

Picking the *Right* Employee:

The Challenge of Finding and Keeping Quality Employees

by Jennifer A. Smith

Even in today's tough economy, when many people are seeking work, employers may still find it a challenge to attract the *right* people to their businesses and to retain top talent. And in the restaurant industry more than many others, the quality of your employees and their attitudes are directly visible to the customers you serve. *Wisconsin Restaurateur* spoke to several industry experts and restaurant operators for a look at best practices in hiring and retaining good employees.

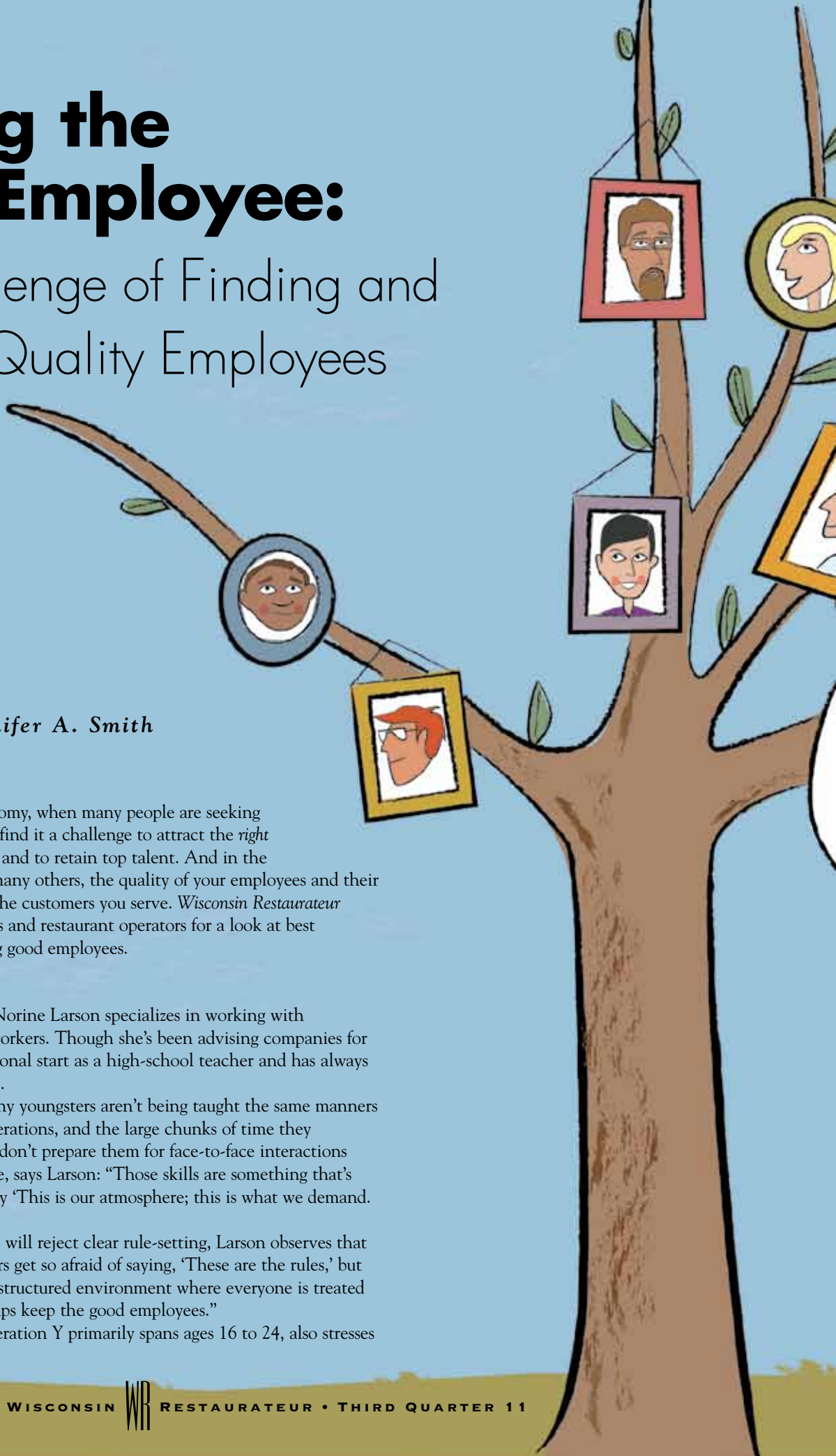
Engaging young workers

Minneapolis-based consultant Norine Larson specializes in working with businesses that employ young workers. Though she's been advising companies for thirty years, she got her professional start as a high-school teacher and has always had an interest in young people.

Larson is concerned that many youngsters aren't being taught the same manners and social skills as previous generations, and the large chunks of time they spend texting and Facebooking don't prepare them for face-to-face interactions with customers. But there's hope, says Larson: "Those skills are something that's teachable. Employers need to say 'This is our atmosphere; this is what we demand. Can you do this?'"

While some worry that teens will reject clear rule-setting, Larson observes that it's quite the opposite. "Managers get so afraid of saying, 'These are the rules,' but young people love to work in a structured environment where everyone is treated with the same set of rules. It helps keep the good employees."

Larson, whose focus on Generation Y primarily spans ages 16 to 24, also stresses





the role of positive reinforcement. “There’s nothing better than praise. Try to catch people doing something right and compliment them. For young people, that spreads like wildfire.”

Praise and perks go a long way

Several Wisconsin restaurant operators echo Larson’s upbeat approach. Glenda Woosley, who has owned the Culver’s in Darboy for the last twelve years, comments, “We praise employees with a lot of words of encouragement and empower them to make decisions. They can make decisions with guests up to the point where they don’t feel comfortable.”

While fun summer outings like inner tubing or a trip to an amusement park or water park provide an annual treat for staff to look forward to, Woosley doesn’t lose sight of little things along the way that make top members of her team feel valued. As she says, “I can stick a gift card in a paycheck stuffer. I give incentives along the way. It’s a little thank you for doing things over and above.”

Linda Wendt, of Wendt’s on the Lake in Van Dyne, also works with many young employees. The casual-dining restaurant specializes in supper-club favorites. Lake



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perch is Wendt's signature dish, but customers also flock there for deep-fried lobster bites, prime rib, chicken, ribs and other hearty fare.

In a staff of 40 people, 24 are under the age of 30. Wendt, who has been in the restaurant business for 46 years, has the long-range experience to see how young workers have changed over time. While she reads books on how best to interact with Generation Y on the job, she has also learned from first-hand experience.

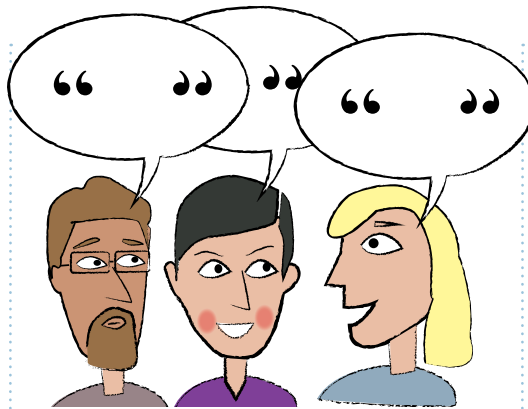
Observes Wendt, "Generation Y really likes to be noticed and thanked often. They love to be praised in front of their peers and guests—anybody, and the more the merrier! I have a basket full of different things that Generation Y employees tend to like, such as movie passes, picture frames and fast-food gift certificates. If they do something above and beyond their duty, I will pull them aside in front of their peers and loudly say, 'Outstanding job.' Then I'll let them pick something out of the basket."

While the items are relatively inexpensive, the gesture shows employees that a good performance is valued. It also builds goodwill between supervisor and worker: "You're trying to get them to feel good about you as well, and show that you understand them," says Wendt.

And when things do go wrong on the job, even discipline can be carried out in a positive manner, says Woosley. At her Culver's location, "When we discipline, we do it right. We explain things to them and talk about how we can correct it for next time."

Empowerment through involvement

David Lindenstruth, who owns five HuHot Mongolian Grills in Wisconsin (plus two out-of-state locations), connects charitable giving with strategies to make employees feel valued. One-time scholarships of up to \$1,500 per employee for graduating seniors recognize good workers who also have a strong GPA and record of extracurricular activities. And, through



his company's "Making Impacts" program (see www.makingimpacts.com for more details), staff members can have a say in which charities benefit from a portion of store sales. A five-member committee picks charities, and two out of the five members on the committee for a particular location are employees.

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That charitable aspect speaks to a larger issue addressed by "The Restaurant Doctor," Bill Marvin, a consultant based in Gig Harbor, Washington. Marvin strongly cautions against simply hiring warm bodies who can fill an immediate need. Instead, he says, the smart course of action is to communicate a larger view of the restaurant's purpose to prospective employees and choose only those who understand and support this vision.

Concludes Marvin, "One of the things that makes it tough in our industry, that contributes to low morale, is that operators are not looking past the mechanics of what they do. Nobody gets up in the morning with a burning urge to come down and give you money. [Customers] support you because they

want to, and the more the work you're doing for them benefits them and their community, the more inclined they are to support you."

Programs like Lindenstruth's "Making Impacts" help connect his HuHot locations to their communities, and make employees feel valued by involving them in decision-making—which helps retain high-quality workers.

In fact, several consultants and restaurant operators cited meaningful employee involvement as a key to keeping top performers on staff. Notes Larson, "[Managers] don't have to be the only brain to make all the decisions. A collaborative atmosphere sometimes really helps. If you're going to hire a waiter, why not let the person who is your best waiter also ask some questions? That way, everybody feels like they have a voice—and in a restaurant, you have a working crew that has to work closely together."



Finding people who fit your culture

But, before you can focus on keeping good employees empowered and involved—and therefore happily employed with you—you have to get them in the door. A number of restaurant owners said they choose not to advertise in newspapers any more, instead depending on word-of-mouth and referrals from current top employees.

Of course, operators must be careful to avoid loaded interview questions or

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not giving “outside” candidates a fair shake. The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD) has information online about fair hiring practices and interview questions to avoid. Visit <http://dwd.wisconsin.gov> and click on “DWD Publications” under the “Administrative Services” heading, then search for Publication 4825.

DWD cautions that asking an interviewee if friends or relatives already work for the employer is irrelevant to an applicant’s competence. Also, as DWD states, “Since the question implies a preference for friends or relatives, it may be unlawful if the composition of the present work force is such that this preference reduces or eliminates employment opportunity for minorities or women.”

Good interview questions avoid bias but give job candidates a chance to talk in an open-ended way, giving potential employers an accurate sense of their experiences, attitudes and capabilities. Says Wendt, “You get a lot out of just listening to them tell you about themselves. You can almost throw out any question you want if you’re willing to listen carefully to the response.”

A positive, well-functioning work culture is its own form of advertisement to potential employees, too. The restaurants “with the best reputations have the pick of the litter and can demand more from people,” says Marvin. And that feeling is evident to people right when they walk in the door. “Your real competitive edge is not what you do, but how you are, what the feeling is in the place when you go in.”

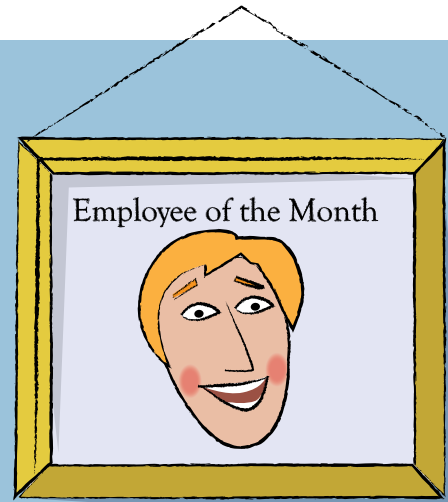
Different generations working together

Restaurant work is not just for young people. In fact, as *Nation’s Restaurant News* recently noted (“Aging gracefully,” May 30, 2011), the average age of restaurant employees is increasing, due in part to the effects of the recession. The average age of an hourly employee is now 29; it’s 37 for managers.

Larson encourages restaurant

Top tips for recruiting and retaining the best workers

1. Clear workplace rules make expectations transparent and create a sense of fairness that helps retain top workers.
2. Though it may sound obvious, praise employees for a job well done—especially in front of peers or guests.
3. Little incentives can go a long way in making people feel valued: think movie passes, gift certificates and other small tokens that say “thank you” for good performance.
4. Involve staff members in meaningful decision-making, whether it’s hiring or deciding which charity a store fundraiser should support.
5. Think about creative ways to pair employees of different ages and work styles, so that people’s strengths complement each other.
6. A positive work culture not only keeps current employees happy, it’s something customers and potential applicants notice. It’s your best calling card to attract talented people.



operators to think of creative ways to pair teenagers and seniors. “I’ve tried to encourage restaurants to hire older



workers,” she says. “Senior citizens can be great partners with teenagers; often the older person has much more patience with them.” And, for seniors who may be less tech-savvy (though, of course, one shouldn’t assume that they are), teens can help with tasks like operating a computerized cash register.

In the end, while different generations might bring certain strengths and challenges to the workplace, each individual is different and managers can bring out their best by creating a positive environment in which hard work is visibly valued. That, in turn, keeps good employees on board and serves as a powerful advertisement to potential applicants. [WR](#)