

HIRING SEASONAL EMPLOYEES: A DIFFERENT REALITY IN TODAY'S JOB MARKET

By Elizabeth Kaye McCall

Forget traditions and conventional wisdom, if hiring seasonal employees is on your agenda. The job market of five years ago is nothing like today.

"In a marketplace of 4.1 percent unemployment, you essentially have no qualified people available to work," said Tarun Kapoor, M.B.A., professor at California State Polytechnic University in Pomona's Collins School of Hospitality Management. "(Those) who are unemployed aren't necessarily qualified for your positions. It's critical to understand that in this labor market, the dynamic has changed. It's a different reality."

Kapoor, who is also the director of Collins' Professional Development Institute, has 25 years' experience in the hospitality industry — starting as a management trainee with Sheraton after college and working as a general manager for Hyatt before joining Collins 12 years ago.

"I think the overall industry is going through a revolution right now in terms of the roles that people play and the way we structure our work," Kapoor said. "I think the hospitality industry right now is going through some major soul searching: How can we restructure, do our businesses, when almost every other major industry — especially on the manufacturing side — has changed the fundamental ways in which they do business. We are a little slow at doing that."

California schools and colleges, traditional sources of seasonal help for the state's lodging industry, no longer supply a ready stream of potential employees. "The majori-

ty of our students aren't taking the summer off," Kapoor said, citing the nature of the California State University and community colleges systems. Even high school students are decreasingly available for seasonal jobs as a result of more frequent year-round school.

"No longer do we have the hundreds of thousands of college kids who can go work at Disneyland, if you will, for the summer," Kapoor said. Furthermore, students working during the year are generally sticking with their employers through the summer. A different reality? Entirely.

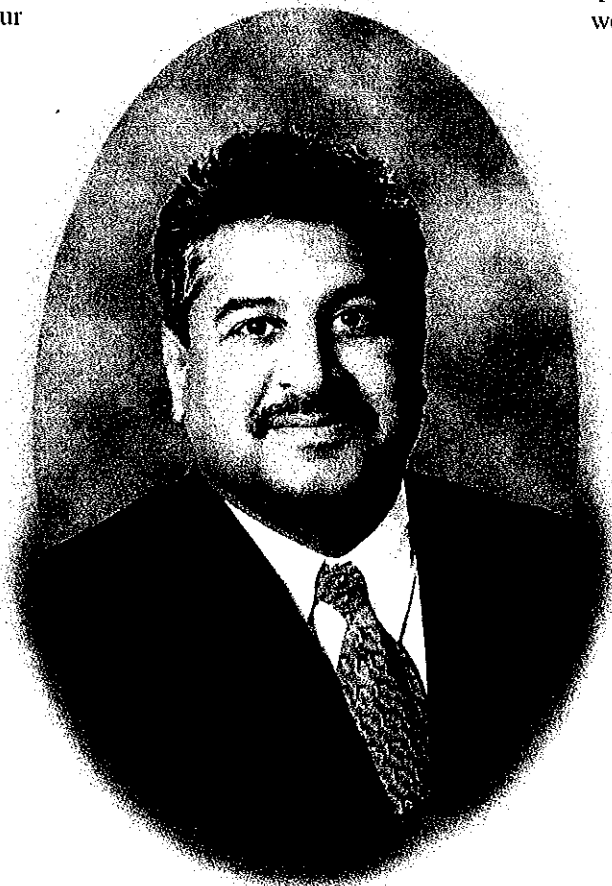
Hiring seasonal workers requires different measures — increasingly where to find them. "If California properties want to go the student route of recruiting, then they almost have to go the Midwest and other parts of the country — which is not a bad idea," Kapoor said.

The lure of California still wields a powerful punch, and appeals to students in out-of-state hospitality and even non-hospitality schools (easily located via directories). But, glamour alone won't sufficiently bring seasonal recruits to California.

"The reality is you've got to pay these people enough that their travel and room and board costs are covered, and they still can save some money to go back to school," Kapoor said.

But the higher recruiting costs involved may pose difficulties for small property owners.

The private club industry, also a seasonal business, has long implemented nationwide internship programs with hospitality schools. In fact, many clubs find it preferable to



Tarun Kapoor says low unemployment figures have forced the lodging industry to change the way it hires and provides for seasonal employees.

bring in college students and provide a learning experience — and often provisions for housing — than hire an unemployed individual who may lack the grooming required to serve a large-affluent membership.

“These private clubs are in many ways the equivalent of a small B&B or a million-dollar (hotel) business,” Kapoor said. “Without question, we now have to do non-traditional recruiting.”

Consequently, many hotels, clubs

and other businesses are turning to temporary workers from overseas.

“Historically those companies who did recruit seasonal employees (from abroad) again built relationships with schools and colleges in countries like Ireland, where at least there was a certain amount of Westernization already,” Kapoor said. “Today it’s everywhere from Russia to Jamaica to Ireland to South Africa.

“I think that the work requirement and immigration requirements are

probably as lenient as they've been in the last 25 years because of the labor crisis," Kapoor said. Unlike past practices when corporate human resource directors recruited overseas, numerous private (and reputable) agencies are filling that role and providing seasonal employees for a fee. With only short-term work permits required, the overseas option can be one that works fairly well.

Among the more innovative recruiting methods gaining popularity is partnering with other businesses to share employees. "If in fact you're a summer season, then you want to go to a ski resort that has a winter season," Kapoor said. "Again the reality is the transportation; these are transient employees. So the way you conduct your business with them is slightly different and the way you compensate them and all is slightly different."

Nowhere should a difference be more apparent than in the hiring process, if one heeds Kapoor's advice. "I would interview the resort as much as I would interview the employees," he said. "Make sure that the work culture, work environment and management philosophy these people are bringing from their winter employment is similar to your philosophy. Otherwise you'll have a major culture shock."

Another pitfall that applies to many interview scenarios can have far-reaching consequences. "If the owner can't identify what criteria an employee needs to be successful in their style operation, they're going to hire wrong," Kapoor said. "Ideally, you need to be very clear in your mind what it is you need, and not just in terms of what (technical) skills you need."

This is particular in the case of B&Bs and small hotels, where the owner has a dominant influence. "You need to be very careful that these people fit your concept of service and in fact, are compatible with you," Kapoor said.

Flexibility and a willingness to handle multiple tasks are qualities that are particularly important for seasonal hires at B&Bs. "I think in a temporary

situation we tend to be less cautious about hiring people because we know it's temporary," Kapoor said. "I think it should be the exact opposite. You need to spend more energy in recruiting than in retention, because you really don't have time for retention."

Consequently, it is crucial to accurately assess the desired criteria for seasonal employees once it has been determined. Interview questions need to be thought out beforehand and structured to elicit more than a "yes" or "no" response.

For instance, to evaluate trustworthiness Kapoor suggests developing several questions that will reveal beliefs about honesty. Open-ended questions, like asking how job candidates would handle a situation with a coworker who was unknowingly observed stealing money or jewelry from a guest's room, will provide varying responses. Based on such information, an employer can better determine the most desirable hiring prospects.

Once on board, it's important to consider how temporary employees are treated. "If you're not hiring people from the neighborhood, and if you're in fact importing them from other neighborhoods, then you have to make sure that at the end of the day the money that this person is making is covering the incremental costs that they are going to have for coming from outside," Kapoor said. "Plus, get them the savings if you will, or the income, that they would have expected if they were from the neighborhood."

Yet some ways of compensating seasonal employees can minimize cash outlays. Providing meals or trade-outs for services with local businesses can yield incentives for short-term employees. Kapoor references a New York club that went so far as to rent a house for a group of interns from Ireland to live in and provided a minivan to drive to a local Irish pub on their night off. (The club even arranged trade-outs with the pub to provide the Irish interns with free beer).

"For such a short period of time the work has to be fun, but you have to be willing to step beyond the nor-

mal employer-employee paradigm,” Kapoor said.

Developing relationships with local schools and the community can even generate repeat seasonal employees. “If you’re a B&B in a small town in California, you should have built a relationship with the local high school,” Kapoor said. “You should have these kids when they are juniors start working for you in one capacity or another (so) they look forward to working for you every summer.”

Increasing levels of responsibility each year will not only build loyalty, but may find a first-year college student returning to supervise a high school student in the job he originally had two years before.

“I think B&Bs and small hotels have never built that relationship with local schools, with the local community,” Kapoor said. “That’s the kind of relationships I would build . . . so people look at me as a fun place to come to work.” ■