



## 3 Ways to Build a Dynamite Dining Services Team

*By Susan Saldibar*

Low unemployment. Boomers retiring. Rising wages. Competition from fast food restaurants....

Houston we have a problem.

All kidding aside, this is a problem that's not showing signs of rectifying itself any time soon. On one hand, it's great that kids are now getting jobs and wages are up. But, you're probably not so ecstatic if you're trying to staff your senior living community.

I read a really good article recently on today's labor challenges from [Gordon Food Service](#) (a Senior Housing Forum partner). I caught up with Dana Fillmore, Healthcare Segment Manager for Gordon Food Service, partly because she was quoted in the article, but also because she has a lot of knowledge about staffing for dining service employees.

I asked Dana what they are doing at Gordon Food Service to help their clients get a better grip on the tight labor market as it impacts their dining services staff. I also asked her where a good place to start might be for operators struggling to get out in front of the curve of these issues. Dana spotlighted a few key areas that need to be addressed.

1. **Benchmark.** Dana suggests that you begin by assessing how efficiently your dining team is operating today and how it compares to peer communities. (If you are a member of the Association for Healthcare Food Service, you can use the AHF Benchmarking Express tool.) "Look at things like FTE labor hours per meal," she says. "There are so many ways to improve efficiencies and save FTE hours."

So, in essence, you may think you need 3 people, but after tightening up here and there, may only really need 2. I can see where it makes sense to do this before you make broad assumptions that will impact your budget.

2. **Know your prospective employee as well as you know your prospective customer.** Dana recommends building out a profile of your ideal employee, and then learning everything you can about them. That includes segmenting and creating value propositions to fit their demographic profiles. And that need not be restricted to young workers. Dana suggests that operators consider hiring baby boomers who are either retired or semi-retired. “Often, middle age or older staff can communicate better with residents,” she says. I can’t help but wonder if there might be some great family cooks out there who would get great satisfaction putting their well honed skills to work in a senior living environment.
3. **Market, market, market!** This makes a lot of sense, given the tight employment market. Just as you would do to attract prospective residents, Dana suggests you turn your marketing engine towards what you can do to attract good employees. “Make sure you have a strong ‘Careers’ section on your website,” Dana says. “Make sure your value statements are up front where they can be seen,” she adds. She also suggests you utilize pre-vetting solutions that will help you identify those prospective employees with the skills and traits you desire. “It’s important to find the traits first, then train,” says Dana. Nice to know that attitude is still everything.

## **Make sure you have a plan to keep them, once you get them!**

Dana tells me that one mistake senior living community operators make is putting all the effort into acquiring talent and then quickly turning off new hires with tired, mediocre benefits and perks. It’s time to listen to your audience and carve out programs that reflect their motivations and needs. “I read recently about a community that developed multiple levels within each department for employees to work towards. Those who moved up gradually received special perks and advantages, such as more control over their schedules, more influence within the community, and the ability to take on positions of greater influence. It gave them more motivation to stay onboard.”

Given today’s market and this industry, you really need to give recruits something emotionally tangible. “You need to give them opportunities to learn and invest in them from a knowledge standpoint,” Dana says. “Give them opportunities to grow and develop so that they want to stay on your team. Build value.”

You can read the full article from Gordon Food Service [here](#).



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