READY TO GROW: Workforce Partners in the Spotlight

Going for 'Gold': An apprenticeship program with benefits that cross industries

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Derik Reiser of Old Herald Brewery & Distillery in Collinsville, shown at the far left, shares details of the site and its program with the National Restaurant Association's David Faro, shown at the center right in the black polo shirt, and others taking part in the 2023 hospitality tour. (Photo courtesy National Restaurant Association)

Negative reviews, low employee morale, high turnover. Those are just a few examples of the fallout resulting from a customer experience that is just downright bad. "Bad" is a subjective term, but we all know when we've been part of such a scene, and we all have countless stories about it.

Bad customer service is defined across industries as when a business or entity fails to meet its customers' expectations in terms of quality, response time, or just overall. Poor customer service impacts the reputation of a company and its brand, leads to customer churn or loss of loyalty, negative word-of-mouth and online reviews, as well as the aforementioned lower employee morale and higher turnover in the workforce.

And according to a recent PricewaterhouseCoopers customer experience survey, 59 percent of people in the United States will walk away after several bad experiences – 17 percent after just one bad experience – even if they have love or loyalty to a company or product previously.

The soft skills needed for a positive customer service experience are most often the focus of the hospitality and retail industries but are also assets that can be beneficial in any industry.

It is for that reason that a new apprenticeship program rolled out in the past year through a partnership between the National Restaurant Association, Madison County Employment & Training, and Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau is gaining traction across the region, and across the country.

As an affiliate organization of the National Restaurant Association, a new "Guest Service Gold" training program is being delivered by the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute (AHLEI). It has thus far been focused on the hospitality and tourism outlets of customer service but is looking to expand into other vocations as well. When it comes to an audience, this training program is built for any customer-facing professional experience.

In fact, Director Tony Fuhrmann said that his staff is going through the training so that those seeking services through Madison County Employment & Training will have a more positive experience.

Further though, Fuhrmann's office now has two newly trained Guest Service Gold instructors who are now available to the greater community to provide an industry-recognized credential to those in need that also provides more opportunity for individuals looking toward a related career path.

So, how did such a nationally renowned program end up in Madison County? And why?

David Faro, the senior manager of Workforce Development and Business Development for the National Restaurant Association, provided answers to the how and why.

"Tony and I met in Washington D.C. at the National Association of Workforce Boards Convention," Faro said, "and I was talking about putting together multi-sector networks and how that was the most powerful model for moving the needle for our members, which are hospitality employers.

"After that talk was over and everyone left to go have coffee, there was one guy still there who came and talked to me. He said, 'Hey, I think we're doing a lot of those things in southwestern Illinois. What you were describing, I think, we're really on that path, and I'd like to talk to you about that.'" The guy Faro was referring to was Fuhrmann.

"So, Tony and I started talking, and I started to get more excited about what Tony and his cohort were doing, because it's a terrific story about a multi-sector group in an area that isn't super well-known. You would think more of Chicago or Atlanta being really focused on hospitality as an economic driver and area of opportunity for people. As soon as Tony started saying those words, however, I was on board. Now we're working together with Great Rivers & Routes Tourism with a first focus on the hospitality workforce," Faro shared further.

A survey of the region's hospitality employers was a first step. The results: A desired focus in what some refer to as "soft skills."

"Our association likes to call them power skills," said Faro. "What I mean by that is customer service, and so we started to develop a conversation about how we could build a scaled model for customer service for area employers. The answer to that was the Guest Service Gold Tourism Program that's offered through the National Restaurant Association as well as the American Hotel and Lodging Association."

As for the "why here" piece of the story, Faro noted, "Looking at southwestern Illinois – while not exclude other areas of the United States – but the Midwest does have a reputation for hospitality.

Faro continued: "And most importantly, Tony had put together a multi-sector network of people that were telling the story on the ground that we would like the rest of the country to hear. A focus on hospitality – and that focus on hospitality is through professional development and industry-recognized certifications. The community also put their money where their mouths are. They've minted instructors and they're putting instructors in schools. We have an Illinois Restaurant Association ProStart program in a school in Collinsville because Tony brought educational frameworks in as well."

The program Faro referenced is hosted at the Collinsville Area Vocational Center. Further training opportunities are in various stages of development and/or implementation with John Michel's Soulcial Kitchen in Swansea and with Derik Reiser at Old Herald Brewery & Distillery in Collinsville. A further dialogue has also begun with AltonWorks as they bring Master Chef Lasse Sorensen to the region, a six-time Emmy nominee and host of the TV show "Food is Love."

Fuhrmann added, "We have two of our own staff that were trained as part of a state grant, and we're working with at-risk youth now. We're going to be doing the training with them as a part of that state grant, but then we're going to open it up to the public and to the business community. We'll try to target restaurants at first, but we're not going to limit it to them.

Currently Madison County Employment & Training works with youth attending alternative school, night school and in the juvenile justice system.

"Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau has partnered with us on this as well," Fuhrmann said further. "They may have some of their staff go through the training so that they can become trainers as well and offer this on a regional basis. We've already had restaurants who want to know when they can do this. The training is based on hospitality, but customer service is customer service, right?

"Those skills are needed. You go into your doctor's office for example, and you encounter people there at the front desk too. They are providing customer service. I can see people from all industries saying, 'Yeah, I want to put my staff through this,'" Fuhrmann added.

Nationwide, hospitality has nearly one million jobs available each month, and one in 10 people work in the foodservice industry nationally, making it the second-largest private sector employer in the country. Nine in 10 restaurant managers, and 8 in 10 owners, started in entry-level positions.

In fact, 63 percent of all adults have worked in the restaurant industry at some point, essentially making it the nation's training ground.

Faro then shared some further insight about the hospitality industry as a whole now, and how it will move forward.

"But instead of talking about the future of the hospitality industry, let's talk about the future of the American economy. As the American economy continues to grow and boom, it utilizes hospitality as a backbone. In many states, it's the second or third largest part of the economy. In fact, Tony and his cohort are focusing on it in Madison County because they understand the power of a strong hospitality economy," he said.

"So, that's not going away. But what is going to change in the future? Two things. More articulation with workforce development because they understand what happened to the industry in the pandemic and because people like Tony across the country are vital catalysts in sustaining us," Fano said further.

"And, across the country, people are talking about apprenticeships in a different way than they did when I was in high school or even when my kids were younger," he added. "Right now, the apprenticeship framework is gaining a lot of momentum for people in hospitality careers to have an illuminated career pathway, meaningful industry connections, and meaningful industry certifications. This is a powerful way for opportunity populations to enter the industry and thrive."