
Preparing teenage workers for professional success through early workplace expectations

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Abstract

Purpose – This article will demonstrate how early training prepares teens for success. It examines key components of workforce readiness—including punctuality, attendance reliability, professional attire and business etiquette—and highlights how clear expectations set during initial job experiences can bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world employment. The specific tactics discussed in the article are applicable to any industry and are useful in helping develop this eager population and the challenges that accompany the youthful staff.

Design/methodology/approach – This article draws upon industry experience and insights from hospitality practitioners who have worked extensively with young employees, integrating these perspectives with relevant surveys, interviews and generational research. This paper aims to provide evidence-informed managerial recommendations for hospitality professionals engaged in hiring, supervising and developing adolescent employees, drawing on training approaches grounded in Kolb's experiential learning theory.

Findings – Overall findings will help employers better understand the advantages teenagers can bring—including energy, flexibility, cost-effectiveness and the potential for long-term talent development—while also gaining essential hard and soft skills that support their professional and personal growth. However, employing Gen Z youth also presents challenges such as navigating labor laws, addressing training gaps, managing safety and work-life balance concerns, and supporting teens' limited experience with stress, communication and conflict resolution.

Originality/value – This topic advances an innovative framework for modernizing recruitment, hiring practices and talent retention by leveraging early work experiences to cultivate the next generation's career interests, professional competencies, work ethic and overall workforce preparedness.

Keywords Gen Z, Adolescent employment, Workforce readiness, Professional development, Employability skills, Youth workforce preparation, Career readiness, Workplace expectations, Vocational education, Experiential training, Work-based learning, Soft skills training

Paper type Practitioner paper

Introduction

A major challenge on the forefront of the various hospitality industries has always been labor shortage issues. However, this issue has reached new levels of difficulty since the resurgence of the hospitality industry following the global pandemic. Hoteliers and restaurateurs have had to develop outside-of-the-box strategies to employ their baseline staff (El Hajal & Losekoot, 2024). Some of these strategies included offering a higher rate of starting pay and/or a sign-on bonus, accepting flexible hours and schedules, developing carpool and transportation support, and accepting job sharing and gig economy opportunities, along with the recruitment of alternative demographics (Deloitte.com, 2025). One of the targeted demographics of these potential employees is the early-teenage population, also referred to as Gen Zers, born between 1997 and 2012 (El Hajal & Losekoot, 2024). The federal minimum working age for non-agricultural work is 14. Each state has its own regulatory guidelines based

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upon age for the number and times of specific hours, school day versus non-school day regulations and maximum number of hours per day/week (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025a).

Many teenagers are eager to start earning their own money, and some young teenagers may have the opportunity to do so because of their family business or businesses. The National Restaurant Association reported that the teenager work staff percentage in the restaurant and foodservice industry was at 37% of 16–19-year-olds in 2024; this was the highest it has been since 2009 (WAHospitality, 2025).

After discussions with hospitality industry professionals, several stated that they started available too early. Teenagers are typically in the hospitality field, and the increases being made to the state minimum wages are enticing to these young adults. The federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour, and many states have minimum wage laws higher than the federal. By 2026, Florida's minimum wage will increase to \$15 per hour and in California will be nearing \$17 per hour (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025b). In the global context, youth unemployment rates have fallen to pre-pandemic rates in most regions, but not all. Youth employment has favored males over females and is stronger in regions of advanced economies (ILO.org, 2024).

Another key reason for reaching out to the teenage demographic in popular tourism destinations is the lack of affordable housing. This issue has eliminated the potential college-age staff coming to these seasonal destinations for temporary work. Short-term rentals are not available at a rate that can be maintained by minimum wage or front-line positions, and are typically rented out for a premium price during the season. In these destinations, employers who provide housing typically reserve it for J-1 exchange visitors and H-2B temporary non-agricultural workers, whose seasonal placements help meet tourism-driven labor demands. Tourism destination areas are known to have a constant struggle with labor shortages and usually have a very low unemployment rate during the season with the general age population of workers. Therefore, industry professionals have shifted to employing local teenagers who do not have a mortgage or rent payment demands associated with their job acceptance.

Methods

This article is designed from industry experience and discussions with many hospitality practitioners with similar experiences employing young staff members. It is supported through industry findings, surveys, interviews and reports of the Gen Z generation. Specifically, four large beach resorts (recreation, club, and food and beverage departments) and three restaurant owners/managers, all having at least ten years of industry experience. This article is aimed at providing actionable managerial takeaways, and the intended audience is the hospitality practitioners in hiring, supervisory and management positions.

The benefits and challenges of a youthful workforce

The opportunities associated with employing teenagers in an organization have many benefits and, of course, challenges. There are significant benefits to employing a youthful staff, which is advantageous to the business and the teenager. For the business, teenagers bring a fresh energy and enthusiasm to learn and can be very cost-effective for the organization. The employer can provide opportunities for a strong mentorship program, which can develop long-term talent and streamline additional relationships with youth programs. Some programs that can become a pipeline for the young hospitality workforce are high schools, religious groups and athletic teams. The teenagers have flexible schedules and can help cover busy periods or specific shifts. Amy Burns, CEO and Owner of Anthony's Restaurant in Washington stated it best by saying, "They [teenagers] bring a noticeable energy and enthusiasm to the workplace... having younger team members also helps create a healthy balance within our crews, blending experience with fresh perspectives" (WAHospitality, 2025).

As for the teenagers, the benefits are just as plentiful! The most obvious include skills development, networking opportunities, financial independence, developing time

management and work ethic skills, building confidence, exposure to a diverse workforce, transferable skills and career exploration. All these skills are transferable into real-life skills in communication, professional development, accountability, organization and leadership (WAHospitality, 2025). Not only are the hard skills of the workplace a tangible take-away for the teenager, but the development of their soft skills – empathy, emotional intelligence, strategic thinking and leadership – are even more important in transferring into real-life skills necessary in any future employment.

The benefits are vast on both sides – employer and employee. However, adding the Gen Zers to the workforce does not come without its challenges. These challenges begin with the federal and state labor laws. It is imperative to be knowledgeable of the restrictions on the number of hours per day and per week the younger staff are allowed to work and the restrictions placed on school days versus non-school days. There are very few strict international, federal or state restrictions on adult staff above the age of 18. Another important restriction within these laws applicable to youth staff is the importance of knowing the specific jobs/tasks that are approved and which ones are off-limits. This is especially important in the kitchen areas, lawn work or golf carts, lifeguarding at natural environments and the use of ladders or scaffolding (Fisherphillips.com, 2024; WAHospitality, 2025). However, there are several apps that are helpful in navigating the child labor laws (Nemco.com, 2024). Another challenge is training and development addressing the skill shortage and lack of customer service training (WAHospitality, 2025; Fernandez, 2023). Other reported challenges are safety concerns, work-life balance issues, turnover, changing expectations and communication gaps in the business and family dynamics. The work-life-balance is a difficult challenge with this age group because of the lack of coping mechanisms to handle stress. Stress is very common in hospitality during peak business times and when trying to balance work with personal life obligations. Many times, this is the first job and the first time these young teenagers are navigating all these responsibilities at one time. The parents encourage them to work but also continue to have rules and regulations on their time commitments, thus providing the teen with more stress trying to please both parties.

Actionable insights

Best practices for onboarding teenage employees

There are many strategies to help combat many of the challenges presented with this unique labor force. The most important consideration is to be knowledgeable and intentional about embracing this young workforce. Prepare your staff involved with onboarding, training and orientation with the proper information to help the youth staff feel welcome, supported and encouraged from the beginning. The entire team will have to buy into the strategy of employing teenagers and assist all throughout their journey. By prioritizing the three main advantages to employing a younger staff – (1) mentorship, (2) training and professional development and (3) growth/leadership – companies can create unique opportunities for both parties (WAHospitality, 2025).

Training and professional development are challenging to focus on with younger staff. This guided training will begin from the application process. Many young teens do not have a résumé to upload during an online application process, and many also lack the skills or experience needed to create one. Therefore, most young applicants will exit the application process at the point when asked to upload a résumé. Remember, they have never had a job before setting out on this goal to seek employment. So, training and development may begin before the job itself, perhaps by offering resume workshops prior to the season on the weekends. A company that offers application assistance to interested applicants, both young and old, and even to non-tech savvy applicants, is a plus. Business leaders will have to prioritize training programs (Deloitte.com, 2025). However, these training programs and resources will need to be modified from a typical adult-g geared learning format. For instance, adding simulation or electronic learning training programs on role-playing with upset guests or on simulated apps for experience in the correct process of dropping or picking up shifts.

Teens learn quicker and retain more with experiential learning, meaning “learning by doing.” Many studies have shown that experiential education has been one of the most popular approaches in recent years to help enhance students’ learning experience (Price-Howard & Lewis, 2022; Lin, Kim, Qui, & Ren, 2017; Kiser & Partlow, 1999). Kolb’s experiential learning theory (1984) defines experiential learning as “the process by which knowledge is created through transformation of experience: knowledge results from the combination of understanding and transforming the experience” (pg. 38). It has been shown that this type of active learning is considered one of the key features of service industry education (Patiar, Ma, Kensbock, & Cox, 2017; Price-Howard & Lewis, 2022). This can be developing a training format or platform that includes training activities with simulations or game-like scenarios and healthy competition – making the learning format fun. Utilizing simulation learning through electronic-based platforms helps students participate in real-world decision-making without the associated risks and helps them build their confidence before interacting with guests (Douglas, Miller Kwansa, & Cummings, 2008; Price-Howard & Lewis, 2022). For example, having Virtual Reality (VR) computer-based training available to teach handling “upset guests” scenarios for each teen to role play would have a strong impact on preparing them for the work setting. VR is a computer technology that replicates an environment (real or imagined) and simulates a user’s physical presence in that environment to allow for user interaction. It offers unique opportunities from a training perspective, such as allowing users to improve their skills without the consequence of failing real customers or the need to be in the real environment physically (Lui & Goel, 2022).

Strategies to increase youth staff retention

The next key insights that can overcome several of the other challenges are dealing with scheduling, outside-the-box incentives, work perks and motivational tactics. This age group consistently needs to see, hear and feel all the positive affirmations and appropriate motivational speeches that not just managers but also co-workers can provide. This starts with flexible schedules. Teens have a lot of schedules and are doing more in each school week than most adults do in a month. They also have very little control over the practices, after-school activities and demands of a student (and/or student athlete). The best tactic in these situations is to empower them to communicate when they can and want to work. Apps are helpful with some of the crazy and hectic scheduling issues (Nemco.com, 2024). A 2024 Deloitte survey revealed that job flexibility is in higher demand, including job-sharing, part-time positions and options like a 4-day work week (Deloitte.com, 2025).

Outside-the-box incentives and job perks are important topics since this may be the teenagers’ first time in a work setting. Several actionable items in this area include having them be a part of building a stronger team. Do this by having them refer their friends, and this will help to build a stronger team, perhaps with less drama. Also, many employers have offered a referral bonus for friends or returns for a second or third season. Bringing back previous seasonal employees can help repeat guests feel a connection as well. The team connection with friends can make the work fun, build trust and create a community and not just a work shift (WAHospitality, 2025). Other incentives or job perks can be utilizing a pay-on-demand app, flexible pay days, pay additional bonuses for the hard-to-staff shifts, encouraging the use of facilities, food and merchandise discounts, and rewards with Uber/Amazon gift cards for guest compliments (Nemco.com, 2024).

Real world examples

A few real-world examples of young staff in the workplace are their inability to drive themselves to work, sport and club demands, and the lack of experience in conflict resolution. Considering the transportation needs, they must rely on a parent or other relative or friend and, at times, invest in an Uber for transportation to or from the workplace. Parents typically have

jobs and can't always be available to assist in the transportation needs, especially with shorter shifts than typical jobs. Staff members will get a text that their ride is onsite, and then get very flustered, hurried, or stressed trying to complete the last task(s) to end their shift.

Another frequent example always seems to occur after the weekly schedule is posted. The sport team or club the teen is a part of has a meeting, practice or tryouts during a scheduled shift. The young staff is torn between the level of importance between the two and takes no accountability or responsibility for finding someone to cover their shift. They should learn through the training of business etiquette that it is not appropriate to quit via text and how to appropriately address a supervisor in front of guests. These guidelines and policies must be clear during orientation because they are very prevalent in young staff.

Lastly, the teens seem to have communication issues within the team and struggle with appropriate ways to handle conflict within the workplace. Many times, they don't want to be a snitch, or they may fear retaliation and are not at all equipped for handling these situations without someone getting upset or these behaviors being on display in front of the guests. This is understandable with the lack of experience but can be quickly addressed as a problem arises if they are properly trained to involve a supervisor as the mediator. Proper training during orientation in how to appropriately handle conflict situations can be taught experientially before the teens are sent out to the work setting.

Some examples of available resources for employers hiring staff younger than 18 years of age are provided by the Washington Hospitality Association in the Handbook for Excellent Restaurant Operations (HERO) and the Handbook for Amazing Lodging Operations (HALO) (WAHospitality, 2025). Washington State has set a great example of having these resources available to employers, and it would be a good standard for every state or global region to follow.

Conclusions

Teenagers are often underestimated and discounted, but they have great potential to help aid in the labor challenge in the hospitality industry. This youthful demographic solution can find great success by implementing intentionally designed training and development programs set in place to prepare the young staff to enter the workforce. Experiential learning is key, along with simulation-based training to help teach, develop and reinforce the development of the necessary skill set, both hard and soft skills (Price-Howard & Lewis, 2022). Gen Zers are ambitious and eager to get started on a career; therefore, a positive experience upon entering the workforce can really assist them in the direction of a career within the hospitality industry (Deloitte.com, 2025). There is limited research on the needs, wants and expectations of Gen Z (mainly because of their young age to complete survey data). As stated by El Hajal and Losekoot (2024), additional research is needed to explore potential links between the talent managers, hospitality educators, hospitality management students (future employees) and the policy makers. By 2030, it is projected that 74% of the workforce will be comprised of Gen Z and Millennials, and this is a defining force (Deloitte.com, 2025). A proactive approach taken by the leadership in hospitality and tourism organizations will aid in the preparation of our youth to help alleviate the challenges of the labor shortage and high turnover rates within the hospitality and tourism industries.

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