

# Warm workplace relationships: how to retain hospitality employees

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This article addresses the significance of workplace social connections for hospitality workers. When examining high turnover in hospitality, the focus is generally negative, such as shift work and low pay [1]. Surprisingly, for a sector that employs one in 11 people [2], little attention focuses on the positive aspects. In New Zealand, hospitality work is considered inferior, to be endured while waiting for more exciting opportunities [3]. Yet a recent New Zealand study shows that hospitality employees at all levels are fulfilled by being recognised as professionals and from the variety, challenge and growth possibilities of their work. The study drew from boundaryless career theory about the social competencies that enable career success for individuals [4]:

- knowing 'why' they are engaged in this career (individual motivation and identity);
- knowing 'how' they are supposed to perform (skills and expertise); and
- knowing 'who' – significant networks (relationships and reputation).

In the qualitative study, data were firstly collected through focus groups with hospitality professionals who had left the industry after working there for at least 10 years. Then, interviews took place with current hospitality employees in a variety of roles, from general manager to kitchen porter with an average of 25 years' experience. Thematic analysis was carried out separately on each study before results were combined.

## Findings

Positive relationships linked to career social competencies [4] forged hospitality workers' professional identities, building long careers:

### 1. *Good relationships supported workers' professional identity*

The findings showed that participants knew clearly 'why' they stayed; for example, they loved meeting different people. However, career motivations changed with their life and career stage – sometimes caregiving commitments took priority; at other times, gaining promotion was most important. One housekeeping supervisor explained how she refused a pay rise to move to another hotel because the money was not as important as established relationships. Being viewed as an excellent kitchen porter or manager ensured that employers tailored jobs to employees' circumstances.

## 2. *Being professionally excellent was deeply satisfying*

Knowing ‘how’ referred to the expertise that experienced employees demonstrated to managers and co-workers. They were dedicated, knowledgeable and passionate. Affirmation by guests was rewarding; one restaurant manager described her intense satisfaction when professional associations rebooked their Christmas functions because “I will look after them”.

## 3. *Relationships and reputation*

Employees gained their reputation by showing ‘the right people’ that they were professionals. Their experience and networks were their ‘pedigree’. Endorsement from peers and managers increased job autonomy and better opportunities at all levels. Mentoring relationships formed organically, and older employees spoke of the enjoyment they experienced from ‘giving back’ in their turn and mentoring others.

## **Practical implications**

This study reveals that strong social connections are founded on respectful relationships between hospitality employers and employees, where workers know they are valued. Employers should ask whether career aspirations are the driving force for individuals, and if so, let employees know there is a plan for their next position. If unable to provide further development over time, managers should facilitate moves among their networks. In turn, they will receive new recruits. To keep professionals who are content to remain at their current level, employers should ask, and provide, what is important to them – certain shifts, a sustainable lifestyle (i.e. a living wage) or an aspect they enjoy. Upskilling remains an important motivator.

Employees *do not* stay with employers (and co-workers) who show no respect by refusing to put rosters online; giving less than one weeks’ notice of shifts; providing insufficient hours; or not accommodating workers’ study or care-giving commitments. Training plans for new team members accelerate good relationships, and studies show that retention of new employees is increased by induction processes; however, these are frequently missing. In sum, good social relations in the workplace are not a ‘luxury’ option in hospitality environments, they are essential.

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