



RESTAURANT AND
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Personality: a key ingredient to success

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Any company can improve its performance and employee retention by using assessment tools to match the right people with the right positions. But can it work for an entire industry?

That’s what psychologist Gerard Ferrara is finding out through his work with Restaurant and Catering Australia, the main association for the country’s biggest collective employer—the tourism and hospitality industry.

The ambitious assessment project is part of a national strategy involving the association and the federal government to address a shortage of skills and labour.

“There was a big gap between employers’ expectations and the reality of what applicants offered,” says Ferrara. “TV shows like Master Chef, Hell’s Kitchen and the Naked Chef don’t really give a realistic representation of what’s needed. People who know what they’re in for are more likely to work out better. So employers asked, ‘Are we selecting the right sort of people?’”

Fast growth in the service-driven Australian economy poses formidable challenges for the industry. “They have difficulty getting people into the industry, and lots of people who are in the business are new to it,” says Ferrara. “And it doesn’t really have a formal HR department, especially as far as employee testing and selection. The challenge is bringing the whole industry up to date on modern HR practice, and at least growing the chance of retaining suitable people.”

Ferrara notes that the federal government had its own challenge—finding a fair and equitable process to shore up the industry, based on reliable indicators.

To help them meet these challenges, Ferrara interviewed 30 restaurant owners and hotel managers across Australia, representing a range of employers from bargain brands to premium establishments. From their criteria, he determined that the Work Personality Index® assessment was the preferred tool for the industry.

Among the WPI tool’s merits, he says, is that it offers a fair assessment based not on ruling people out, but ruling people in who might otherwise be excluded from consideration.

“The WPI is driven by actual business needs and shaped by industry itself,” says Ferrara. “It gives a sound basis for evaluating at the individual level and at the industry level.”

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When he showed employers the WPI tool's Job Match Profile and asked them to define the range in which ideal employees would score for the 17 personality traits it measures, he got mostly consistent results.

"It's not just technical skills that are needed," he explains. "A chef can fine-tune cooking skills. What mattered to employers were factors like attitude, reliability and attention to detail."

With that in mind, Ferrara and his colleagues then validated the tool by testing current employees who had proven themselves in "front-of-house" and "back-of-house" roles—the two main types of positions the employers wanted profiles for.

Ferrara says the validation step had two benefits: "In the first step, employers had a direct say in what each profile needed. Testing existing good people against those profiles was a way of proving we were on the right path. It also increased commitment from the participating employers."

The owners and managers also got something out of the profiling exercise, says Ferrara. "It was a valuable opportunity for them to reflect on what they need from people, what was most important to them."

What was important turned out to be less about meeting specific job requirements than about aligning candidates' personal values with organizational values—crucial to keeping good people in a high-turnover industry.

Since the initial work in 2008, the skills development project has been laying the groundwork for apprenticeship and training on a nationwide scale.

"We're now trying to develop a network of coaches to help the people who'll be brought on board," says Ferrara. "We're showing them what the scores mean, how to support people through the process and how to retain people who are being selected."

Ferrara ran training sessions for a key group of apprentice support people, to help them understand what they need and how they can work with people of various profiles. He says it's working out well so far. "Each person now has a group they support, and can put a face to the profile."

To Ferrara, the idea of putting a more familiar face on the ideal employee sums up the real value of the WPI tool for the whole industry.

"If you know what you're looking for, you have a better chance of knowing when you've found it."

Gerard Ferrara is a Corporate Psychologist who runs Johari Management Consulting. To learn more about this project contact Gerard at gerard@johari.com.au



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