

Orange County Hospitality Pros Discuss Steps To Success

By Bill Quinnan

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The leisure and hospitality sector is a rich source of job opportunities, and it is expected to continue to be one over the next decade. The sector has held up strong despite the recent recession, and job growth within the sector in Orange County over the last year equals nearly one-third of the county's total job growth over the same period, according to the California Employment Development Department.

However, the hospitality sector demands certain characteristics and skills of those wishing to build long-term careers leading to high-paying positions. What are today's employers looking for in new entrants to these industries, and how can students prepare themselves to meet these demands?

That question was one of the primary topics of a recent advisory board meeting on culinary arts, hospitality and tourism. The event was hosted by Vital Link, a non-profit organization dedicated to connecting businesses and schools in order to help prepare students for meaningful careers. The meeting, which took place Sept. 28 at the Hilton Waterfront Resort in Huntington Beach, attracted 74 educators, primarily from Orange County, and featured panel discussions with 17 representatives of local restaurants, hotels and related establishments.

Common themes emerged as the panelists shared their insights about desired skills, emerging trends, and the factors that help some individuals win job offers and promotions.

Safety first

Safety is a top priority for hospitality employers, ranging from food-handling to the prevention of slips and falls, which can frequently cost a business \$5,000 per incident, according to one panelist. Other safety issues include proper lifting techniques, alcohol service, correct use of knives and other utensils or kitchen machinery, carrying dishes safely and even wearing the right shoes for the job.

Obtaining safety certification can give job seekers an edge, and reduce the likelihood of spreading food-borne illness or being injured on the job. In addition, being trained on the proper use of kitchen equipment will help individuals be safer, more efficient workers.

Make a good first impression

Employers want to hire people who will make a good first impression with customers. Candidates must therefore make a good first impression with prospective employers. This means having professional attire and demeanor and a smile. If the first contact with the company is made online, the candidate should make sure that the application is filled out completely and accurately.

Ruby's Diner executive vice president Tad Betshe noted that, while an employer may not be expecting a candidate to wear a suit, doing so won't hurt. On the other hand, as other panelists noted, arriving with unconventional piercings or visible body art might.

Understand the brand

Prospective employees should be familiar with a company's products and are aware of the image the company is trying to project. Reggie Bryant, director of field human resources for Marie Callender's, said that he will regularly ask job candidates what their favorite pie is.

St. Regis Monarch Beach human-resources manager Robbin Thibodeaux-Holland noted that when a candidate shows up to an interview wearing grey and black – the resort's color scheme – it shows her that the candidate has probably done some research about the company.

Knowing the brand also includes understanding the offerings that may be available for guests with special dietary needs, such as patrons seeking gluten-free menu items or reduced-calorie options.

Speak the language

It's one thing to know what food you like, but can you articulate why you like it? Panelists noted that being able to speak the language of the industry is an important skill.

Cynthia Cail, catering manager for Plums Catering, noted that employees may need to be able to distinguish between different kinds of fish, and Island Hotel executive chef David Mann noted that understanding different cuts of beef is a useful skill.

For establishments such as Whole Foods Market, which tends to serve a food-conscious market, regional healthy-eating associate

Mandy Marino noted that employees may need to be knowledgeable about such matters as whether the meats came from animals that were grass-farm or farm-raised.

Think like a customer

Customer service is essential in the hospitality sector. While service skills are difficult to teach from a text book, everyone has had good and bad experiences as customers from which to learn, explained Bryant.

Cail suggested that culinary instructors incorporate role-playing into the classroom, as many students have never been in a position to serve customers before.

All about attitude

The right attitude can make the difference between an employee who simply does the job and one who becomes a superstar.

"Hire for attitude, train for skill," Thibodeaux-Holland said, adding that while skills can be taught, attitude cannot.

Jason Alexander, general manager of Disney's Paradise Pier Hotel, suggested that seasonal hires treat their temporary employment situations as opportunities for something greater. A standout employee might be offered something long-term.

Work your way up

Unfortunately, making it to the upper ranks of the hospitality sector usually requires one to start at the bottom. Panelists noted that students should be patient and aware that the jobs they get upon graduation are not likely to be glamorous or high-paying.

On the other hand, panelists also agreed that hospitality has no rigid advancement schedule. Entry-level workers can advance more quickly by having a good attitude, being fast learners and demonstrating their competency on the job.

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