

Prioritizing the employee experience improves retention - National Restaurant Association

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Executive Summary

This article, published by the National Restaurant Association (NRA), addresses the persistent employee retention challenge in the restaurant industry despite improved applicant flow. The central argument is that prioritizing employee experience through engagement tools and communication technology improves workforce stability. The primary evidence draws from the NRA's 2025 State of the Restaurant Industry report, which finds that 77% of restaurant operators identify retention as a significant business challenge, and that strong workplace culture and employee engagement are key retention drivers. As a case study, the article profiles Potbelly Sandwich Works and its internally developed 'Potbelly Pulse' survey tool — a phased digital check-in administered at one week, 14 days, and 30 days post-hire — presented by Chief People Officer Patrick Walsh as a competitive differentiator. The article concludes that AI-powered insights and predictive analytics will increasingly shape workforce strategies, with the NRA's Chief Economist Chad Moutray projecting broader technology adoption as a means to improve employee satisfaction and long-term retention.

Key Insights

1. 77% of restaurant operators identify retaining employees as a significant challenge, according to the 2025 State of the Restaurant Industry report.
2. Potbelly Sandwich Works implemented a phased employee pulse survey ('Potbelly Pulse') at 1 week, 14 days, and 30 days post-hire to monitor new employee sentiment and identify retention risks in near real-time.
3. The NRA's research positions early-tenure communication and manager-employee alignment as central mechanisms through which employee engagement translates into retention outcomes.

Practical Takeaways

- Structured pulse surveys administered at defined early-tenure intervals (e.g., 7, 14, and 30 days) represent one organizational approach to capturing new employee sentiment before disengagement or attrition occurs.
- Providing district and regional managers with direct access to location-level engagement data is one mechanism through which organizations attempt to enable proactive, localized responses to workforce issues.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article references a specific industry-level statistic (77%) from a named NRA report, lending some empirical grounding. The Potbelly case study provides concrete implementation detail — survey timing, delivery channel, data access structure — that adds descriptive value. Limitations: The Potbelly Pulse case study is entirely self-reported by a company executive with no independent validation, outcome metrics, or comparison group. No retention improvement figures are cited. The article is published by the NRA and sponsored by Paradox (a recruiting technology vendor), creating dual conflicts of interest. Claims about AI and predictive analytics are forward-looking and speculative, not evidence-based. The research report cited ('Research Insight: Workforce Technology') is the NRA's own publication, not peer-reviewed. Overall, the piece functions primarily as branded content that uses an industry statistic to frame a promotional case study.

Organizational Practice

Potbelly Sandwich Works administers a phased digital employee survey ('Potbelly Pulse') to new hires at one week, 14 days, and 30 days post-hire via mobile phone. Survey data is made available directly to district and regional managers to enable proactive identification of engagement issues and retention risks at the individual location level.

Strategic Implications

The article reflects a broader trend in the restaurant and service industries toward deploying lightweight, mobile-first pulse survey tools during the critical early-tenure window, rather than relying on annual engagement surveys. The emphasis on manager-level data access points to a decentralization of engagement monitoring, moving accountability closer to frontline operations. The integration of predictive analytics and AI into workforce engagement platforms is framed as an emerging direction, though the article presents no evidence of its current efficacy in this sector.

Validation Status: passed
