

Solving SA's hospitality skills shortage: Service is the key to resolution

 By [Guy Stehlik](#)

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The skills shortage in the global hospitality industry has been widely publicised during the past two years as the world - and the hospitality industry in particular - is getting 'back to normal'.



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The majority of hospitality employees in Europe and the US lost their jobs during the pandemic, as most hotels and restaurants had no choice but to close their doors. During that time, many individuals took the time to study, learn new skills, and ended up switching industries to clerical jobs and other nine-to-five jobs. Now that our industry has reopened, the big challenge is to fill all the open positions with skilled hospitality staff.

Hospitality staff shortage: A global problem

My family and I witnessed these unbelievable shortages during our recent holiday in Greece, where even at top-notch hotels and restaurants, short staffing was the order of the day as many vacancies remain unfilled. The service levels were lower than we had ever experienced before, with untrained staff serving hospitality patrons. As a result, qualified staff were stretched beyond their limits, and this was clear for every tourist to see!

Data from the EU shows that over 1.2 million jobs in tourism remain unfilled, while reports from the AHLA state that 87% of hotels in the US reported staff shortages this year.

For the first time in decades, hotel groups are forced to look towards Africa and in certain cases, South Africa, to recruit valuable hospitality workers in Europe.

However, in South Africa, where there is no shortage of job seekers, the outlook is just as grim. Like in Europe, qualified South African hospitality workers who were retrenched during Covid quickly realised that they could find work in other sectors that were far less stressful and provided better working conditions.

For those who remained in hospitality, our industry faces a high turnover rate due to factors like long work hours, seasonal fluctuations, intense pressure, and low compensation. These factors collectively contribute to burnout among hospitality workers. It's not surprising that some staff members would leave their job for just a couple of hundred Rand more at their next hotel position. And can we really blame them?

For the past 25 years, the hospitality industry in South Africa has been and continues to attract the wrong people. We are attracting and selecting people merely looking for a job, a way to put food on the table. While this motivation is understandable with the current socio-economic circumstances, our industry is in desperate need of people who have a deep and fundamental desire to serve others. People who are willing to take a knock in salary to serve in an industry, not work in an industry.



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Guy Stehlik, CEO, BON Hotels

As an industry, we don't screen. We take it at face value that an applicant has a fundamental desire to serve. And then, we wonder when they leave and contribute to high staff turnover percentages, why they don't complete inhouse training courses or orientation programmes. We need a shake-up in the recruitment process of the hospitality industry, instead of going on meaningless hiring sprees to attract as many people as possible.

To find the right people, we need to have a thorough pre-employment screening process, incorporating personality tests, character assessments and other psychometric evaluations. Such measures will quickly determine an individual's propensity to want to be of service to others and thus be a potential fit for our industry.

The hospitality industry needs a PR makeover

What's even more concerning to me is that the current hospitality training modules rolled out by government in South Africa are failing. Despite numerous learning and apprenticeship programmes offered through initiatives like the National Skills Development Programme, CATHSETA, and various public-private partnerships, many are underperforming, with some even being dubbed 'dysfunctional'. These programmes once again are targeting individuals who are primarily motivated by a paycheck, showing very little interest in the industry at large.

The onus is now on the hospitality industry to get qualified recruits excited about the industry. We need to better communicate the incredible growth possibilities within the sector in South Africa. With the right attitude, the right passion and the right skillset, the growth opportunities in the hospitality sector are phenomenal and skilled candidates can make it from receptionist to general manager in 10 to 15 years in many cases.

A source of inspiration is the restaurant industry, which has been particularly successful in minting remarkable chefs. The country's culinary institutions are flourishing, painting the industry as glamorous and enviable.

There are thousands of South Africans who have got a natural propensity for service and wanting to make a difference. It is high time the hospitality industry addresses its fundamental PR crisis and gets the right talent interested and excited about joining us.

ABOUT GUY STEHLIK

Guy Stehlik is the CEO and founder of BON Hotels and Director of BON Hotels International West Africa. Having vast experience in all aspects of Hotel Management as well as having owned his own hotels, Guy created BON Hotels as an "owner-staff-community-guest" centric company to herald in and define an exciting new era in hotel management.

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