

Aligning expectations with real-world experiences: a talent management study on the restaurant industry in Finland

Restaurant
industry in
Finland

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Abstract

Purpose – Skilled workers are crucial for an organization's success, and managing, retaining and attracting them is vital in long-term. This study aims to explore talent management practices in the Finnish restaurant industry and to align workers' expectations with the real-world experiences of their work to reduce turnover and enhance job satisfaction.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts a mixed methods approach, including a survey and interviews with workers and managers to gain insights into their expectations and experiences of work. The study considers themes for designing and implementing effective talent management procedures.

Findings – This study highlights the importance of employees' experiences of their work conditions, leveraging positive emotions and fair utilization of temporary agency work (TAW). Understanding the different work preferences of generational cohorts and addressing the challenges associated with owner disengagement and TAW can also contribute to attracting and retaining talent in the restaurant industry.

Originality/value – Skilled workers have often been portrayed as targets that need to be managed, with insufficient consideration given to their preferences, needs and expectations. With the findings of this study, companies can establish mutual understanding with their employees and attract diverse talent.

Keywords Talent management, Employee retention, Restaurants, Employee attraction

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Skilled workers are widely recognized as an organization's most valuable resource, and it is reasonable to suggest that companies with the best-skilled workforce will succeed in the long run (Pandita and Ray, 2018). Managing, retaining, attracting, and investing in employees who possess the necessary skills is imperative for companies willing to maintain and develop their competitiveness (Armstrong, 2006; Bufquin *et al.*, 2018; Cajander and Reiman, 2019; Jogaratnam, 2016, 2017; Ott *et al.*, 2018; Pandita and Ray, 2018). The shortage of skilled workers is causing ever-increasing negative economic impacts worldwide (Ott *et al.*, 2018). According to Hansen *et al.* (2011), employee turnover can cost organizations 50–200% of the annual salaries of redundant workers. Despite these high costs, little research has been done on strategic or operational actions that organizations could make to prevent worker turnover (Carnahan *et al.*, 2017). Employee turnover can often be attributed to a misalignment between employees'

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expectations and their actual work experiences. Addressing this misalignment effectively requires organizations to gain a deep understanding about their employees' needs, provide the necessary resources and support for optimal job performance, and ensure that employees' expectations match the realities of the work environment. By taking these steps, companies can create a positive workplace, boost job satisfaction, reduce the desire to leave, and ultimately cultivate a more stable and productive workforce (Cicognani *et al.*, 2016; Pleitz *et al.*, 2015).

Finnish restaurant industry and labor challenges

In Finland, a country known for its relatively stable and secure labor market, good working conditions, strong labor unions and good wages, the restaurant industry faces staffing challenges despite these advantages (Kangas and Kvist, 2018; Rasmussen *et al.*, 2019). Over the past three decades, the accommodation and restaurant sector has seen a significant increase in its workforce, with employment numbers rising by up to 50% between 1995 and 2008 (Service Sector Employers, 2022). In 2019, as many as 95,200 people were employed in the industry (Service Sector Employers, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, caused a significant decline in the number of employees, with the industry employing 78,700 people in 2020 (Service Sector Employers, 2022). Figures for 2022 were predicted to have an even worse decline, which have been reported by Service Sector Employers (2022). While the number of job applicants has decreased, the number of restaurants has at the same time increased in Finland. In the last decade alone, up to a thousand new restaurants have opened, making recruiting and talent retention even more challenging (Service Sector Employers, 2022). A record-breaking 73% of Finnish restaurants reported that the availability of skilled labor was a major obstacle to their growth (Service Sector Employers, 2022). The primary reasons for the service industry's recruitment difficulties are the lack of job seekers (53%) and the mismatch between job seekers' skills and the industry's needs (48%) (Service Sector Employers, 2022). Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Finnish Hospitality Association (2023) estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 professionals in the restaurant industry switched their careers to other sectors. Considering the evident need for recruiting new talents in the restaurant sector, it is crucial for the restaurants to recognize the importance of sustainable talent management strategies (Gjerald *et al.*, 2021; Podgorodnichenko *et al.*, 2022). By doing so, companies can establish mutually beneficial relationships with their employees and attract diverse talent to create a competitive edge in the market.

Prior research and research objectives

Nordic hospitality research distinguishes itself by centralizing on hospitality providers, particularly focusing on managerial aspects (Gjerald *et al.*, 2021). This earlier research spans recruitment, socialization, training, retention, work environment, working conditions, work-family dynamics, and emotional considerations (Gjerald *et al.*, 2021). This emphasis aligns with Nordic management traditions, work regulations, and the established discipline of service theory and research in the Nordic context (Gjerald *et al.*, 2021). In the broader non-Nordic literature on talent management, there's been a predominant focus on organizational and supervisory perspectives, with limited exploration of employees' experiences and viewpoints (Pandita and Ray, 2018; Richards, 2020). Additionally, skilled workers have often been portrayed as targets that need to be managed, with insufficient consideration given to their preferences, needs and expectations (Kolivand, 2018; Richards, 2020). In their exploration of expectations, Andreassen *et al.* (2021), extended the concept by incorporating various expectation types to it, of which this study uses predictive and normative types of expectations.

The objective of this study is to explore talent management practices in the restaurant industry and methods to align expectations with workers' real-world experiences, aiming to improve employee retention and job satisfaction. The study's originality lies in its comprehensive

investigation of the expectations and experiences of different levels of employees (workers and managers). Moreover, this study aims to enhance talent management practices in the restaurant industry while also making a valuable contribution to the broader discourse on talent management within the service sector.

Literature review

Talent management addresses the challenges of attracting, developing, and retaining a high-performing workforce that is needed to achieve organizational goals (Armstrong, 2006; Kravariti *et al.*, 2022). Talent management involves systematic processes for identifying key positions essential for the organization's competitive advantage, nurturing a pool of high-potential individuals for these roles, and establishing a specialized human resource structure to ensure the ongoing commitment of capable employees. Ultimately, it aims to align the right people with the right jobs at the right time in accordance with strategic business objectives. It is very important to distinguish between different concepts that are often used with talent management, such as recruiting problems, labor shortage and lack of skilled workers. Recruiting problems arise when employers face difficulties in obtaining the needed workers, while labor shortages occur when employers are unable to find and obtain the necessary workforce (Räsänen and Ylikännö, 2021). A shortage of skilled labor exists when there is a demand for workers in the labor market, but the skills possessed by the available workforce do not match the requirements of employers (Räsänen and Ylikännö, 2021).

Components of talent management

Talent management, also referred to as skilled workforce management, is a critical component of the broader field of human resource management. It encompasses the practices, systems and processes that influence employee behavior, attitudes and performance (Armstrong, 2006; Kolivand, 2018). At its core, talent management comprises two levels: personal competency management of workers and organizational management and development (Ott *et al.*, 2018). The various components of talent management include the workforce planning, attraction and acquisition of workers, the evaluation of performance, the development of skills and employee retention (Armstrong, 2006; Pandita and Ray, 2018). Additionally, academic research has expanded the scope of talent management to include long-term organizational strategy and career path planning for employees (Pandita and Ray, 2018).

Talent retention is a crucial aspect of talent management that involves the implementation of policies and practices preventing the loss of skilled workers (Armstrong, 2006). This approach seeks to balance the needs of employees, the forces of the labor market and financial considerations (Armstrong, 2006; Pandita and Ray, 2018). The costs of labor loss are significant and can include direct costs, such as hiring and training new employees and indirect costs, such as the loss of specialized skills, tacit knowledge and an employee network that could be leveraged (Hansen *et al.*, 2011; Ott *et al.*, 2018). Talent attraction is the process of enticing passive candidates to apply for a job in a particular organization. Strategies for attracting skilled workers may include employer branding, recruitment marketing, display of an excellent organizational culture, employee rewards and other benefits (Armstrong, 2006; Liu *et al.*, 2016). These approaches are influenced by factors such as generational differences, economic conditions and overall competitiveness (Kolivand, 2018). However, the impact of these methods on the psychological conditions and experiences of workers is often overlooked (Hu and Ho, 2016).

Managing working conditions as part of talent management

The literature lacks a clear and consistent definition of working conditions, as various studies use different concepts of it interchangeably (Alatalo *et al.*, 2018). Most studies connect

working conditions to factors such as promotion, wage increments, managerial/supervision roles, working outside regular office hours, unpaid overtime, mental strain factors, occupational risks and injuries (Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2019; Toropova *et al.*, 2021). An additional difficulty to the definition is that the execution of actual work is shaped not only by the organization and nature of the tasks at hand but also by workers' skills, attributes, understanding about the tasks, the approach to work and capacity to adjust or handle unexpected situations. Consequently, the effectiveness of work as an activity relies on both the specific work context and the individual worker (Eurofound and ILO, 2019). Also, emotions play part in employees' expectations, whether positive or negative they have an impact on how employees anticipate outcomes. Unpleasant and inadequately managed or suppressed emotional experiences tend to lower individuals' expectations of positive outcomes, affecting their perceptions and expectations (Birch *et al.*, 2021; Gjerald *et al.*, 2023). In line with these studies, we adopt a broad definition of working conditions that encompasses physical and psychological risk factors, as assessed by the workers themselves.

To maintain a talented workforce, it is crucial for any organizations to recognize the various factors that contribute to working conditions, particularly within the dynamic restaurant industry. Due to the inherent precarious nature of the restaurant industry, characterized by low stability, high employee turnover, reliance on younger and low-skilled workers, seasonality, part-time work, exhausting workdays, and possible discrimination or bullying, working conditions in this field require extensive scrutiny and attention to a broad spectrum of factors (Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2019; Kravariti *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, restaurant work presents distinctive challenges, including interactions with diverse and sometimes demanding customers, socially intensive duties, emotional strain, a multicultural work environment, and evolving technological demands (Cajander *et al.*, 2023; Gjerald *et al.*, 2023). Flexibility within this setting warrants a separate consideration, as it assumes a unique character from the perspectives of both employees and employers (Koutsimpogiorgos *et al.*, 2020; Kost *et al.*, 2020). Gjerald *et al.* (2023) address this dichotomy by introducing 'conditioned flexibility,' initially presented as an advantage but potentially evolving into an additional demand for employees. Good working conditions have been linked to improved organizational citizenship and commitment, work self-efficacy and job performance while reducing employee turnover and motivation to leave early before the end of the shift (Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2016). Enhancing overall well-being, job satisfaction, leisure self-efficacy, and reducing exhaustion are all associated with good working conditions (Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2016). In their study, Cicognani *et al.* (2016) found mixed or even opposite outcomes when comparing the expected versus actual working conditions for different types of employment contracts. This suggests that simply having a certain type of contract does not necessarily determine the quality of the job experience. Rather, the individual's perception of the job was a more important factor in shaping their overall job satisfaction and well-being, which provided the premise for this study. Therefore, we propose the following overarching research questions for this article:

- RQ1. What are the factors influencing talent attraction and retention in the restaurant industry?
- RQ2. How do these factors relate to the potential discrepancies between employees' expectations and experiences?

The gap between expectations and experiences

Expectations are a multifaceted construct with various types delineated in existing literature (as highlighted by Andreassen and Gjerald, 2023). It can be categorized into two common types, which are relevant to this study: predictive (reflecting what will happen), and

normative (describing what should happen). Experience can be defined as the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation (Merriam-Webster dictionary). The predictive expectations of workers are shaped by various factors, such as their needs, past experiences, personal preferences and the information they receive about the employer through advertising and other communication channels (Andreassen and Gjerard, 2023; Cicognani *et al.*, 2016; Pleitz *et al.*, 2015). Upon arriving at the workplace and starting their jobs, workers self-assess their normative expectations about their work. However, if their expectations do not align with the employer's expectations regarding the nature and quality of the work, it can lead to dissatisfaction for both parties. Such discrepancies have been found to be associated with negative outcomes, such as lower job satisfaction, commitment to work and intention to leave (Pleitz *et al.*, 2015). Thus, it is crucial to identify any misalignments between employees' expectations and the actual nature of the work that may occur during recruitment (Buckley *et al.*, 1998; Chillakuri, 2020). Psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989) sheds light on the relation of workers' expectations and experiences. It refers to the implicit expectations, obligations and reciprocity that are not explicitly stated in the employment contract. The psychological contract plays a critical role in building trust between employees and employers and is closely linked to the skills of a cohesive work community. As such, it is an essential consideration in managerial work (Pleitz *et al.*, 2015). Based on the literature above, we propose the first hypothesis:

H1. There is a discrepancy between employees' expectations and experiences of their work in the restaurant industry.

In the restaurant industry, employees work under different contracts and under different circumstances (Cajander and Reiman, 2021). These differences set background to expectations and experiences, which may exist between workers and managers regarding their job responsibilities, workload, career advancement, job security and work-life balance (Cajander and Reiman, 2019; Cicognani *et al.*, 2016). Managers are responsible for the everyday business of restaurants, including hiring, training and managing staff and the workers are generally responsible for carrying out specific tasks, such as food preparation, serving or cleaning (Kiefer, 2002; Madera *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, managers are expected to work longer hours and have more responsibilities but also earn more money than workers with fewer responsibilities (Kiefer, 2002; Madera *et al.*, 2017). Achieving manager status is often the final stage of a restaurant worker's career and workers anticipate opportunities for promotion and higher salaries (Enz, 2004). Managers anticipate more job security and stability in their employment, while workers may have more flexibility in their schedules or precarious situations, especially if agency work is involved (Knox, 2018; Warrick, 2017). However, these differences can vary depending on the specific restaurant and the roles of the workers and managers involved. Therefore, we propose our second hypothesis as follows:

H2. The expectations and experiences of different levels of employees vary in the restaurant industry.

Methodology

We employed a multistage mixed method framework (Fetters *et al.*, 2013; Nicolau *et al.*, 2017) to investigate the relationship between the restaurant employees' expectations and experiences of their work. The study was conducted in three stages in the Finnish restaurant industry context. At the first stage, we conducted a survey and quantitative analysis to compare the expectations of workers with the experiences of their work to test *H1* and *H2*. At the second stage, we conducted interviews and qualitative analysis to gain

insights into the underlying motivators behind the attitudes of workers towards their expectations and working conditions to answer the RQ. Concurrently, we conducted the same process with restaurant managers. Finally, we integrated the sets of data to perform the final analysis. [Figure 1](#) presents the progress of the research process.

The survey was promoted through a Facebook page of a professional restaurant industry magazine and distributed to restaurant workers via email through a labor union. In total, 127 workers volunteered for and completed the survey. Subsequently, we invited these participants to take part in the qualitative phase of the study, which included semi-structured interviews. Ten individual interviews were conducted with restaurant workers. A similar process was applied to recruit restaurant managers (hired employees, not restaurant owners). Thirty managers responded to the survey, and all 30 participated in group interviews. We obtained participants' consent through signed forms, which also provided information about the study and its objectives.

Sample description

Out of the 127 workers, 79 (62%) were female, while 48 (37%) were male. They fell into various age groups, including those under 20 years (4 [3%]), between 21 and 30 years (50 [39%]), 31–40 years (42 [33%]), 41–50 years (21 [17%]), 51–60 years (6 [5%]), and over 61 years (4 [3%]). In terms of weekly working hours, 14 (11%) reported less than 10 h, 25 (20%) worked between 11 and 20 h, 29 (23%) worked 21–30 h, 40 (32%) worked 31–40 h, and 18 (14%) worked more than 40 h. One respondent did not provide this information. The ten workers interviewed included individuals of varying ages and genders: four males aged 27, 29, 30 and 34, and six females aged 35, 39, 40, 40, 44 and 46. Two of them were temporary agency workers with no set working hours and the rest worked with full time contract.

Concerning the managers, 18 (60%) were female and 12 (40%) were male. The majority (81%) of those had over 20 years of working experience, 13% had worked for 16–20 years, and 6% for 11–15 years. Their workplaces varied by the size of the restaurant, 31% worked in small restaurants under 10 employees, 22% in restaurants with 11–20 employees, 13% in restaurants with 21–30 employees, and 34% in restaurants with 31 or more employees. It's worth noting that all managers worked under full-time contracts and were considerably older than the workers (majority were over 40).

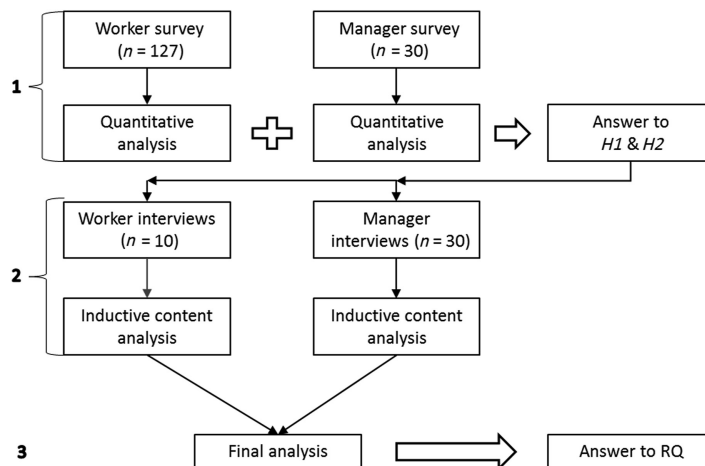


Figure 1.
Flowchart of the
research process

Source(s): Author's own creation

Survey

The survey was developed to examine the restaurant employees' relationship between the expectations and experiences of their work by applying the QPS Nordic questionnaire (Lindström, 1997). This questionnaire specifically focuses on the psychological and the social aspects of work (Lindström, 1997), which are inherently intertwined with employee expectations and experiences (Crocetti *et al.*, 2014). The QPS questionnaire has been tested and widely implemented in various organizations. In a study by Lindström *et al.* (1997), the Cronbach's Alpha value for the QPS ranged between 0.64 and 0.81, indicating good internal consistency. Drawing from the questionnaire, a set of 10 broad questions (Appendix) were formulated to evaluate both the expectations and experiences related to their work. This approach not only ensured the assessment of psychosocial work environment aspects but also provided a robust foundation for examining the alignment between expectations and experiences in the context of restaurant employees' work.

For simplicity and clarity for the participants, both types of expectations were treated equally in the survey. However, later in the interviews, the types of expectations were explained to interviewees and separated for analysis. We implemented dimensionality reduction to streamline the dataset by reducing the number of features. This transformation from a high-dimensional to a low-dimensional space retains the essential properties of the data, addressing challenges posed by numerous, often correlated, and potentially redundant variables in real-world datasets (Meng *et al.*, 2016). The results revealed that all 10 questions align with a single category for both expectations and experiences. The Table 1 below shows the Pearson correlations between the questions for both expectations and experiences.

During the first analysis phase, survey data were processed and analyzed, and key figures were calculated using SPSS Statistics software (version 26). The survey findings were aimed to provide valuable background information for the subsequent interviews, forming a seamless continuation of the data collection and analysis process. Mean scores were calculated for each of the four groups under examination: workers' expectations, workers' experiences, managers' expectations, and managers' experiences. These mean scores represent the average responses of each group regarding their respective aspects of the work environment. Cronbach's Alpha values were computed to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the measurements. For each group, a Cronbach's Alpha value was calculated. These values provide insights into the degree of consistency among the items or variables being measured within each group. High Cronbach's Alpha values indicate that the items within each group reliably measure the intended constructs. In this analysis, values greater than 0.700 were considered reliable. The 95% confidence intervals of the difference variance were determined to evaluate the statistical significance of differences in mean scores between

Question	Expectations	Experiences
Q1	0.712	0.751
Q2	0.686	0.746
Q3	0.737	0.804
Q4	0.713	0.732
Q5	0.806	0.849
Q6	0.677	0.726
Q7	0.864	0.851
Q8	0.662	0.686
Q9	0.837	0.804
Q10	0.871	0.873

Note(s): Extraction method: principal component analysis

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 1.
Component matrix of
the questionnaire

different groups. Each confidence interval provides a range of values within which the true population parameter (in this case, the mean score) is likely to fall. If the confidence intervals do not overlap, it indicates that the differences in mean scores between groups are statistically significant.

Interviews

To supplement survey analyses the research team conducted semi-structured theme interviews (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) (there was a particular topic for the respondent, but questions were open-ended and might not be asked in the exact same way or order to each respondent) for the workers in January–February 2021, and the group interviews for managers were held in September 2022. The data collection process experienced delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic since it was not feasible to conduct group interview with managers during the peak of the pandemic in 2021. The interview questions were based on the Conditions for Work Effectiveness Questionnaire-II (CWEQ-II; Almost and Laschinger, 2002; Laschinger *et al.*, 2001) CWEQ-II was selected due to its versatility and modifiability. It has been consistently utilized alongside other scales and it has demonstrated its applicability and reliability across various contexts (Chandler, 1986). CWEQ-II measures access to different structures of opportunities, such as learning and mobility within the organization, obtaining formal and informal knowledge needed for effective work, receiving feedback and guidance from subordinates, peers and superiors, and having the necessary financial means, materials, time, equipment and supplies. The CWEQ-II also measures formal and informal power, which is derived from job characteristics, social connections and communication channels. However, to obtain detailed responses for this study, the research team decided to conduct the questionnaire as an interview, allowing for more flexibility and to make customized open-ended questions about the expectations of interviewees concerning each theme. This approach allowed the researchers to gain valuable insights into the experiences of the interviewees and allowed the use of previous survey data as a topic of discussion. In this way, interviews provided data for a comprehensive inductive content analysis, which is a qualitative method (Bengtsson, 2016; Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). On average, each individual interview had a duration of 45 min and the group interview for managers lasted for two hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The point of data saturation was reached as interviewees consistently offered similar responses to the questions. The same interview protocol and guide that was used with the workers was used as the basis of the interview with the managers. Group interview was conducted by two researchers and one consultant simultaneously to avoid any possible interpretation errors and to understand the overall situation and themes which were discussed.

The interview material was analyzed using NVivo software (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019) according to the principles of the inductive content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). The main author was responsible for reviewing, coding, and analyzing the data obtained from interviews. To gain a comprehensive understanding about the data, each interview transcript underwent multiple thorough readings. Following this, significant statements within the data were identified and encoded, employing a color-coding system assisted by NVivo software. These coded statements were subsequently organized and categorized in alignment with the research questions. During the secondary round of readings comments were grouped into overarching categories that encapsulated specific meanings, such as “Factors affecting talent attraction in restaurants.” These broader categories were then further classified into sub-categories, streamlining the organization of comments associated with distinct themes, like “Using humor in recruitment.” The process of constructing the main category through abstraction involved the creation of generic categories derived from the sub-categories using content-specific keywords.

Findings

Survey findings

Table 2 below presents the mean scores, Cronbach's alpha values and 95% of the confidence intervals of the difference variance. The high Cronbach's alpha values (values greater than 0.700 were considered reliable) for all question groups suggest that they measure the intended constructs reliably. The 95% confidence intervals of the difference variance suggest that the differences between the mean scores are statistically significant, indicating that there are significant differences between the expectations and the experiences of the work environment of both employee groups. These expectations held by both employee groups (i.e. the workers and managers) regarding their work were found to be relatively high. However, when comparing their expectations with their actual experiences, both workers and managers reported lower scores in the survey, revealing a significant misalignment between employees' expectations and the experiences concerning their work. The high level of agreement among the survey items measuring expectations and experiences further enhanced the credibility of the findings. While both groups held high expectations for their work, workers reported a greater disparity between their experiences and their expectations compared with managers. Although managers also faced misalignment between their expectations and experiences, it was comparatively smaller.

It can be concluded from the survey that the misalignment between employees' work expectations and the experiences is indeed substantial in many restaurant workplaces, providing support for H1. The survey findings suggest the presence of a discrepancy between the different levels of employees' work expectations and the experiences, with a more pronounced impact on workers than on managers. Based on these findings, H2 is supported. The employee relations between workers and managers were defined by their unique roles and perspectives, so their different views should be considered in planning of talent management.

Interview findings

This part of the study aimed to investigate how the employees' expectations and experiences affect talent retention and attraction in the restaurants. The survey provided a preliminary understanding of the expectations and experiences of different employee levels and the interviews were conducted to discover and clarify these matters. This way both employee levels could give a slightly different view to restaurant work. The owners were treated in this study as the supreme authority for the affairs of the restaurant and the paragraph "Withdrawal of the owners from everyday work" discusses the relationship between both employee groups with the owners.

Employee group	Mean score Variance	Cronbach's alpha	95% confidence interval of the difference
Workers' expectations	4.359 0.045	0.758	4.2067 4.5102
Workers' experiences	3.084 0.040	0.910	2.9413 3.2273
Managers' expectations	4.300 0.051	0.933	4.1388 4.4597
Managers' experiences	3.661 0.036	0.924	3.5204 3.7916

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 2.
Key figures of the
survey for the
employee groups

Factors affecting talent retention in restaurants

Working conditions as a determinant of talent retention. The interviews revealed that predictive expectations of working conditions played a crucial role in determining talent retention. Specifically, employees who perceive their working conditions as favorable from the beginning are more likely to stay with the company, especially those who have access to flexible work arrangements, promotion opportunities and competitive remuneration packages, to mention a few perks. Conversely, employees who perceive their working conditions being inadequate are more likely to leave the company regardless of the initial expectations. The same goes for the pace of work and the amount of demand placed on employees. In some cases, employees think that the workload is too high or that their work-life balance is not being respected. This can be interpreted as a violation of their normative expectations.

Another critical factor in talent retention, which the interviewees emphasized was the level of respect and trust that employers show for their employees is. Employees who feel respected by their employers are more likely to remain with the company. Respectful behavior can manifest through regular communication, feedback and recognition of employees' achievements and responding to their normative expectations. Worker 1 talked about good situation in their restaurant:

Our restaurant manager and owners don't directly dictate how we should do our work. There's trust in each one of us to carry out our tasks independently. If there's any need for support, I can easily reach my immediate supervisors and colleagues out.

Management weaknesses contribute significantly to high turnover rates. Poor management practices, such as lack of communication and unclear or untruthful job definitions or advertisements, lead to employees thinking that their expectations were not met and further leads to dissatisfaction increasing the likelihood of them leaving. Both the workers and managers also emphasized that personnel turnover can create a negative spiral of bad expectations, finally causing more turnover. As more employees leave a company, the remaining employees become demotivated. Moreover, the high cost of replacing employees can create financial difficulties for restaurants, and understaffing exacerbates rushes and pressure on existing employees, violating their normative expectations of what work should be. Furthermore, workers stated that a negative workplace atmosphere, lack of social support from colleagues and managers, bullying and discrimination can create a toxic work environment that makes employees unhappy and more likely to leave. The complexity of upholding good working conditions was highlighted by Manager 1:

Everyone affects the working conditions in our restaurant. Encouraging people to keep up their work ability is one thing, but whether the employees themselves want to put in the effort to maintain and improve it is a whole different story.

Overall, the interviewees emphasized that restaurants should prioritize creating a positive workplace atmosphere, providing favorable working conditions, demonstrating respect for their employees and keep their promises about the quality and content of the work to increase talent retention. Addressing management weaknesses and ensuring a reasonable pace of work are also critical to reducing labor turnover rates. These themes highlight the crucial role that truthful definitions of working conditions play in forming employees' expectations and experiences, and finally decisions of staying or leaving.

Generational divide in work ethics. The interviewees emphasized some differences between younger and older employees in terms of their work preferences, attitudes and normative expectations. Younger employees tended to prioritize flexibility, work-life balance and opportunities for growth and development, while older employees placed more importance on job security, stability, and benefits. In addition, unlike older workers, younger employees

were not forced to work due to fewer familial responsibilities or financial obligations, such as childrearing or mortgage repayment. Specifically, younger employees appeared to be more accepting of the idea of relying on welfare as an alternative to employment if their normative expectations were not met, whereas the older generation tended to view it as more stigmatizing. Worker 2 states that:

I deal with hundreds of people daily who have different world views, value systems, perspectives, and various moods. Often, I am like a rubbish bin where negative emotions are channelled. Navigating through such social situations is a burden. I can never predict what I might encounter. I do not have to stand for this, perhaps I will soon quit . . .

Many interviewees noted that in recent years, the restaurant industry garnered a lot of attention due to the popularity of cooking shows, making it a media darling. This resulted in a surge of applicants with high normative expectations looking to join the industry. However, the hype has since subsided, leading to a decline in the industry's valuation. Consequently, many individuals who entered the industry during the hype left, as the actual work failed to meet their normative expectations. Most of these employees were young and lacked the persistence and genuine motivation required to thrive in the demanding restaurant industry. Manager 2 stated the following about younger workers:

We're focusing on younger folks who haven't had any training in this field. We want to train them, motivate them, and get them involved. Otherwise, in just a couple of years, they might end up moving on to something entirely different.

Withdrawal of the owners from everyday work. The withdrawal of owners from the everyday work of the restaurants forces employees to shoulder more responsibility than should be required of them. This can have a significant negative impact on overall morale and trust in the workplace and create negative predictive expectations. Some restaurant owners view their establishments solely as investments, assuming them to generate profits without requiring their involvement. This might result in lack of continuity and stability, as employees struggle to maintain standards and profitability of the restaurant without the owners' guidance. Worker 2 talks about nobody taking responsibility in a restaurant.

As a worker, changing practices and processes can be challenging. If a particular way of doing things has been established in the restaurant, it may not be easy to change it right away if at all. Often new idea or perspective on doing things is either swiftly dismissed or nobody cares, even if it could improve operations.

In addition, recruitment and staff retention might suffer from the absent owner, as the employed managers usually have no authority to promise candidates benefits or some other form of compensation. When the words and actions of the owner do not match, this can lead to disproportion between both the predictive and normative expectations and the experiences of employees, causing a loss of trust in the employer. This can be particularly damaging during times of crisis, such as the pandemic, when companies may be under increased pressure to cut costs or pressure employees to put far more effort into their work than originally predictively expected. Employees may think that the company's most valuable asset, its employees, are sacrificed to fix losses, leading to further distrust and intention to leave. It is crucial for owners or their representatives to communicate openly and honestly with their employees, especially during times of uncertainty, to help build and maintain trust in the future in the workplace. Manager 3 expressed the problem using a figure of speech:

Keeping all these different parts of the chain in good condition is crucial. It's the responsibility of the entrepreneur or the restaurant manager to make sure everything stays intact and connected. Because every single link in that chain has an impact on the overall operation and if the chain is already weak right from the start, well, things just won't fall into place, and it won't work out smoothly.

Factors affecting talent attraction in restaurants

Using humor in recruitment. Many managers said that they used humorous job advertisements to attract potential employees. The use of humor in job postings was found to be particularly prevalent when the job itself had unattractive aspects, such as low pay, long working hours or demanding work. These negative aspects were overemphasized humorously to achieve certain kinds of shock effects. Managers use humor in job postings to reduce applicants' predictive and normative expectations, making it clear that the job may not be as desirable as it seems. In this way, applicants are prepared for what they will face if they choose to pursue a job. Humorous job postings can also help managers evaluate applicants preliminarily. Applicants who respond to a humorous job posting are more likely to have a good sense of humor and to be good fit for the company culture and their normative expectations may be lower than an applicant who answers normal job posting. Both the workers and the managers considered humor to be an effective tool in recruitment efforts. An example of humorous job posting presented by Manager 4:

Salary 50e/h. A couple of times a month a trip to wineries for tastings and you can decide your working hours yourself. Well, not really, but there would be a job available with long working days, poor pay, and work when your friends are partying. If this raised any interest, please contact the manager.

However, managers using this method reflected that it is important to strike the right balance between humor and professionalism. Job postings that are too humorous may come across as unprofessional and create wrong kinds of expectations which a job cannot match, and the humorous style may not attract the right applicants. Managers admitted that they must carefully consider the tone and content of their job postings to ensure that they effectively attract the right applicants.

Emotionally appealing job advertising. Several interviewed managers had used emotionally appealing job advertisements, which particularly feed normative expectations of potential workers and target younger job seekers who had limited experience in the working world. These advertisements employed various themes aimed at capturing the attention of potential applicants. The themes revolved around the excitement of embarking on new experiences, forging lasting friendships, creating unforgettable memories and becoming part of timeless stories. While this form of advertising has gained popularity, it is important to note that the interviewed managers acknowledged that it may cause a growing disparity between workers' predictive and normative expectations and experiences of work, which survey results also confirm. This may result in problems and turnover in the long run. Managers who utilized this approach did not anticipate a long-term commitment from employees; they employed it to fulfill short-term staffing needs. Manager 2 gave an example of emotionally appealing job advertising:

Here at *** we believe in the power of friendship and memories. We are a place where old friends meet, and new friendships are made. Here you can create unforgettable, eternal memories. So, come and join to work with us this weekend. Bring your friends, share stories, make new memories, and enjoy life *** style.

Temporary agency work (TAW) as a route to employment. TAW was often considered a route to employment by managers, allowing employees to gain experience in different roles and potentially leading to permanent employment. However, workers' predictive and normative expectations of regular work, benefits and stability are not often met. Manager 5 was pleased with TAW as a route to employment by stating:

So, for the extras, it's like a kind of reward when they get more hours for doing their job well.

Additionally, managers said that contracts between employers and agencies can limit the transfer of an employee to the restaurant or that the agency charges a significant fee when the

employee is transferred. As a result, many agency workers felt like their normative expectations were not met and the experience was that they were being exploited, not appreciated, and not receiving the benefits and security they were expecting, leading to dissatisfaction and intent to leave. A TAW worker stated:

Well, you know, it's like those hours given to temporary workers, they're usually the first ones to go. It puts them in a real tough spot, always hanging by a thread, and on top of that, they got this constant worry about what's going to happen down the line, if there's going to be any work for them at all. It's a real mess, no certainty whatsoever in this situation.

Discussion

Three factors (employees' experiences of their work, leveraging positive emotions and utilization of TAW) influencing retention and attraction in restaurants emerged from the interviews as highly significant and timely. The first factor concern employees' experiences of their work are related to their working conditions, management practices and workplace atmosphere, which play a crucial role in determining talent retention. The owners hold the most power in restaurants and therefore withdrawal, neglect, and disengagement of owners from everyday work can exert a substantial detrimental influence on workplace morale and trust, ultimately resulting in increased turnover rates. [Gjerald et al. \(2023\)](#), present in their study that support and recognition from management and colleagues is important to employees. In addition, our study emphasizes the importance of the support and recognition, or at least some indication of caring about the affairs of the restaurant, also from the owners. Further, the power dynamic of restaurants perfectly lines with [Rousseau's \(1989\)](#) psychological contract theory, explaining the importance of reciprocity and setting realistic expectations for employees, as they often have limited knowledge about the working conditions until they are hired. Additionally, restaurants face a formidable challenge managing the expectations of younger generations. Our research, in conjunction with the insights of [Cicognani et al. \(2016\)](#), underscores the paramount importance of paying special attention to the youngest workers, as they are the most prone to leave due to unmet expectations related to working conditions. [Chillakuri's \(2020\)](#), observations also reflect with our findings, emphasizing that younger workers often have idealistic normative expectations about their work, expecting it to be both meaningful and exciting, with their ideas actively implemented by their managers. Our research contributes by highlighting additional characteristics of younger workers, such as their propensity for work detachment and susceptibility to relying on alternative means of income.

As a second factor, our study suggests that leveraging positive emotions, as discussed by [Alatalo et al. \(2018\)](#), can be instrumental in motivating employees to make decisions and encouraging their engagement. In our study, this effect can be seen in job seekers' attitudes towards accepting a new job, for which managers used emotionally appealing marketing tactics that can attract young workers to join the workforce by creating positive expectations. Another effective emotional strategy for talent attraction is the use of humorous marketing if job seekers understand the intended tone. Humorous job postings can offer a non-conventional perspective, preparing candidates for less desirable aspects of the job and reducing normative expectations and then likelihood of disappointment. While these strategies initially capture attention and interest, the growing gap between normative expectations and experiences can ultimately result in higher turnover rates. It is important to acknowledge that such approaches also lead to shorter job tenures. In their study, [Oikarinen and Söderlund \(2016\)](#), found that the presence of humor in job advertisements had a detrimental effect on the expectations of job seekers. It influenced their perceptions and attitudes towards the job ad, the company, and the work in a negatively, in contrast to our

research where humor in job advertisements was generally viewed positively. This may be due to the customer service-oriented restaurant field itself, where humor is especially emphasized even as a requirement for the job.

Third factor that emerged concerns TAW. The predictive expectation of TAW providing a pathway to secure permanent employment was viewed as both an opportunity and a risk. Although TAW can offer potential career prospects, the actual outcomes may not always align with employees' predictive expectations, resulting in a potential turnover of employees. [Fostervold et al. \(2018\)](#) presented a significant concern when utilizing TAW as a pathway to employment: that there is a practice of using and disposing of workers if there is a continuous supply of new workers available. In our study, we observed that this practice had a subtle but notable impact. This practice first created positive predictive expectations to employees, later it indeed hindered the transition of employees to permanent work and created a cycle of continuous replacement, causing the employees feel their predictive expectations were not met, and they were being exploited and not appreciated.

As an answer to [RQ1](#), we outlined above three factors that influence talent attraction and retention in the restaurant industry. We emphasized the significance of working conditions, management practices, and workplace atmosphere determining talent retention. Also, we noted that the substantial impact owners' involvement or disengagement from daily work can have on workplace morale and trust. These factors ultimately affect turnover rates and highlight the importance of support, recognition, and the psychological contract between employers and employees. We also addressed the management of expectations, particularly focusing on younger workers who tend to have higher expectations, which [H2](#) also highlights.

[RQ2](#) was answered above by explaining how the identified factors can lead to discrepancies between employees' expectations and their actual experiences. It points out that misalignments between employees' expectations and their workplace experiences are substantial as [H1](#) highlights. Support for [H2](#) acknowledges that workers and managers often have different perspectives and expectations based on their roles. This highlights the need for tailored talent management approaches that consider these differences among employee groups to address the potential disparities between expectations and experiences effectively. In summary, a holistic understanding of the factors influencing talent attraction and retention in the restaurant industry was gained and their relationship to the discrepancies between employee expectations and experiences cleared.

Implications

Examining the differences of expectations and experiences of restaurant employees help employers to gain a better understanding about the workforce. This is needed when considering how to design work environment to be more inviting and to adjust work demands accordingly to gain better retention and attraction for all employees. Employers should be transparent about what employees can expect of their jobs in terms of working conditions, responsibilities, and benefits. Also, they should prioritize creating a positive workplace atmosphere by encouraging mutual respect and trust.

This study touches topic of changing work ethics, especially among younger employees. This information can be valuable as it reflects how the younger workforce views work, career, and job security differently from older generations that have been in work life much longer. The topic was only considered shortly. So, this topic requires more research. The discussion of TAW raises concerns about the treatment of agency workers. Regulatory changes should be considered in order to ensure agency workers are protected and treated fairly. The same conclusion about agency work has been made many times before and will continue to be made again and again as, [Alsos and Evans \(2018\)](#), [Cajander and Reiman \(2021\)](#), [Cotton \(2015\)](#), [Forde and Slater \(2016\)](#), [Johnstone and Quinlan \(2006\)](#), and [Knox \(2018\)](#), have concluded.

This study, for its part, responds to the lack of research presented by Gjerard *et al.* (2021), the need for more research catching the actual voices of the workers themselves. This study focuses precisely on bringing the voice of restaurant workers to be heard and even temporary agency workers had representation among participants. In similar manner, this study expands the examination of Alatalo's team (2018), on the role of emotions of the service encounter from the traditional dyadic perspective emphasizing human interactions between employee and customer, then we expand it further to include the interactions between workers, managers and to even owners of the restaurants.

Future research avenues

As for future research, we propose examining the effects of humorous or emotional tone of job advertisements for actual outcomes of the employee retention. This future research could also compare different industries to examine if other industrial sectors use humor in a similarly and whether working results can be achieved. Other notable topic for further research elaborates from Andreassen *et al.* (2021), that the shift between predictive and minimum tolerable expectation types of expectations might result in a narrower *zone of tolerance*, potentially making people more discerning and harder to satisfy. We suggest focusing on exploring the 'zone of tolerance' also for work expectations, particularly within the context of talent management and employment. This could yield fresh insights into the impact of flexibility in work expectations on talent retention, attraction, and job satisfaction. Moreover, while this study primarily examines the restaurant industry, there is an opportunity to conduct similar studies across various sectors. Such research could help determine if the issues highlighted here are industry-specific or more widespread. Further research could delve deeper into the generational differences, exploring their nuances and implications for talent management. This research is especially pertinent as younger generations play an increasingly prominent role in the workforce.

Strengths and limitations

The strength of this study is the implementation of a mixed methods approach, which gave the opportunity to look at the matter more holistically and enabled the collection and integration of diverse data from the participants in this study. By utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study was able to gather a broader range of information and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Although the study was conducted in Finland, its themes of restaurant work, staffing challenges and talent management are relevant globally. In this respect, it is crucial to recognize that Finland is considered a welfare state, which implies that there is a relatively stable and secure labor market, better working conditions, strong labor unions and higher wages (Rasmussen *et al.*, 2019). Thus, when applying the findings of this study to other regions or contexts, the influence of these factors should be considered. Second, due to the limited resources available, the interviews were conducted with only one researcher. Thus, this situation provides an opportunity for conducting more comprehensive analyses but raises the potential for increased subjectivity interpreting the findings. The third limitation relates to the sample size that can be considered limited. Concerning the survey, a small sample size can lead to wide confidence intervals, which increases the risk of obtaining "false positive" results and might exaggerate the differences between groups. Concerning the interviews, we see that a certain saturation point was achieved within this limited sample of interviewees that was also in an imbalance between the workers and managers when considered from the number of interviewees. Fourth limitation relates also to the sample. The utilization of a Facebook page from a professional restaurant industry magazine could potentially introduce a selection bias, primarily representing restaurant workers who

actively follow that specific magazine. Similarly, reliance on an email list from a labor union may not provide a comprehensive cross-section of restaurant workers, especially those unaffiliated with the union. Out of 127 worker participants, 44 workers were sourced from the union's list and all the 30 managers. It is likely that restaurant workers who follow the magazine or are union members are likely to be more interested and informed about the restaurant industry.

Conclusions

This study shed light on the substantial misalignment between employees' work expectations and their actual experiences within the restaurant industry. This discrepancy affects employee retention and attraction. Both examined groups – workers and managers – have high expectations of their work, but their actual experiences in the workplace are lower than their expectations. The impact of this misalignment is more pronounced among workers than managers, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the unique perspectives and roles of different employee groups in planning talent management strategies. Creating a positive workplace atmosphere and working conditions, promoting respect from employers and good management practices were considered critical factors to reduce the misalignment of expectations and experiences. To attract employees, the use of humor in job advertisements is a promising feature in the restaurant context. Though, it is important to strike a balance between humor, emotional tone and professionalism to attract the right applicants. When using humor or emotional tone, employee candidates' possible generational differences should be given more emphasis (i.e. younger employees and job seekers may value humor differently than older and more experienced employees).

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Appendix

Survey

Source(s): Author's own creation

1. How would you rate the importance of the following factors in your ideal job? (Scale 1–5. 1 = less important, 5 = very important)

How important is the opportunity to learn and acquire new skills in your ideal job?

How important is the opportunity for career advancement in your ideal job?

How important is receiving a reasonable salary and benefits package in your ideal job?

How important is working at a suitable pace for you in your ideal job?

How important is finding meaning in your job, according to your own definition, in your ideal job?

How important is job security and a stable income in your ideal job?

How important is working in a respectful and supportive environment, in your ideal job?

How important is work-life balance, where work and free time fit well together, in your ideal job?

How important is experiencing a sense of continuous success and self-improvement in your ideal job?

How important is having mutual trust and respect in the workplace in your ideal job?

2. How well do the following factors manifest in your current workplace? (Scale 1–5. 1 = does not work/is not present, 5 = works/is present)

How well manifests the opportunity to learn and acquire new skills in your current job?

How well manifests the opportunity for career advancement in your current job?

How well do you receive a reasonable salary and benefits package in your current job?

How well do you experience working at a suitable pace for you in your current job?

How well do you find meaning in your job, according to your own definition, in your current job?

How well works job security and a stable income in your current job?

How well in your current job can you work in a respectful and supportive environment?

How well in your current job works work-life balance, where work and free time fit well together?

How well do you experience a sense of continuous success and self-improvement in your current job?

How well manifests mutual trust and respect in the workplace in your current job?

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