

FOCUS ON RESTAURANTS

Quick-service restaurants offer tasty careers

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Like many people, J. R. Escobar wants to keep a balance between his work life and his personal life. The 26-year old plays local gigs with his band Wingnut, practices sleight of hand at a local magic club, and makes time for friends and family. What may be surprising to some is that the balance includes his job as general manager of a Pizza Hut restaurant in Round Lake Beach.

Quick-service restaurants—to use the industry term for fast food—have borne an image as places to work long hours for little pay. But many restaurant chains have greatly improved their conditions to attract and retain good employees.

Pizza Hut's corporate parent, Yum! Brands, has been a leader in improving benefits for its employees. Yum! Brands is one of the world's largest quick-service restaurant companies with 33,000 units in 100 countries. It also owns the KFC and Taco Bell brands and has recently acquired the Long John Silver's and A&W chains.

Virginia Ferguson, Yum!'s public relations spokesperson, says that a restaurant general manager might still be expected to pull a 50-hour week, but they are compensated with a competitive wage and benefits package including performance-based bonuses, a stock option plan and 401(k). Many of these benefits are also offered to the restaurant crew.

"We offer health insurance and a savings plan to all our people who work enough hours to cover the premium. You can be here just two days a week taking phone orders, and you're qualified for coverage," Escobar says.

Escobar is also pleased with the recruiting efforts Yum! has made in the Hispanic community. "I have an employee who didn't speak much English when she started, but she had a lot of enthusiasm for the job, so I brought her through the management program and she became a shift manager before she even became bilingual. A lot of other places won't even consider doing that."

These incentives are becoming standard through the industry, according to Sean Self of Self Opportunity, Inc. a Dallas-based firm that conducts career fairs for restaurant chains: "There are managers making six figures in many restaurants, especially complex operations like a Chuck E. Cheese's. Stock options are being offered to the hourly employees. There's a great improvement in quality of life for employees," Self says.

Escobar receives support from Area and Regional Coaches, most of whom were restaurant general managers themselves. Escobar is responsible for hiring his own employees, although a specific process is

followed. "We ask test questions to see who might have customer-facing skills, or if they have 'back of the house' skills to keep the food prep area running; who has driving or team orientation skills.

"We want the prospective employee to come in for two hours and see how the job actually works before they even have the interview, because this can be a very high-paced job."

Escobar's involvement in his community helps him identify the right people to work in his restaurant. It also helps identify local events that might bring in more customers, like a village festival or soccer game, so he can be fully staffed and have enough supplies on hand.

Although most restaurant companies prefer to promote from within, the industry is in a growth phase that has opened opportunities for those with outside management experience. Yum! is expanding its success with its multibrand stores, combining menus from two or three different restaurants, like KFC and Taco Bell, under one roof. Jenny Bean, Yum! Brands' employment marketing manager, says they're hiring externally to bring in qualified managers for the multibrand restaurants.

Self has put on job fairs for several restaurants that are building in the Chicago area. The homegrown Portillo's Hot Dogs chain is adding new locations, and several restaurants like Potbelly Sandwich Works, Corner Bakery, Panera Bread, Buca di Beppo and Bahama Breeze are expanding. "During the height of the economic boom, we would be lucky to see 50 people at a job fair," Self says. "Now, our last few events have brought 150 to 175, and we receive up to 400 resumes per event. And the quality of the managerial candidates has gone up tremendously." These restaurants are also considering applicants with outside experience. "If they see a person who's managed a \$5 million department at a Home Depot, they realize there's no reason he can't take care of a \$5 million restaurant."

While the quick service restaurant business has become more attractive to potential managers, it still requires a good customer service attitude that you can pass on to your employees. Escobar, who has managed his Pizza Hut for seven years, says, "This is essentially the same job I had when I was 16. I have a lot more responsibilities now, but I still get to horse around with the employees. This kind of job gives me lots of opportunities to pursue a life outside of work."

— Mark McDermott

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