

2026 Culinary & Hospitality

WORKFORCE PLAYBOOK

How to Recruit, Train & Retain Top Talent

Gecko
Hospitality



WHAT'S INSIDE?

- ✓ **Effective job listing strategies** that cut through the noise and attract career-minded candidates
- ✓ **Structured onboarding systems** that turn day-one hires into productive team members faster
- ✓ **Career path frameworks** that give staff compelling reasons to grow with you, not your competitors
- ✓ **Management training approaches** to help avoid common pitfalls that can undermine your team
- ✓ **Retention strategies** that can reduce turnover and fuel long-term engagement

This playbook delivers practical tools and proven frameworks to help you recruit, train, and keep the kind of talent that drives real results in today's competitive market.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Competition for culinary and hospitality talent is as intense as ever — but for organizations that can master workforce development, the payoff is substantial.

This playbook, developed by Gecko Hospitality through a blend of deep industry research and hands-on experience, gives professionals actionable strategies to build stronger, more stable teams in 2026 and beyond. Whether you're hiring for a single location or managing talent across multiple properties, the guidance here is designed to help you move from reactive staffing to proactive team-building.



TOP FIVE INSIGHTS

- 1. Hospitality Sets the Standard in Hiring Transparency**
The hospitality industry leads in progressive hiring practices, with 59% including pay ranges in job postings and 34% eliminating degree requirements¹
- 2. Time Is the Biggest Obstacle to Reskilling**
Two-thirds of employees need new skills to succeed,² but nearly 80% cite lack of time as their primary barrier to development³
- 3. Poor Management Drives Employee Turnover**
Poor management soft skills are the second-biggest source of workplace stress; 96% of employees saying they'd consider leaving over it⁴
- 4. Learning Culture Directly Boosts Profit & Loyalty**
Investment in training shows direct impact: operations with strong learning cultures see customer loyalty increase by 10% and profitability rise by 23%⁵
- 5. Internal Mobility Improves Long-Term Retention**
Businesses that prioritize internal promotion and clear career paths see significant improvements in long-term retention⁶

ROI AT A GLANCE

- ✓ Estimated average cost to replace an hourly employee: \$9,089⁷
- ✓ Estimated cost to replace a management position: \$19,394⁸
- ✓ Annual restaurant turnover rate, 10-year average: 81.46%⁹
- ✓ Benefit of strong training culture: 57% higher retention¹⁰



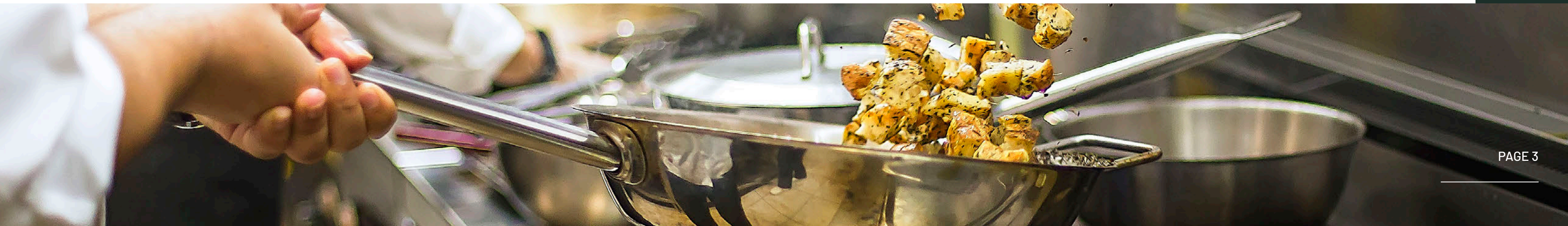
THE HIGH-STAKES TABLE:

Why Workforce Strategy Matters More Than Ever

The landscape of culinary and hospitality workforce management continues to evolve. While the intense “war for talent” that marked the early 2020s may have cooled somewhat, workers still hold significant leverage in today’s job market. As the restaurant and foodservice industry prepares to add around 100,000 jobs this year, nearly half of operators report strong competition for qualified talent.¹¹ **For forward-thinking organizations, this presents a challenge—and an opportunity.**

81.46% average annual turnover at restaurants in the last decade¹²

Getting workforce strategy wrong can be expensive. Over the past ten years, **restaurants have experienced average annual turnover of 81.46%,¹² with the estimated average cost to recruit and train a new employee estimated at \$9,000¹³—and climbing to nearly \$20,000 for management positions.¹⁴** And those numbers don’t even capture the ripple effects: team burnout, inconsistent guest experiences, and the constant drain of time spent refilling the same roles.



—
**DID YOU
KNOW?**



4%

The accommodation and food service sector has had the highest quit rate of any industry since 2021, regularly topping 4%.¹⁵

77%

of organizations experienced difficulty recruiting for full-time positions in 2024.¹⁶

47%

of HR professionals say recruiting is becoming more difficult compared to the previous year.¹⁷

BUT THERE'S GOOD NEWS:

Organizations taking a more strategic approach to workforce development are seeing serious gains. The key lies in adopting what we call the

THREE PILLARS APPROACH

→ **EFFECTIVE RECRUITMENT**

Attracting candidates who want more than just a job

→ **STRATEGIC TRAINING**

Building skills and creating clear growth pathways

→ **THOUGHTFUL RETENTION**

Fostering an environment where people want to stay

THESE PILLARS DON'T OPERATE IN ISOLATION.

Strong recruitment reduces training strain. Smart training boosts retention. And when retention is high, culture improves — which in turn draws stronger candidates. Done right, this creates a flywheel effect that turns workforce management from a constant headache into a real strategic advantage.

This playbook draws from deep industry research and real-world success stories to deliver practical strategies for each pillar. Whether you're managing a single location or leading a multi-unit group, you'll find tools, frameworks, and insights to help you build the kind of team that fuels long-term success in the demanding world of culinary and hospitality.

EFFECTIVE RECRUITMENT:

Building a Talent Pipeline That Delivers

With the restaurant and foodservice industry poised to add 100,000 jobs this year,¹⁸ hiring managers face a complex challenge. Traditional recruitment approaches that worked in the past are showing diminishing returns, and nearly half of operators report that competition for qualified candidates remains intense.

67%

of organizations say it's very or somewhat difficult to fill hourly service positions.¹⁹

60%

of organizations say their biggest recruiting challenge is a lack of applicants.²⁰

If your hiring strategy is limited to just job postings and hope, it's time to rethink the approach. Organizations must move from reactive hiring to building intentional strategies that attract career-minded professionals ready to grow with your team.



UNDERSTANDING THE RECRUITMENT LANDSCAPE

The challenges of recruiting in the culinary and hospitality industry remain significant, even as some pressures have eased.

While 77% of organizations experienced difficulty recruiting for full-time positions in 2024—down from 91% in 2022—nearly half of HR professionals report that recruiting is becoming more challenging compared to the previous year.²¹ **This seeming contradiction suggests that while the overall volume of applications may be increasing, finding the right candidates remains a persistent challenge.**

Traditional tactics are falling short. Strategies that once worked reliably are now less effective, prompting employers to rethink how they attract the next generation of talent.

INDUSTRY TREND TO WATCH

Hiring for hourly service workers has dropped out of the top 10 most difficult positions to fill (down from third place in 2022). However, 67% of organizations still report it being somewhat or very difficult to fill these positions, suggesting the need for continued focus on effective recruitment strategies.²²



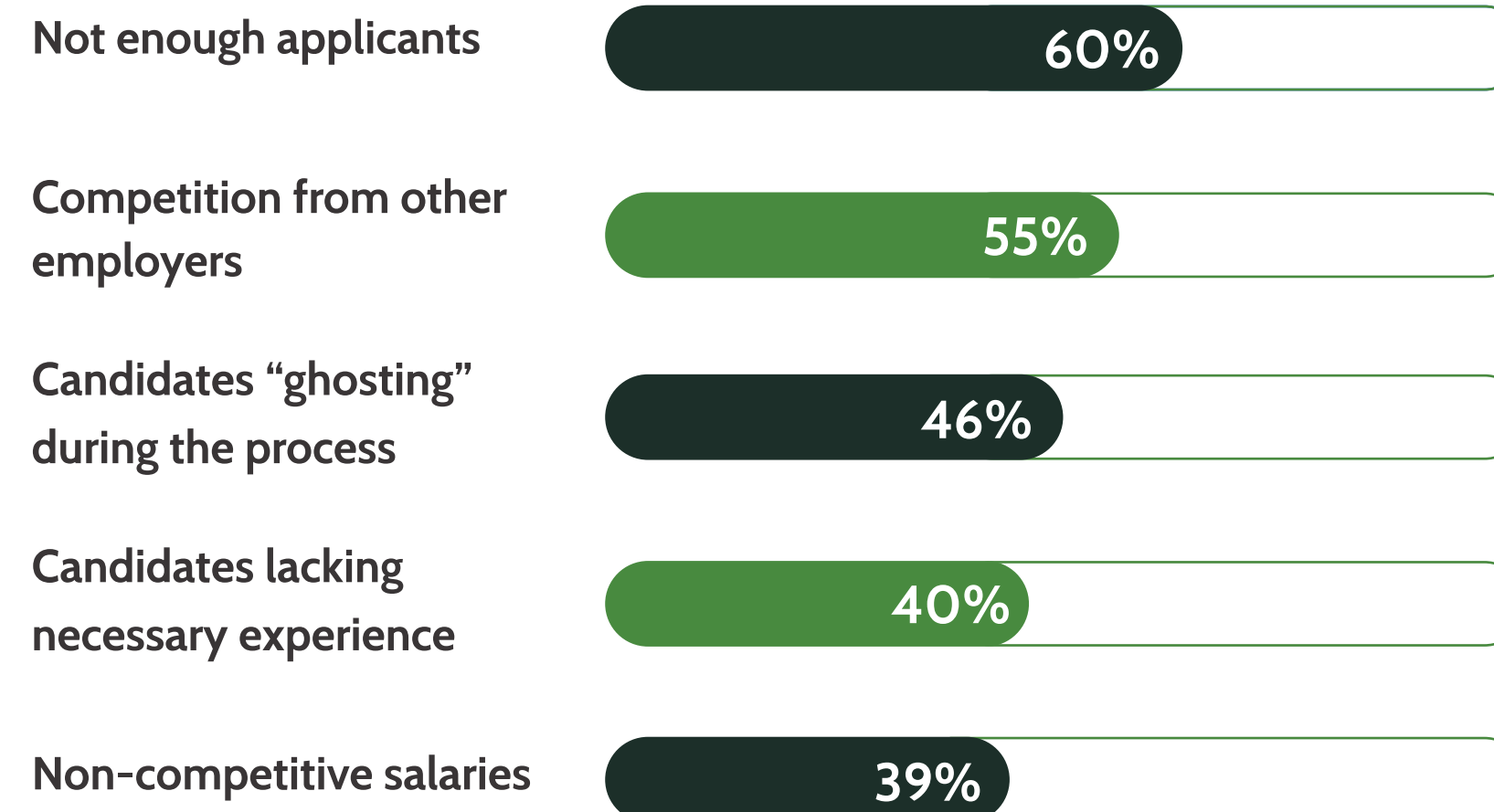
WHAT'S MAKING RECRUITMENT DIFFICULT?



Understanding the current challenges is the first step toward addressing them.

Recent industry research has identified several key factors that are making recruitment particularly challenging in today's market.

TOP 5 RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES²³



NOTICE A TREND?

Four out of five of these challenges suggest that job seekers still have the upper hand. That means employers need to sharpen their pitch and think creatively about what they offer—and how they communicate it.

CREATING COMPELLING JOB LISTINGS

Your job listing is often a candidate's first impression of your organization. Make it count!

The best listings balance clarity and inspiration: they speak to qualified candidates and encourage promising applicants who are still building their experience.

DEFINE CLEAR ROLE EXPECTATIONS

Even for seasonal roles, taking the time to define what success looks like can pay dividends. It helps attract candidates who are not only qualified but aligned with your team's values and expectations. Think beyond daily tasks—focus on what qualities make someone thrive at your organization.

PRO TIP: WRITING JOB DESCRIPTIONS THAT CONVERT

- Lead with impact rather than tasks (“Help create memorable dining experiences” vs. “Serve food and beverages”)
- Include both “must-have” and “nice-to-have” qualifications to encourage promising candidates
- Highlight growth opportunities explicitly (“potential for advancement to lead line cook within 12 months”)
- Use industry-specific keywords that demonstrate your expertise
- Keep technical requirements focused on what's truly necessary for day-one success

— FOREGROUND GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES



Career-focused candidates care deeply about advancement—and they're screening for it.

Organizations that clearly map out potential career growth attract higher-quality applicants and see better acceptance rates. But it's not enough to say "there's room to grow." Be specific. Show where the path leads—and how to get there.

EFFECTIVE WAYS TO SHOWCASE GROWTH POTENTIAL INCLUDE:

- Detailed career progression paths
- Education and development programs
- Mentorship opportunities
- Examples of internal promotions
- Clear timelines for advancement

OFFERING COMPETITIVE COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

While pay still matters, forward-thinking employers are looking beyond wages to craft a more compelling offer. Research shows that **competitive compensation often pays for itself through lower turnover, stronger performance, and a smoother guest experience.**

THE ROI OF COMPETITIVE WAGES

Higher wages don't just boost morale—they can often drive real financial returns. Reduced turnover alone can save organizations substantial amounts in recruiting and training costs, while higher-quality service can support premium pricing strategies.

THE ROI OF HIGHER WAGES

Higher-paid employees can save money (and even increase revenue) through:



Improved efficiency resulting from longer tenured employees



Enhanced quality justifying premium pricing



Increased customer satisfaction driving repeat business



Reduced turnover saving replacement costs (\$9K to \$20K per employee) ^{24,25}

BENEFITS THAT MOVE THE NEEDLE

Today's employees are weighing more than just pay.

Flexible schedules, access to meals, instant pay, and education perks are just a few examples of benefits that meaningfully influence where people choose to work—and how long they stay.

THE MOST IMPACTFUL BENEFITS OFTEN INCLUDE:

- Health insurance and retirement packages
- Flexible scheduling options
- Free or discounted shift meals
- Paid time off, including sick leave
- Instant pay access options
- Education and development opportunities

DID YOU KNOW?²⁶

The hospitality industry leads in several progressive hiring practices:

59%

voluntarily include pay ranges in job postings (vs. 45% across industries)

34%

have eliminated college degree requirements (vs. 24%)

18%

actively seek international talent (vs. 8%)

BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE



The restaurant and foodservice industry employs one of the most diverse workforces in the American economy; 50% of employees are minorities, compared to 38% in the total U.S. employed labor force.²⁷ This diversity can be a significant strength, but only if your culture supports it.

Inclusion goes beyond policy – it's about daily practices that make every employee feel valued and empowered.

MAKING INCLUSION REAL

Creating an inclusive workplace takes more than just stating good intentions. Successful organizations take concrete steps to ensure their recruitment and workplace practices support diversity at every level. This commitment must be visible in everything from job descriptions to management practices.

Effective inclusion strategies often include:

- Using inclusive language in all communications
- Showcasing diverse leadership in recruitment materials
- Creating explicit policies supporting different backgrounds and perspectives
- Building partnerships with diverse community organizations
- Implementing bias-awareness training for hiring managers

CULTURE AS A RECRUITMENT TOOL



Popular burger chain In-N-Out frequently ranks very high among fast-food restaurants in employee satisfaction, and much of that boils down to the positive workplace culture and focus on training and flexible scheduling. Employees report that they're treated with respect, and the company sponsors events like annual trips, social sports play, and summer picnics.

According to Glassdoor statistics, 91% of employees at In-N-Out would recommend it to a friend.²⁸ Their success stems from creating a culture of respect, providing clear advancement paths, and offering meaningful benefits—proving that when you build a great place to work, recruitment becomes easier.

The most successful organizations recognize that effective recruitment is about more than just filling open positions—it's about building a foundation for long-term success. By taking a strategic approach to job listings, compensation, and workplace culture, employers can attract the kind of talent that drives sustainable growth in the demanding world of culinary and hospitality services.

FIVE QUICK WINS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR HIRING PROCESS

Ready to start attracting better talent? These five straightforward changes can translate into quick wins for your hiring process.

Effective inclusion strategies often include:

- 1.** Lead with impact in job descriptions (“Help create memorable dining experiences” vs. “Serve food and beverages”)
- 2.** Clearly outline growth paths and advancement opportunities in your job postings
- 3.** Include both “must-have” and “nice-to-have” qualifications to widen your talent pool
- 4.** Highlight competitive compensation and standout benefits like flexible scheduling or instant pay access
- 5.** Showcase your inclusive culture through diverse leadership examples and inclusive language



STRATEGIC TRAINING:

Investing in Your Most Valuable Asset

In an industry where the average cost to replace an employee can exceed \$9,000²⁹, effective training isn't just about skill development—it's a strategic investment. **Yet too many organizations still rely on informal, inconsistent methods that lead to knowledge gaps, operational missteps, and avoidable turnover.** A more intentional approach to training can transform that cost into a high-return asset.

70%

of workers say learning increases their connection to their organization³⁰

57%

increase in retention at organizations with strong learning culture³¹

80%

of workers say they don't have enough time to develop new skills³²





THE EVOLUTION OF CULINARY TRAINING

INDUSTRY TREND TO WATCH

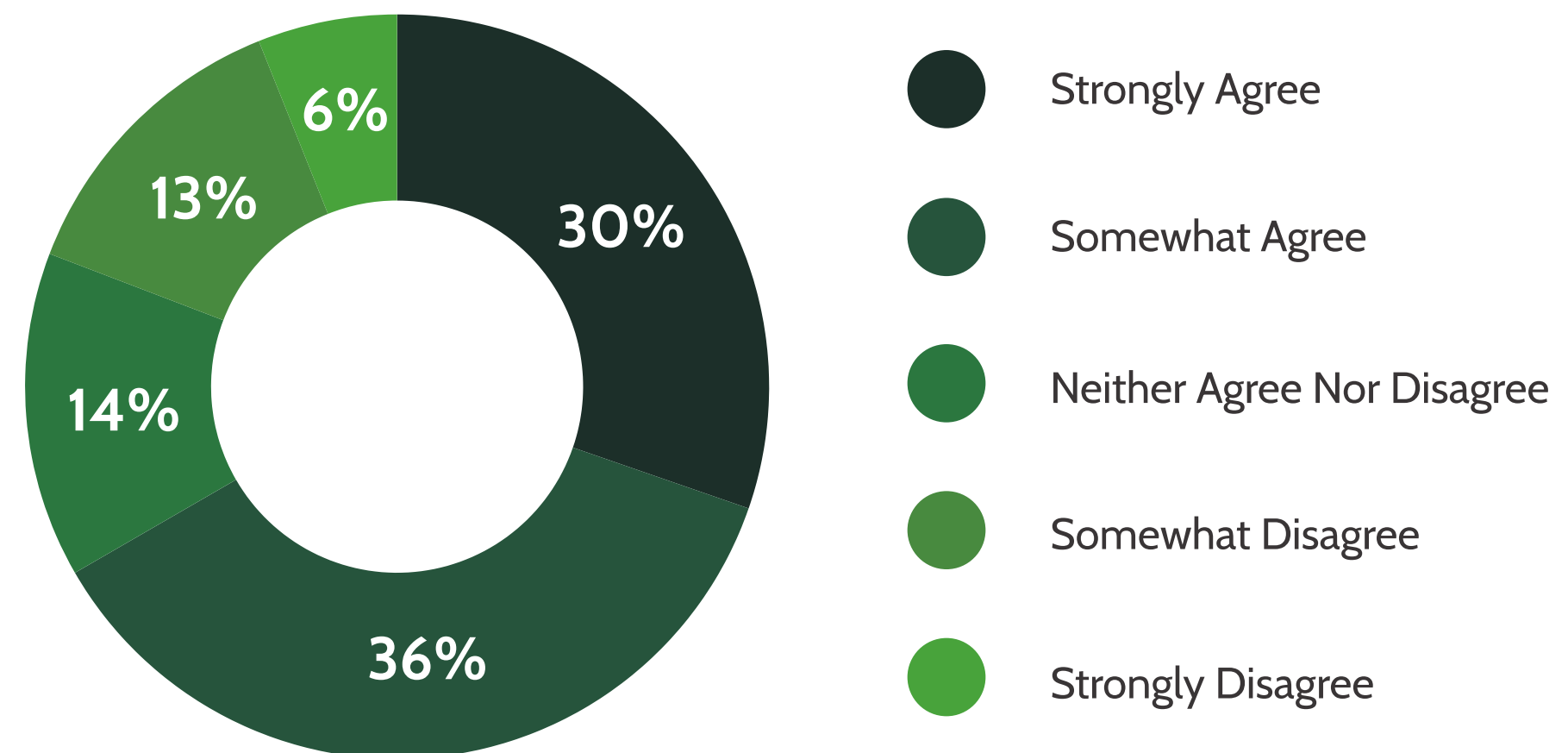
Two-thirds of employees say they need new skills to thrive in their current roles. Yet nearly 80% say time, not resources, is the main barrier. That means carving out space for learning may matter more than increasing budgets.³³

The classic path—culinary school followed by industry work—is no longer the default. Many professionals now enter the industry through nontraditional routes, learning on the job and seeking training in real time. This shift opens new doors but also raises the bar for employers: you need to train for both today's needs and tomorrow's growth.

Even experienced employees, while masters of their craft, may not have developed the teaching skills necessary to effectively pass on their knowledge. This gap between knowing and teaching can create a bottleneck in skill development across an organization.

WORKERS RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING SKILLS³⁴

I need to develop new skills in order to be successful at my job...



CREATING EFFECTIVE ONBOARDING SYSTEMS

“Put on this apron and shadow George for a day” doesn’t cut it anymore. Today’s operations demand onboarding that’s structured, replicable, and aligned with your brand standards. Done right, onboarding reduces early turnover, boosts performance, and sets the tone for a healthy workplace culture.

EMPHASIZE STANDARDIZED PROCESSES

Documentation and consistency are key to successful onboarding. When every trainer follows the same process and covers the same material, new hires receive reliable information and clear performance expectations. This standardization helps prevent bad habits and ensures all essential skills are covered.

PRO TIP: FIRST WEEK SUCCESS

Schedule brief daily check-ins with new hires during their first week. This simple practice can identify confusion early, demonstrate support, and dramatically improve training outcomes. Keep these meetings focused and efficient—15 minutes is often enough.

CORE COMPONENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE ONBOARDING PROGRAM SHOULD ENCOMPASS:

- Detailed written procedures and checklists
- Structured mentor relationships
- Regular progress check-ins
- Clear performance expectations
- Documentation of mastered skills

ESSENTIAL SKILLS TRAINING

Professional kitchens and dining rooms demand more than just technical know-how—they require coordination, awareness, and excellent communication. A well-rounded training program builds both competence and confidence.

BACK OF HOUSE FUNDAMENTALS

Your kitchen is only as strong as your team's execution. Training should cover the must-have skills—knife work, food safety, equipment handling—but also how each role fits into the broader operation. Communication and coordination are just as critical as cooking.

Key areas of focus should include:

- Culinary expertise appropriate to your menu
- Proper knife skills and safety protocols
- Equipment operation and maintenance
- Menu knowledge and plating standards
- Kitchen communication and coordination
- Food safety and sanitation procedures

FRONT OF HOUSE EXCELLENCE

Great service doesn't happen by accident. It takes preparation. Front-of-house staff should be trained to deliver seamless, confident guest experiences—even in high-pressure moments. That means going beyond charm to build real skill.

Essential front-of-house training elements include:

- Menu knowledge, including ingredients and allergens
- Service timing and guest interaction protocols
- POS system operation
- Conflict resolution techniques
- Wine and beverage service (where applicable)

MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT



Promoting your best cook or most reliable server into management doesn't always yield great leadership.

New managers often struggle without targeted leadership training – especially in areas like communication, feedback, and team support. These gaps can quietly derail your culture.

DID YOU KNOW?

Poor management soft skills rank as the second-biggest source of workplace stress, with 96% of employees saying they'd consider leaving an organization if their manager doesn't prioritize team well-being.³⁵

We'll touch on the soft skills employees *wish* their managers had in the next section on employee retention.

CAREER PATH DEVELOPMENT

Organizations with strong learning cultures see 57% higher retention rates than those without.³⁶

This underscores the importance of creating clear career paths that show employees their potential for growth within your organization. Career development isn't just about employee satisfaction—it's about building your next generation of leaders.

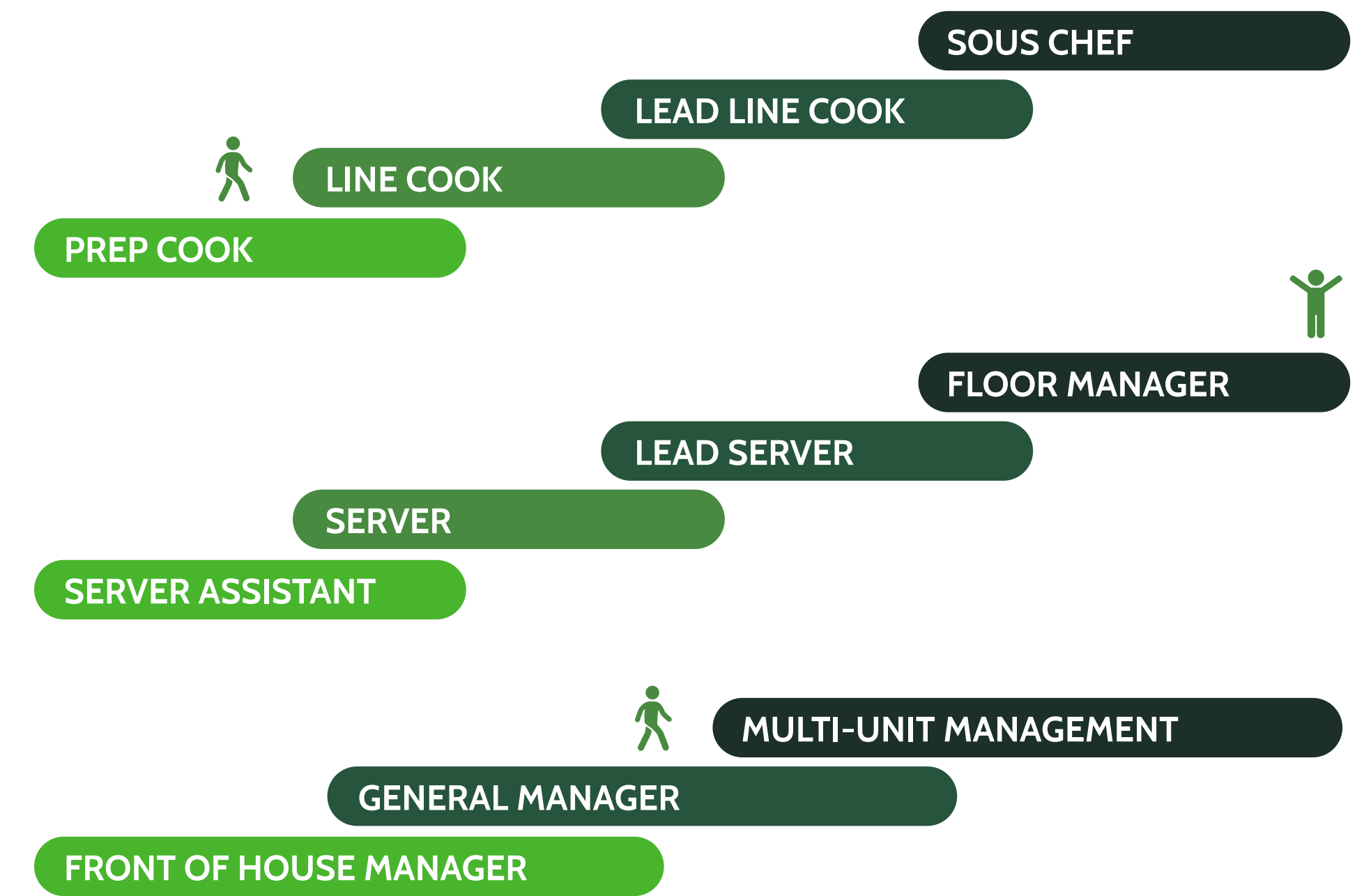
DOCUMENTING GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Clear, visible career paths help employees picture a future with your organization—and motivate them to grow toward it. This includes both vertical promotion opportunities and lateral moves that broaden skills and experiences. The key is to make those paths tangible: **specific milestones, clear expectations, and achievable timelines.**

PRO TIP: MAKING CAREER

Don't just show employees where they could go—show them how to get there. Use detailed skill checklists and timelines to turn abstract “paths” into concrete goals that employees can pursue with confidence.

SAMPLE CAREER PROGRESSION



CONTINUOUS LEARNING APPROACHES

The impact of learning extends far beyond skill development. Organizations that invest in it see stronger engagement, better productivity, and higher profitability. **A full 70% of workers say learning improves their connection to their organization, while 80% report that learning adds purpose to their work.**³⁷

STRUCTURED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Great learning programs don't happen by accident. They're built into the operation. That means mixing formal training with real-world application—and making learning doable in the middle of a busy shift. Think short workshops, cross-training, and manager development tracks that fit into the rhythm of your business.

MENTORSHIP THAT WORKS

Mentorship isn't just about pairing a new hire with a veteran. To be effective, it needs structure. That means clear expectations, regular check-ins, and mutual support for both mentors and mentees. When done right, mentorship accelerates growth *and* strengthens culture.

PRO TIP: TIME MANAGEMENT FOR TRAINING

With 80% of employees citing lack of time as the biggest barrier to skill-building³⁸, time-smart strategies make all the difference:

- Break training into small, digestible segments
- Use slow periods to focus on skill-building
- Create “learning shifts” where development is the main goal
- Integrate learning into daily operations with structured feedback loops

The investment in training might feel significant, but compared to the cost of turnover and performance issues, it's a bargain. Strong training doesn't just build skills—it creates the kind of team that delivers better results, stronger culture, and more consistent guest satisfaction.



CHECKLIST:

BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE ONBOARDING & TRAINING PROGRAM

The most effective employee development programs take a structured approach to onboarding and training. Does your development strategy hit these key elements?

- ✓ Create standardized onboarding processes with written procedures and skill checklists
- ✓ Assign mentors for new hires and schedule regular check-ins
- ✓ Segment training into shorter, digestible modules that employees can tackle during slow periods or learning shifts
- ✓ Cover both hard skills (knife safety, POS operation) and soft skills (communication, guest service)
- ✓ Incorporate continuous learning strategies like cross-training, mentorship, and micro-learning to support long-term growth

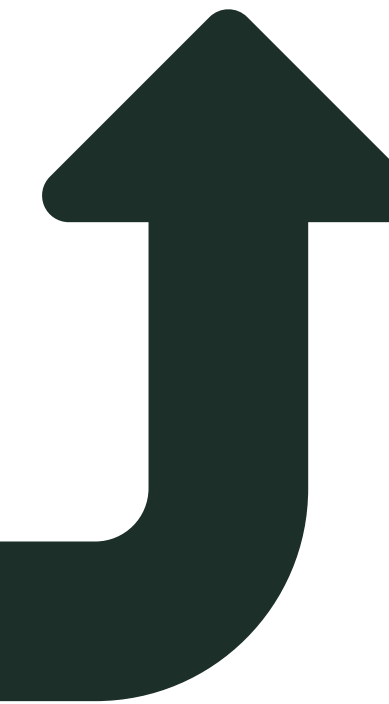
THOUGHTFUL RETENTION:

Earning Your Team's Engagement

The best recruiting and training strategies won't deliver lasting results if you can't keep the talent you've developed. **Nearly half of organizations say retention remains a major challenge,**³⁹ which suggests that even well-meaning efforts often miss the mark. To truly understand why employees stay—or leave—you have to look beyond surface-level metrics and explore how workplace culture, growth opportunities, and employee well-being all intersect.

ORGANIZATIONS OVERVALUE...

Formal well-being programs
Organization brand/reputation



ORGANIZATIONS UNDERVALUE...

Manageable workload
Quality of coworkers



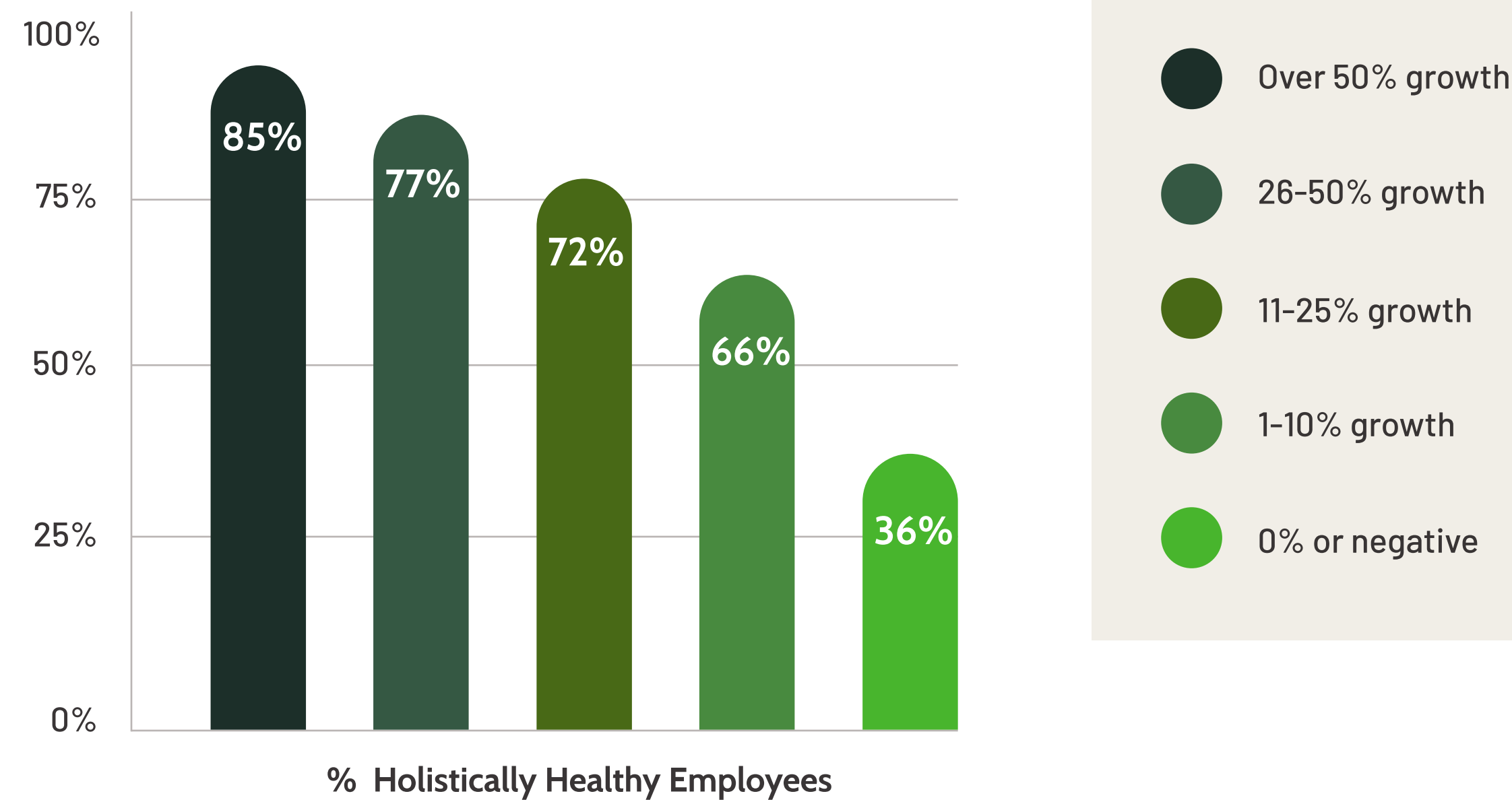
THE SCIENCE OF STAFF RETENTION



Recent research reveals a striking correlation between employee well-being and organizational success; employers who genuinely care for their employees' holistic health—encompassing mental, financial, physical, and social well-being—see dramatically better outcomes across all key metrics.

This isn't just about making people feel good. The data shows a clear connection between employee well-being and revenue growth. **Organizations experiencing more than 50% annual growth are significantly more likely to have holistically healthy employees (85%) compared to those with no or negative growth (36%).**⁴⁰ This pattern holds steady across growth brackets, suggesting a strong relationship between employee well-being and business performance.

HOLISTIC HEALTH LINKS TO GROWTH⁴¹



WHAT REALLY DRIVES DEPARTURES

While conventional wisdom often focuses primarily on compensation, studies have revealed some surprising disconnects between what employees value and what HR professionals believe matters most. While both groups align on the importance of job security, fair pay, and work culture, substantial gaps emerge in other areas.

HR professionals tend to significantly overestimate the importance of formal well-being programs and organizational brand reputation. **Meanwhile, they underestimate the impact of manageable workloads and quality colleagues.**⁴² This misalignment suggests that many retention efforts may be focusing on the wrong priorities.



INDUSTRY TREND TO WATCH

The PwC Global Workforce Hopes and Fears Survey identified significant gaps between what workers value and what they actually receive:⁴³

- 82% say fair pay is very/extremely important; only 57% feel they receive it
- 74% prioritize fulfilling work; 62% find their work fulfilling
- 65% value flexibility; 62% say their job provides it



CREATING SUSTAINABLE WORK ENVIRONMENTS



The hospitality industry is known for demanding work, but that doesn't mean balance is out of reach.

Forward-thinking organizations are proving that it's possible to uphold high standards while supporting the well-being of their teams. It's not about lowering expectations—it's about building a system people can sustain.

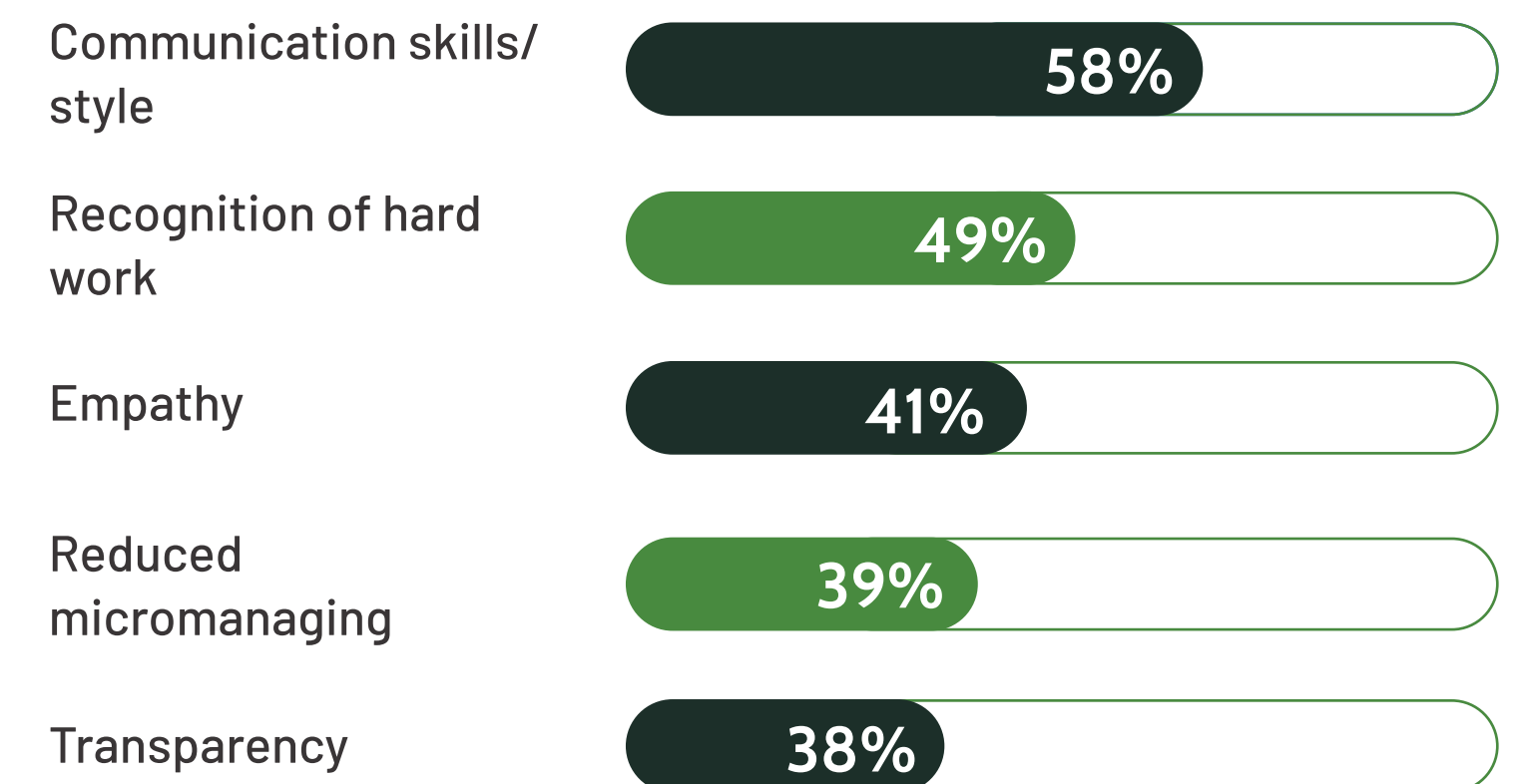
THE MANAGER EFFECT

Few factors impact retention more than the quality of management. Harvard Business Review research shows that poor soft skills among managers are the second-biggest source of workplace stress. Even more telling? A full 96% of workers say they'd consider quitting if their manager doesn't prioritize team well-being.⁴⁴

What specific skills do employees want to see in their managers? **The data is clear.**

MOST DESIRED MANAGEMENT SKILLS

These are the top five skills employees wish their managers would improve.⁴⁵



BEYOND TRADITIONAL BENEFITS

Benefits like health insurance and retirement plans still matter—but they're no longer enough. Today's employees also value immediate, tangible support like flexible schedules, paid time off, and even access to their pay when they need it. Forward-thinking employers are reimagining their benefit packages to meet these evolving needs.



PRO TIP: RETHINKING RECOGNITION

Traditional employee recognition programs often miss the mark. Instead of generic “employee of the month” awards, consider offering:

- Unique skill development opportunities or training certifications
- Preferred scheduling options or extra time off
- Other non-monetary benefits, like gift cards, access to local events, or free meals

These rewards directly support career growth and well-being while incentivizing employee performance.

THE LEARNING CONNECTION



Learning culture and retention go hand in hand. Organizations with strong development programs don't just keep more employees—they promote more from within and create more internal mobility. According to LinkedIn data, these organizations see 57% higher retention, 23% more internal moves, and 7% more promotions into management.⁴⁶

This connection becomes even more significant when examining employees considering job changes. Among workers likely to switch jobs in the near future:

- 67% cite skill development opportunities as a key factor in their decision
- 51% believe their required job skills will change substantially in the next five years⁴⁷

These findings suggest that robust learning and development programs aren't just nice-to-have perks—they're essential tools for retention in an evolving industry.

MAKING TIME FOR DEVELOPMENT

Time—not motivation—is the biggest obstacle to ongoing learning. Four out of five employees say they want to build new skills, but can't find the time.⁴⁸ Smart organizations are solving this by weaving development into daily operations, instead of treating it as a separate “nice-to-have.”

Key areas of focus should include:

- Structured mentorship programs that connect experienced staff with newer team members
- Cross-training initiatives that expand skills while providing operational flexibility
- Regular skills workshops scheduled during naturally slower periods
- Micro-learning opportunities integrated into daily operations

The most effective retention strategies recognize that keeping great employees requires more than just competitive pay or traditional benefits. **It demands creating an environment where people can grow professionally while maintaining personal well-being.** Organizations that succeed in this challenge don't just reduce turnover—they build the kind of stable, experienced teams that drive long-term success in the demanding world of hospitality.

TOP FIVE RETENTION STRATEGIES THAT ACTUALLY WORK

You work hard to build the right team; protect that investment with retention strategies that actually deliver. Here are five key steps you can take to foster a work environment that employees will love.

- ☑ Train managers on communication, empathy, recognition, and reducing micromanagement
- ☑ Align career path development with tangible milestones and clear advancement timelines
- ☑ Offer meaningful, flexible benefits (like instant pay, flexible scheduling, and wellness support)
- ☑ Embed skill development into daily operations—not as “extra work” but part of the flow
- ☑ Foster a culture of appreciation with meaningful recognition, not generic “employee of the month” awards

Get in touch with our team for more information on partnering with Gecko Hospitality and building your culinary talent pipeline.

READY TO ENERGIZE YOUR RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING?

Contact Gecko Hospitality to build your custom workforce solution today.

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FOOTNOTES

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