

Reopening Successfully, Part 1: How to Manage Labor

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Maybe you closed your doors temporarily or kept a skeleton crew for takeout and delivery orders. You've made it this far. Now governors are setting dates for when restaurants can fully reopen. That's good news.

Besides setting an opening date, however, states are also mandating social distancing within dining rooms, the result being fewer tables, crimping your revenue potential. In an

industry already famous for tight margins, it's never been more important to execute for maximum profitability, all while keeping employees and patrons safe.

Getting the most from every labor dollar is key

Because the cost of labor can run anywhere from 25% to 40% of gross revenue, it's important to get it right from the (re)start. Give yourself at least couple of weeks prior to opening to implement these suggestions:

Pay retention incentives. Wait, weren't we talking about saving money on labor? Absolutely. Offering short-term financial incentives or small hourly raise to your most experienced employees *will* save you money in the long run. After all, you don't have to train them; they know their jobs already and how to provide dining experiences that keep guests coming back. Better yet, they can help your new staff members get up to speed faster, smoothing the way for a successful reopening. Additionally, many of you may have received a loan through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). Forgiveness is based on maintaining or quickly rehiring employees and maintaining salary levels. You may need to offer financial incentives to former staff to compete with the enhanced unemployment benefits they may be receiving now.

Spread the word: You're hiring. Fire up your social media accounts, hang "Now Hiring" banners from your storefront, and distribute recruitment flyers in the neighborhood around your location. Encourage your current staff to reach out to friends who would make a good fit.

Train your new employees in groups. You likely won't have the time to do the customary, one-on-one, apprentice-style training. Instead, hold training "seminars" of up to 15 hires at a time. Pick a time on a Saturday or Sunday to go over all policies and procedures, and familiarize them with your layout. Be sure to hold a robust Q&A session to answer their questions.

Train for the basics of service first. Be sure to include an overview of your facility, menu, table numbers, and who to go to if they have a challenge. Customers will likely have a lot of questions. Consider arming staff with an FAQ sheet to refer to when they're asked about your updated hours of operation, services offered, payments accepted, and specifically, all the steps you're taking to keep your staff and patrons safe from COVID-19.

Use the server-assistant model. One way to overcome a shortage of veteran servers (and turn tables more quickly) is to let only your experienced servers take orders, enter them into the POS, and process payments. Use new, less knowledgeable staff to perform the basics like running food and pre-bussing tables. Train your bussers to refill chips, drinks and bread when they're not cleaning and setting tables so your primary servers can focus on your customers.

Offer free online training resources to new hires. Simplot, for instance, offers a quick, comprehensive training [on how to make great french fries](#), perfect for new staff and veterans alike, available online 24/7 on any device, including phones. Free

foodservice [careers development and training is also available online](#) through ServSafe®.

Reduce kitchen labor with prepared, frozen ingredients. Frozen vegetables and fruit are an ideal solution to labor challenges because they eliminate costly prep. They also reduce the need for training and skilled labor, because they're easy and fast to prepare and serve. Think of it this way, if you are paying someone \$15/hr. back of the house, wouldn't you rather have them doing something other than cutting \$0.25 onions and peppers, like breaking down whole proteins with a much higher cost per unit?

Plan your staffing around best- and worst-case scenarios. Always schedule heavy versus light when in doubt. Have staff on call, on site, in case it's busy. This means they come in dressed for work and receive a free meal. If demand warrants it, they go on the floor. If not, they can go home. Floor plans can be swapped out should on-call staff be needed. Getting caught short is no fun and no good for business!

Train for safety. Follow all local and national safety guidelines to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

You're reopening at a time when many things are out of your control. Fortunately, labor is one thing you *can* control, and labor efficiency will play a huge roll in your success as you recover. The more you can keep your servers serving, cooks cooking, and tables turning, the better off you'll be.