per person) x Number of table  
turns = Sales estimate**

For instance, if your restaurant has 10 tables, with an average of 4 guests per table, who spend \$25 per guest on average — and your staff can usually turn each table one time per shift (for a total of 2 seatings) — your calculation will be:  $10 \times 4 \times 25 \times 2 = \$2,000$ .

Repeat this calculation for each shift, factoring in how different a Friday night dinner shift may be from a Monday night shift, or how the breakfast crowd orders differently from the lunch crowd. Get as specific as your restaurant traffic demands. It will help you more accurately forecast your needs, saving you money in the long run.

Limited service restaurants without table turns need to rely on patterns of sales they see over a period of time in order to make accurate estimates. A good point-of-sale system should be able to provide this information in a digestible fashion, but if you're starting from scratch (or have not updated your POS), the formula gets simpler:

▶ **Number of transactions per shift x  
Average ticket size (per transaction)  
= Sales estimate**

Once you have an accurate understanding of sales per shift, per day, and per week, you can start assessing your labor needs. If a shift will make \$2,000, and you want to assign 30 percent of your sales to labor, that's \$600 worth of labor to assign to that shift.

A good point-of-sale system should be able to provide digestible information.

No more than one-third of that should be for managers (\$200) and the other two-thirds applied to hourly or other salaried workers (\$400).

## What if my costs are too high?

If you find that your labor costs are too high compared to your weekly sales (i.e. over 30 percent on a regular basis), it's probably time to take a hard look at your staffing. You may be scheduling too many employees per shift, or missing opportunities to control costs in three key areas: hiring, training, and career development opportunities.

In the meantime, ask your hourly staff to be sure they aren't clocking in earlier than 15 minutes before their shift, and that they clock out when their shift is truly over, not 15 minutes later when they have all their stuff ready to leave. Paying a single employee for an extra 15 minutes probably doesn't seem like much, but paying every one of your employees each for an extra 15 minutes every day can add up to hundreds of dollars very quickly.

Just be aware: some states require employers to pay hourly staff for time to "set up," particularly when uniforms or other shift change procedures are required, as well as prohibit making employees clock out for breaks and mealtimes. Please consult your local laws and/or your attorney to get more detailed information.

In our next chapter, we begin to walk through specific ways you can amend processes in your restaurant to reduce your labor costs, starting with adjusting **your hiring process**.



## Chapter

# Hiring

It bears repeating — in part because it seems so outrageous, and in part because it should shake every restaurateur to their core: **\$146,000.**

That's the average amount per year a full-service restaurant operator could be spending on replacing full time employees<sup>4</sup>, based on a study conducted by the Center for Hospitality Research at Cornell University, which places the average per-person cost at \$5,864.<sup>5</sup> Seems impossible, right?

Not so. With the turnover rate in the restaurant industry as a whole on the rise once again — to 102.8 percent for full-service hourly employees (and

146.2 percent for limited service)<sup>6</sup> — it's more critical than ever to do whatever you can to buck against this trend.

Of course, staff turnover is a part of business. Employees grow, change, and find other opportunities. But when you consider that replacing each one could cost upwards of 30 percent of their annual salary<sup>7</sup>, every employee you can keep and avoid having to replace is money in your pocket.

In terms of keeping your best and brightest — and avoiding the enormous labor costs involved in unnecessary turnover — there's no better place to start looking for ways to improve retention than at the beginning: in your hiring process. We have five key

ways to ensure you're doing all you can to minimize the high cost of employee churn, and maximize retention over time.

### **Don't focus on hiring less. Hire smarter.**

An impulse some restaurateurs may have when a server or line cook gives notice is to ask, "Do I even need to replace them?" It's tempting to try to make do with fewer people to curb costs, and if you're genuinely overstaffed, that's not a bad question to ask.



But part of looking at your overall labor cost structure is understanding that understaffing can sometimes be as expensive as overstaffing. This is especially true when overtime pay for hourly workers starts to build up and morale inevitably goes down among overextended employees.

It's also important to think less about if you should be hiring, and more about whom. Focusing on hiring smarter is one clear-cut way to help ensure longevity in your staff overall, and more efficiency on a day-to-day basis.

Naturally it's important to find a match for the position's required skill set. But that's not the only consideration that should be going into the hiring process. Think about culture fit, not just experience. Does the candidate seem to feel the pulse of how things are done at your restaurant differently than at others? What's their work style? Are they flexible enough to take the basics of what they've learned elsewhere and apply it with fresh eyes here? Will they be willing to learn how you do things?

On average, managers spend 26 percent of their time managing poor performers.<sup>8</sup> That is a huge distraction from time that your managers — the most expensive people on your staff — could be spending on making your business run better. Getting the right fit from the start saves on that cost as well.

It's also fair to take a moment and ask yourself, "Is the position that's vacant the one you really need filled right now?" Maybe you're not overstaffed on the whole, but your serving staff is in more need than your bussers for another set of hands. Don't be afraid to shift priorities, provided you get feedback from your managers of both front- and back-of-house about where they see the biggest hole in your operation vis-à-vis labor.

## Start from the inside.

In terms of finding that right person, referrals are always a great way to find candidates that come with a recommendation you can trust. That could be from one of your colleagues in the community (restaurant owners need to stick together!) or from an existing employee.

Involving your current staff in the hiring process — through referrals and/or assisting in the interviewing — is smart, if for no other reason than they can be motivated by self-interest to help you find the right person. Your employees honestly have as much at stake as you do in the process. They don't absorb the cost of a bad hire, but they are the ones who are going to have to work alongside them, help train them, and make up for any shortcomings that went unnoticed in the hiring process.

The more employees that return for another season, the more your part-time help will understand expectations and procedures upfront.

Also, ask yourself if it makes sense to promote someone you already have on staff to the open position, and hire instead for the lower-level position. Not only are you

solving an immediate problem (and maybe lightening the recruiting load), but you're also sending a message to your existing employees that you are invested in them. That investment will likely pay dividends in higher morale, more job satisfaction, and a better retention rate (i.e. lower re-hiring costs) for you.

## Have a reserve of reliable part-timers.

Getting part-time or temporary workers up to speed is always a challenge, not simply because your establishment is complicated (and every restaurant is), but because there are so many things you may take for granted as a manager or owner that go uncommunicated until it's too late. Spending time training someone who may only be with you for a few weeks to a few months seems like wasted time — and wasted time is wasted money, as they say.

But the reality is, nearly every restaurant has needs at one time or another for part-time workers. If you build a reliable base of high school and college students, and people for whom occasional, temporary work is beneficial, you can maintain consistency over time.

Part of the challenge is maintaining the lines of communication. Make sure they know you'll be calling them back for the next summer/holiday season/busy weekend. Keep in touch with them occasionally during the off-season so you stay top of mind. The more employees that return for another season, the more your part-time

help will understand expectations and procedures upfront. And the less time your managers will need to spend recruiting instead of focusing on other areas of your operation.

Just be careful not to skip training entirely. Employees that have been away from your establishment for an extended period of time will require a refresher, especially if your processes have changed at all in the past year.

### Pay people what they're worth.

Restaurant workers are some of the lowest paid workers. Even after accounting for demographic differences between restaurant workers and other workers, they have hourly wages (including tips) that are 17.2 percent lower than those of similar workers outside the restaurant industry.<sup>9</sup> It's a matter of much debate in many municipalities, with minimum wage laws shifting toward higher base wages and restaurants having to adapt.

But no matter what the local regulation requires in terms of hourly wages (for tipped and non-tipped staff), restaurateurs need to be aware of what the expectation is in their particular market. Because in a time when the national unemployment rate is hitting record lows in most markets, not paying competitively will cost you money.

"There are so many new jobs in the restaurant industry that there aren't as many workers out there to hire," said Victor

Fernandez, executive director of insights and knowledge at TDn2K, a Dallas-based restaurant research firm.<sup>10</sup>

"That's causing all sorts of problems for restaurants, even as they struggle with wages and fight for customers."



Ultimately, wages are not the only way to retain employees — quality training, supportive management, and career opportunity has a lot to do with your ability to both keep great talent and keep those turnover costs down. But not paying employees what they feel they are worth is a sure way to lose good people to someone who will.

Next, we'll take a look at **training**, and the role it can play in actually lowering your restaurant labor costs in the long *and* short term.



# Training

Improving restaurant labor costs through stronger training comes down to two important elements: efficiency and retention.

Your staff doing their jobs right the first time saves you money. When efficiency and customer service improve, so can profits. If you invest in comprehensive onboard training — and then consistently refresh that training for current employees — you're going to build a solid efficiency across your team and keep your labor costs down overall.

In the restaurant industry, retention is often discussed in terms of avoiding burnout and boosting morale. Morale isn't necessarily about keeping your employees happy at all times. It's more about setting them up to succeed rather than fail. You don't want to

send them down a path to frustration that could ultimately lead to them quitting.

Poor training programs make employees second guess themselves during a shift, and can lead to a reprimand for doing something incorrectly because they weren't properly trained to begin with.

When it comes to creating a stronger training program for your restaurant — one that will help reduce turnover and spiraling labor costs as a result — keep these points in mind.

## **Provide a comprehensive orientation.**

Your training plan needs to have a clear, well-planned structure. This is crucial

for your team's efficiency. Write down measurable goals you would expect your staff to accomplish as part of their jobs. Establish the steps of service, making sure each employee understands their specific responsibilities in any given shift.

**Confidence combined with strong training will mean fewer mistakes and more efficiency — which is a huge moneysaver.**

Be thorough even when the new employee has had experience in other restaurants. Every restaurant's process is unique and you want to make sure you train your new hire specifically on how things are run in your restaurant.

It's far too easy for managers to assume certain tasks are obvious and skip mentioning them during training, but that's how new staff members get lost and make mistakes — mistakes that ultimately cost you money.

That said, your training program should prioritize the most important and complex tasks, the ones that will need more in-depth explanation and examples. That doesn't mean skipping the more straightforward tasks. Just keep in mind what needs extra attention so that your employee will have confidence from the get-go that they're doing their job the correct way.

Confidence combined with strong training will mean fewer mistakes and more efficiency — which is a huge money-saver. It will also decrease the chances of job burnout, which can lead to expensive turnover.

## **Reducing Waste**

Train your staff to correctly prep ingredients and properly prepare your dishes. Accurate food prep will avoid viable product getting thrown away with the scraps — a huge source of waste for any restaurant's bottom line. At the same time, your staff learning to follow recipes accurately will avoid the need to re-fire dishes. This will improve customer satisfaction, as well as use the ingredients in a more cost-effective manner.

## **Checklists for Daily Tasks**

While not directly part of training, having a physical checklist for each shift can help reinforce the lessons taught during training. It allows your staff to double-check their work and start getting into the habit of completing all the tasks you need.

Consider creating multiple checklists depending on the area of the restaurant and what's happening in the shift. For example, you can have a kitchen prep checklist, a front-of-house prep checklist, a pre-opening cleaning checklist, a closing cleaning checklist, and a weekly maintenance checklist with rotating responsibilities.

## Cross Training

Not only will cross-training allow your employees to better understand how the restaurant works as a unit, but it will give you more flexibility for scheduling shifts.

**Understaffing can cost you as much money as overstaffing if you're not careful.**

For instance, let's say you train your kitchen staff on how to be barbacks. If your regular barbacks all call in sick, you still have employees to call on who can fill those roles for a limited time. Just make sure to avoid using cross-training as a crutch: understaffing can cost you as much money as overstaffing if you're not careful.

## Provide ongoing training.

Along with that initial training period with new employees, you should be holding periodic refresher training for current employees. This can help you address any changes, as well as ensure that all employees are on the same page regarding current processes. There are many ways directions can get misinterpreted over weeks or months, so letting your staff have space to relearn your instructions outside of their shifts can be helpful for maintaining the efficiency that helps your bottom line.

You can also work team building into training, which will help maintain morale and increase efficiency. If they trust the people they work with, your employees will be more likely to accept each other's help and overall work more smoothly together.

## Offer career opportunities.

Offering opportunities for your staff to learn a new skill, shadow a manager, and even move up in your establishment seems like a cost in itself — and it is, of course. But it's a cost that can reap dividends over time and ultimately save your restaurant money.

Employees that feel their managers and the business owners are invested in their future will often return that loyalty with a dedication to the future of your restaurant. Lack of career development is the number one reason employees say they leave an organization.<sup>11</sup> It's a perk you can't afford to dismiss if you want to reduce the cost of turnover.

## Hold regular staff meetings.

Making a point of setting regular staff meetings benefits your labor costs in a number of ways. Whether that's weekly, bi-monthly, or once a month depends on your restaurant, but just make sure it's consistent. If you tell your staff that you'll be holding two meetings a month and then don't follow through, this could make employees second-guess your initiative.

Regular staff meetings are an easy way to educate your whole team on menu



changes and any new work policies. In many ways, these meetings are mini-refresher courses in themselves. The goal is to make sure everyone understands policies and procedures, reduce employee errors, and increase efficiency.

Focus on your employees as a team can also be a real morale booster.

The meetings also give your staff a chance to ask questions and engage with each other outside of their shifts. This focus on your employees as a team can also be a real morale booster.

But reducing labor costs isn't all about how you manage employees. As we discuss in the next chapter, your labor costs can also be impacted by **operational changes** you make to improve efficiency.



## Chapter

# 4

# Operational Changes

When it comes to reducing restaurant labor costs, often the focus becomes retention. And yes, retention is huge for the restaurant industry because of how the high turnover rates impact your bottom line.

But, if you're serious about lowering your restaurant's labor costs, an equal focus needs to be placed on efficiency within your operations. Here are five places to streamline operations and improve your labor costs in the process.

### **Review your employee policies.**

Believe it or not, a hidden contributor to high labor costs could be employees cutting corners. Do some of your employees take

extra-long breaks? Do those employees conveniently avoid side work?

You might need to look at your employee policies.

See what can be made more specific in your employee handbook and nail down real consequences for those who break the rules. Having a POS system that records employee hours will also help you keep up on monitoring lost time and address key duties that are being overlooked.

While stricter policies can seem like a morale killer at first glance, ultimately employees thrive on structure, not vagueness. You'll also be making sure all employees are on equal footing and doing their fair share. If your more diligent staff

members keep seeing peers taking extra breaks and skimping on side work, that's what's really going to bring morale down — and may even ultimately cost you an employee or two.



### Revise your dining room flow.

Think about how many (or how few) tables you're splitting between each server in any given shift. You could be creating pockets of underused seating, overstaffing for the sections that don't get used often during slower shifts.

Overstaffing balloons your labor costs, but it also means the server who isn't being assigned to the busy tables won't be able to get strong tips that shift.

Also, adding a station in the dining room where you can organize extra silverware, napkins, small plates, etc., allows your front-of-house staff to easily access extra supplies without having to run all the way to the kitchen. This will help increase efficiency and improve overall service for your guests.

Consider your kitchen's layout as well. If you can put corresponding stations next to each other (and cross-train your cooks for those stations), you can let one person handle both stations for the slower shifts. Just make sure the shift really is slow enough to allow that cook to manage both tasks at once.

### Optimize your floor plan.

Is your dining room and bar the most efficient it can be? Inefficient seating charts can make your servers' lives much harder as they try to navigate awkward paths to and from the kitchen. Slowing down servers and bussers with awkward dining room flow could make you think you need to staff more employees per shift, but a simple reevaluation of your seating placement can do wonders for efficiency.

The same thing applies to the kitchen. While many parts of your kitchen can't be moved without major renovations, look to see if there are any movable stations that might work better if you reconfigure them.

## Invest in effective equipment.

If your staff doesn't have the right tools, they won't be able to do their jobs properly.

Whether it's purchasing a mandoline for your produce prep work or upgrading your POS system, you'll be giving your employees what they need to be more effective. This will aid in cooks and servers getting dishes right the first time, provide guests with better experiences, and relieve a lot of headaches for your staff.

**Bloated restaurant menus actually slow down the ordering process ... and reduce the amount of table turns you can get through in a shift.**

Similarly, make sure you've organized your walk-in cooler in a way that makes sense for everyone. Your back-of-house staff shouldn't have to spend five minutes in the walk-in trying to figure out where someone put the eggs. Group ingredients together (while still avoiding cross-contamination) and keep that organization consistent so your employees can quickly grab what they need every time they enter the walk-in.

If a particular item is used very frequently in a particular location, consider smaller refrigeration units on or near the line to store those must-grab items.

## Evaluate your menu.

For many restaurateurs, there's this instinct to build up a huge menu, pulling in a wide variety of items for their guests. After all, you want to provide your customers with as many options as possible so they'll be completely happy with their choice, right?

Unfortunately, that tactic can actually hurt your business more than it helps. Bloated restaurant menus actually slow down the ordering process, add more touchpoints for your servers, and reduce the amount of table turns you can get through in a shift. All of that costs you money at the end of a shift.

A huge menu is also a strain on your back-of-house staff. If your menu features too many different items, it takes extra training for your kitchen staff to learn each and every recipe. It also creates a situation where you have to have more kitchen staff on duty just to execute the large menu well.

As a matter of efficiency for both servers and cooks alike, trim down your menu to a reasonable size with items that make sense together. It's a great first start in making your labor more efficient.



## Conclusion

# The labor market is changing.

Labor remains problem number one for the restaurant industry. Consumer confidence may be strong, but some of the conditions driving improvement for workers are having an inverse effect on management needs within the restaurant industry, leading to a competition for the best workers.

“Restaurants are competing with each other for talent, and it goes beyond restaurants that look like your restaurant,” said Victor Fernandez. “People don’t get up in the morning and say, ‘I’m going to look for a job in a QSR restaurant.’ Around 56 percent of restaurants say their primary competition for hourly employees comes from within the segment, and 37 percent say it’s restaurants across all segments.”<sup>12</sup>

The common threads driving employee moves are no longer work situations, but a better wage offer, a promotion, or richer benefits. Perks matter more than ever, no matter whether you are a quick serve or full-service restaurant.

One thing you can count on is that we will not see labor concerns vanish — or even diminish — for the restaurant industry. But how your business faces those concerns makes a difference. Positive action is what will divide those that merely survive from those who thrive in the future.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>8</sup> "Survey: Managers spend 26% of their time coaching bad employees" – TheLadders.com
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- <sup>11</sup> "Career Development Is Top Priority for Employers Seeking to Retain Talent:" – Chicagotribune.com
- <sup>12</sup> "3 Answers to Restaurants' Most Vexing Labor Problems" – Restaurantbusinessonline.com



**“The reporting we get on a monthly basis includes all the reviews from the customers who I know actually ate in the restaurant. Rewards Network gives us the ability as operators to change ... It really is a great tool to help us monetize — we make money with these reports.”**

**— Michael Schatzberg, Owner**  
*Branded Restaurants, New York, NY*  
*Rewards Network client since 2006*

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**[restaurants@rewardsnetwork.com](mailto:restaurants@rewardsnetwork.com)**

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