

*ProFood World*

Special Report

# FUTURE-PROOFING THE F&B WORKFORCE

Labor shortages, shifting expectations, and knowledge loss are reshaping the food and beverage workforce. Learn how to recruit, retain, and upskill teams for an increasingly automated future.

## SPECIAL REPORT

# HOW FOOD AND BEVERAGE MANUFACTURERS CAN DEAL WITH LABOR PROBLEMS

*From hiring employees to retaining them, here's how F&B producers can deal with workforce challenges, while ensuring the tribal knowledge doesn't walk out the door along with retirees.*

**W**orkforce challenges are one of the most prominent issues faced by food and beverage manufacturers. Not only are many people choosing a career somewhere other than what can be a repetitive, physically demanding role, but the great resignation that occurred during and just after the pandemic sped up the number of qualified workers heading out the door. What remains are understaffed plants with people working even harder.

Manufacturers are trying to compensate for this by adding automation into their processes. This, of course, adds another layer of complexity as employees, who may already be underqualified, now have to be trained to use the machinery. It also comes with the public misconception that automation is meant to displace human workers.

Talent pools also may be shallow for food and beverage manufacturing, or manufacturing in general, with competition for the best people coming from other industries such as construction, retail, skilled trades, and more.



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The following will help F&B producers to deal with workforce challenges, from hiring employees, to retaining them, and how to keep the tribal knowledge from walking out the door along with retirees.



## SPECIAL REPORT



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## PART 1

# Recruiting and Retaining Quality Workers in a Tight Labor Market

*Labor challenges aren't going away, which means employers must adapt their recruitment practices or get left behind.*

The food and beverage manufacturing industry is facing a labor crisis that threatens productivity, efficiency, and long-term growth. As labor shortages persist, companies are struggling to recruit and retain skilled workers in an increasingly competitive hiring landscape. Traditional recruitment methods are no longer enough, and outdated retention strategies are failing to keep employees engaged. To thrive in this environment, food manufacturers must rethink their approach, modernizing hiring practices and creating workplaces that attract and retain top talent.

Recent U.S. labor market data underscores these challenges. According to the latest U.S. jobs report, nonfarm payroll employment increased by 143,000 in January 2025, while the unemployment rate fell to 4.0% (Bureau of Labor Statistics). With fewer unemployed workers in the talent pool, companies must find ways to stand out in an increasingly competitive job market.

## The workforce shortage in food manufacturing

The struggle to find and keep skilled workers isn't a temporary challenge—it's the result of long-term industry shifts. The aging workforce is one of the most significant factors, with experienced workers retiring

faster than new talent can replace them. At the same time, fewer young professionals are entering the field, opting instead for careers in technology, logistics, and other high-growth industries.

Worker expectations have also changed. Younger employees prioritize career growth, workplace culture, and flexibility over traditional long-term job security. Many companies are finding that outdated recruitment strategies—focusing solely on wages and job stability—are no longer enough to attract this new generation of workers.

Adding to the challenge is the increased competition for talent. Food manufacturers aren't just competing with each other; they're also contending with industries that offer higher wages, flexible work environments, and faster career advancement. Without proactive hiring and retention strategies, companies risk higher turnover, increased training costs, and operational inefficiencies.

## Modernizing recruitment to compete for talent

To attract top candidates, food manufacturers need to revamp their approach to hiring. One of the most effective strategies has been hosting

targeted career fairs to connect directly with students and emerging talent. Traditional job postings often fail to capture the attention of younger candidates, whereas in-person recruiting events allow companies to build relationships with prospective employees before they enter the general job market.

Expanding the talent pipeline is also crucial. Companies that actively partner with vocational schools, universities, and technical training programs can create internship and apprenticeship opportunities that lead to full-time employment. Some forward-thinking manufacturers are even developing structured career pathways for high school graduates, veterans, and workers transitioning from other industries.

Speed is another critical factor. Many companies lose top candidates simply because their hiring processes take too long. Streamlining recruitment—through AI-driven resume screening, structured interviews, and fast-track hiring programs—ensures that companies don't miss out on qualified applicants who receive competing job offers.

Beyond improving efficiency, companies must also focus on employer branding to differentiate themselves from the competition. Today's job seekers aren't just looking for a paycheck: They want to work for companies that align with their values and offer clear growth opportunities. Businesses that highlight their company culture, employee success stories, and development programs through social media and recruitment marketing can gain a competitive edge in attracting high-caliber talent.

### Retaining employees through growth and culture

Attracting employees is only half the battle; keeping them engaged and committed is just as critical. One of the most effective ways to improve retention is to provide structured career development opportunities. Employees who see a clear path for advancement are far more likely to stay with an organization. Companies that invest in leadership training, rotational programs, and tuition reimbursement create an environment where employees feel valued and motivated to grow within the company.

Competitive compensation remains important, but benefits and work-life balance play an increasingly significant role in retention. Many manufacturers are moving beyond traditional benefits packages by offering flexible scheduling, enhanced healthcare and wellness programs, and even stock ownership options to give employees a greater sense of investment in the company's success.

Workplace culture also plays a crucial role. Employees are more likely to stay in environments where they feel respected, engaged, and recognized for their contributions. Open communication between employees and leadership, peer recognition programs, and performance-based incentives all help foster a positive work environment. Companies that actively listen to employee feedback and address concerns—whether through engagement surveys, town halls, or one-on-one meetings—build trust and loyalty with a workforce.

Another key factor in retention is addressing employee well-being. Workplace stress and burnout contribute significantly to high turnover rates. Companies that proactively support mental health initiatives, improve ergonomics, and create work environments that promote a healthy work-life balance see measurable improvements in job satisfaction and overall retention.

### Building a workforce for the future

With labor shortages persisting and competition for skilled workers intensifying, food manufacturers must rethink how they attract, develop,

## CASE STUDY A Large Food Manufacturer's Workforce Transformation

One large international food company recently faced severe hiring and retention challenges. Struggling to fill open positions with qualified candidates, leadership recognized that traditional hiring methods were no longer effective. To address this, the company took a proactive approach by hosting its own career fair, targeting graduating students from select universities.


During the event, candidates participated in a structured interview process, allowing the company to quickly assess talent and make hiring decisions. Those selected were placed into a rotational training program, which provided exposure to multiple aspects of the organization through six-month to one-year rotations. This approach not only gave employees a well-rounded understanding of the business but also helped management identify where each individual could make the greatest impact.

At the end of the program, employees transitioned into permanent management positions based on their skills, experience, and preferences. By providing structured career growth from the outset, the company significantly increased retention rates, reducing turnover and ensuring a steady flow of well-trained talent into leadership roles.

This case study highlights a critical takeaway: Modern hiring and retention strategies require more than just filling open positions—they must create a path for long-term employee success.

and retain employees. Companies that invest in proactive recruitment efforts, structured career development, and a strong workplace culture will build more resilient, engaged, and productive workforces.

The labor market is changing, and food manufacturers must adapt. Those who modernize their hiring strategies, create compelling career pathways, and invest in employee well-being will be best positioned to navigate the challenges ahead and build a workforce that drives long-term success.

As the workforce landscape continues to evolve, food manufacturers that take a proactive, employee-focused approach will have a clear advantage in both recruitment and retention. By creating workplaces where employees see a future for themselves, companies can turn today's hiring challenges into opportunities for long-term stability and growth. 

## SPECIAL REPORT



## PART 2

# Retaining Talent in a Shifting Industry

*Companies that fail to prioritize workforce stability risk higher turnover rates, increased operational disruptions, and rising recruitment costs.*

Advances in automation, evolving consumer preferences, and an increasingly competitive labor market are forcing companies to rethink how they attract and retain employees. The reality is stark: Companies that fail to prioritize workforce stability risk higher turnover rates, increased operational disruptions, and rising recruitment costs.

Retention has become as critical as recruitment. While attracting new talent is essential, keeping experienced employees engaged and committed provides stability, protects institutional knowledge, and enhances productivity. The challenge lies in creating a workplace where employees feel valued, supported, and motivated to stay. The most effective retention strategies focus on three key areas:

1. Fostering a supportive work environment
2. Offering competitive compensation and benefits
3. Cultivating a culture of innovation and continuous learning

## Creating a supportive work environment

A company's work environment plays a direct role in how employees perceive job satisfaction and long-term commitment. While compensation and career growth are important, the day-to-day experience at work is often what determines whether an employee stays or seeks opportunities elsewhere.

One often-overlooked factor in retention is the physical workplace itself. Many companies have found that investing in improved lighting, better airflow, and climate control makes a noticeable difference in employee morale. Temperature extremes, poor ventilation, or dimly lit work areas create discomfort and fatigue, leading to frustration and dis-

satisfaction. Improving these conditions signals to employees that leadership cares about their well-being.

Safety is another critical component of a positive work environment. However, safety policies alone aren't enough: Employees need to see leadership actively supporting and modeling safe behaviors. When managers enforce safety protocols consistently and invest in better equipment, employees feel more secure and engaged. Leading by example fosters a culture of trust, demonstrating that workplace safety is a shared priority rather than just another set of regulations.

Beyond physical conditions, strong communication and engagement between employees and leadership significantly impacts retention. When employees feel heard and valued, they are more likely to remain loyal to an organization. Regular feedback sessions, town hall meetings, and open-door policies give employees a voice in decision making. Transparent communication about company goals, performance expectations, and operational changes helps reduce uncertainty and fosters a sense of belonging.

The role of leadership in employee retention cannot be overstated. Employees are more likely to stay in workplaces where management is approachable, supportive, and committed to their success. Companies that provide leadership training to supervisors—focusing on mentorship, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution—often see stronger team cohesion and lower turnover. Employees don't leave jobs—they leave bad managers. Investing in leadership development ensures that supervisors and managers create a workplace where employees feel respected and motivated.

## Offering competitive compensation and benefits

Competitive pay is undoubtedly a key factor in employee retention, but it's not just about salaries: It's about the overall value employees feel they are receiving from their employer. Companies that provide well-rounded benefits packages—including healthcare, retirement plans, and paid leave—are more likely to retain top talent. In a competitive labor market, these perks often make the difference between an employee staying or leaving for a competitor.

Food and beverage manufacturers have a unique advantage when it comes to employee perks. Many companies offer discounted or free products to employees, which not only serves as a tangible benefit but also fosters a sense of connection to the brand. Employees who take pride in the products they help create are more likely to stay engaged in their work.

Career development opportunities are another essential component of retention. Employees want to see a future for themselves within the organization. When companies invest in tuition reimbursement, training programs, and clear pathways for advancement, employees feel valued and motivated to grow. Promotions from within not only strengthen the workforce but also reduce the costs associated with external hiring and onboarding.

While structured career growth programs help with long-term retention, recognition and incentives keep employees engaged in the short term. Performance-based bonuses, profit-sharing, and employee appreciation programs reinforce the idea that hard work is recognized and rewarded. People want to feel that their contributions matter, and companies that regularly celebrate employee achievements cultivate a more loyal workforce.

## Fostering a culture of innovation and learning

Employees thrive in workplaces where they feel challenged, empowered, and encouraged to contribute ideas. A company that actively fosters innovation creates an environment where employees feel invested in

the organization's success.


One of the most effective ways to retain employees is to give them opportunities to learn and grow. While we've previously explored structured mentorship and training programs, it's important to highlight how continuous learning fuels retention. When employees have access to ongoing skill development, they feel more confident in their roles and less inclined to look elsewhere for advancement opportunities.

Encouraging employees to participate in problem solving and process improvements fosters engagement. Companies that create structured forums—whether through idea-sharing sessions, innovation teams, or employee-led initiatives—benefit from a more invested workforce. Employees who see their ideas being implemented feel a sense of ownership and pride in their work.

Technology also plays a role in keeping employees engaged. Digital training platforms, mobile learning tools, and interactive development programs give employees flexibility in how they acquire new skills. Access to learning resources—whether through traditional coursework, webinars, or hands-on training—creates a sense of forward momentum in an employee's career. A stagnant job is an unattractive job; workplaces that embrace continuous learning keep employees motivated and engaged.

## Building workforce stability for the future

As the food and beverage industry continues to evolve, employee retention must be a top priority for manufacturers looking to maintain productivity and competitiveness. Creating a supportive workplace, offering strong benefits, and fostering a culture of continuous learning are all critical to workforce stability. Companies that invest in their employees—not just through paychecks but through workplace improvements, career development, and engagement—will see stronger retention rates and a more committed workforce.

By taking proactive steps to address employee concerns and provide meaningful career opportunities, food and beverage manufacturers can transform workforce challenges into long-term stability and success. 

## CASE STUDY

# How One Company Improved Employee Retention

A large, multinational food manufacturer recently faced mounting challenges in retaining its workforce. High turnover rates were disrupting production schedules, increasing hiring costs, and creating knowledge gaps within operations. Employees were leaving due to a lack of career growth, inconsistent communication from management, and dissatisfaction with the work environment.

To address these issues, the company launched a comprehensive workforce stabilization initiative that focused on three core areas: improving workplace conditions, enhancing benefits, and fostering engagement. First, leadership invested in upgrading workspaces—improving factory lighting and implementing better temperature controls in production areas. These changes resulted in immediate morale improvements and fewer complaints related to workplace conditions.

Next, the company expanded its employee benefits package

to include tuition reimbursement, expanded parental leave, and profit-sharing incentives. Recognizing that wages alone weren't enough to drive retention, leadership ensured that employees saw long-term value in staying with the company.

The final piece of the initiative focused on employee engagement and communication. Management underwent leadership training, with a focus on building stronger relationships with employees. Regular team meetings were restructured to better allow employees to voice concerns, offer feedback, and receive transparent updates on company performance and goals.

Within a year, the company saw a nearly 20% reduction in turnover, along with improvements in employee satisfaction scores. The initiative reinforced that retention isn't about a single factor—it's about creating an environment where employees feel valued, supported, and invested in their future with the company.

## SPECIAL REPORT



Nitai Termmea/Getty Images

## PART 3

# Passing Down Knowledge from Retiring Experts

*Failing to transfer experience is risky. Here are practical strategies to facilitate it.*

The food manufacturing industry is undergoing a seismic shift as seasoned professionals approach retirement, taking with them decades of expertise that cannot easily be replaced. At the same time, the next generation of workers is stepping into increasingly complex roles, requiring both technical proficiency and business acumen to succeed. Bridging this gap has become a pressing challenge, as the risk of losing institutional and tribal knowledge grows more acute.

Knowledge transfer is not simply a matter of convenience—it is a critical strategy for maintaining operational continuity, meeting client expectations, and driving innovation. Yet, it is a challenge that comes with its own set of hurdles, particularly when experienced employees resist sharing what they know due to fears of becoming obsolete. The following are the risks of failing to transfer knowledge, practical strategies to facilitate it, and a real-world case study of a company navigating these challenges.

## The high stakes of knowledge transfer

The potential fallout from insufficient knowledge transfer can be devastating. Operations that rely on seasoned professionals to maintain complex systems or manage legacy accounts risk significant downtime and inefficiency if those individuals leave without passing on their expertise. For food manufacturing companies with long-standing client relationships, the stakes are even higher. Losing the nuanced understanding of why certain solutions are in place or how to migrate aging systems to newer versions can erode customer trust and satisfaction.

Beyond operational risks, there are cultural and interpersonal dynamics at play. Employees with decades of experience may view their specialized knowledge as a safeguard against obsolescence. They fear that if their expertise is shared, their role within the organization will diminish, leaving them vulnerable to layoffs or irrelevance. Additionally, the pride they take in mastering systems and processes that others find

challenging can make them reluctant to relinquish control.

In some cases, seasoned employees worry that younger workers lack the business acumen or interpersonal skills required to handle accounts effectively. This perceived gap in soft skills can reinforce resistance, creating a bottleneck that prevents the seamless transfer of knowledge.

Strategies for effective knowledge transfer

Recognizing and addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Companies must not only implement systems and programs that facilitate knowledge transfer but also create an environment where all employees feel valued and supported.

### 1. Mentorship Programs

Pairing senior employees with junior staff is one of the most effective ways to facilitate knowledge transfer. However, mentorship must be a two-way street to ensure mutual benefit. Senior employees can share their expertise on legacy systems, account management, and customer relationships, while junior employees can introduce their mentors to new technologies, IT security practices, and modern workflows.

One company successfully implemented such a program by closely tracking mentorships through HR and upper management. These mentorships are structured to ensure information flows both ways, creating a win-win scenario where both senior and junior employees gain valuable skills. This collaborative approach helps dismantle fears of irrelevance while equipping the next generation with the tools they need to succeed.

### 2. Digital Documentation

Knowledge that lives solely in the minds of a few employees is inherently vulnerable. Creating a centralized knowledge repository, complete with video tutorials, annotated diagrams, and step-by-step guides, ensures that critical information is preserved and accessible. For legacy systems that may have been in operation for many years, documenting idiosyncrasies and unique configurations is vital to maintaining long-term operational stability.


However, simply creating documentation is not enough. Companies must implement processes to regularly review and update this information to reflect changes in technology and practices. Training employees on how to access and contribute to the repository is also key to its success.

### 3. Modern Training Technologies

Advances in technology, such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), offer immersive training experiences that can bridge the gap between hands-on learning and theoretical instruction. These tools are particularly effective for complex tasks that require a deep understanding of equipment or processes.

## Challenges and opportunities

The process of passing down knowledge from retiring experts to the next generation is both a challenge and an opportunity. By implementing mentorship programs, creating robust digital documentation and leveraging modern training technologies, companies can ensure the continuity of institutional knowledge while empowering their workforce.

As the food manufacturing industry continues to evolve, the ability to navigate these transitions will determine which companies thrive and which struggle to keep pace. For organizations willing to invest in people and processes, the rewards are clear: a more agile, collaborative, and resilient workforce ready to meet the demands of the future. 

## CASE STUDY Bridging the Gap with Mutual Mentorship

A midsized engineering software and services company in the food manufacturing industry recently faced this challenge head-on. With more than 25 years of experience, the company relies on its seasoned staff to maintain legacy systems for long-standing clients. These systems, some of which utilize technologies and equipment that are obsolete, require a deep understanding of their intricacies and the rationale behind their implementation. At the same time, the company is preparing to transition clients to newer solutions, which demands familiarity with modern technologies.

Senior employees, however, were hesitant to share their expertise. Their concerns ranged from fears of obsolescence to doubts about whether younger staff could manage client accounts effectively. Recognizing these challenges, the company launched a mentorship program with a unique twist: mentorship flowed in both directions.

Senior employees train junior staff on legacy systems, account management, and client-specific nuances. In return, junior employees have introduced their mentors to emerging technologies, cybersecurity best practices, and modern tools that could streamline workflows. The program is being closely monitored by HR and upper management to ensure accountability and mutual benefit.

In addition to the mentorship program, the company has implemented regular learning sessions where employees are encouraged to present relevant topics to their peers. This initiative fosters a culture of collaboration and continuous learning, breaking down silos, and encouraging information sharing.

While the program is still in its early stages, the results have been promising. Collaboration has improved, and senior employees are beginning to embrace new responsibilities related to modern technologies. Employee satisfaction is on the rise, and while resistance persists among a small minority, the overall feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

## SPECIAL REPORT



## PART 4

# Training and Development in the Age of Automation

*Introducing automation doesn't mean having to replace people, but it does mean a shift in workforce training.*

As automation becomes increasingly central to production efficiency, quality assurance, and operational flexibility, the skill requirements for today's workforce are evolving just as quickly. Nowhere is this more evident than on the production floor, where line operators and maintenance personnel are navigating a shift from manual, repetitive tasks to technology-enabled, value-added roles.

This transformation doesn't signal the disappearance of the human workforce—it marks a new chapter in how people and

machines collaborate. Automation isn't replacing people; it's freeing them. But for companies to realize the full benefits of this evolution, they must commit to one essential principle: continuous training and upskilling.

We've explored recruiting and retention, the skills gap, and knowledge transfer. Now, we turn our attention to preparing operations teams for the automated future—and why investing in people is just as critical as investing in technology.

**The companies that succeed in the age of automation will not be those with the most robots or the most AI. They'll be the ones who invest in training—not as a compliance exercise, but as a strategic enabler.**

### The automation shift: what it means for operations teams

For decades, the focus of many frontline manufacturing roles was hands-on and repetitive. Manual changeovers, mechanical adjustments, and trial-and-error troubleshooting were daily realities. While foundational mechanical skills are still important, today's most successful maintenance teams and production operators are those who can work seamlessly with connected equipment, digital diagnostics, and intelligent automation.

The skills required in this new landscape are broader and deeper. Operators must now understand how to interface with modern HMIs, interpret sensor data, and respond to system feedback. Maintenance techs are expected to navigate PLCs, smart devices, and networked systems—skills once reserved for engineers. The age of automation demands a workforce that blends mechanical intuition with technical fluency.

This shift is not theoretical—it's happening now. One powerful example comes from my own experience at Nestlé. We had a cooking and extrusion process that proved too complex for basic automation to handle reliably. Operators, through constant attention and manual tweaks, managed to keep it running relatively smoothly. Recognizing the inefficiency, I helped design an AI-based system, augmented by new sensors, to learn and mimic the operators' decision-making patterns. Within a month of deployment and training, the system was running the process independently, freeing operators to focus on broader system optimization and boosting overall plant efficiency. That's the kind of transformation we're talking about—where smart automation multiplies human impact rather than diminishing it.

### The tools driving the change

Several technologies are redefining the shop floor and setting new expectations for operator and technician skillsets:

- **Vision systems and intelligent sensors** are improving quality control, offering real-time data and early detection of defects.
- **Modern HMIs and digital interfaces** allow for deeper process visibility and quicker, more accurate decision-making.
- **AI-enabled troubleshooting tools** help teams resolve issues more efficiently by recommending solutions based on patterns and data history.

These tools don't just add complexity—they add opportunity. With the right training, line workers can become confident problem-solvers who actively improve performance. Maintenance personnel can shift from reactive firefighting to proactive system optimization.

### Upskilling the workforce: resources and framework

Supporting this shift requires more than just equipment upgrades—it requires investment in people. Fortunately, several industry efforts are underway to help:

- **PMMI's Mechatronics Certification Program** provides foundational training for maintenance staff transitioning to automation-rich environments. It covers mechanical, electrical, and control system integration in a modular, scalable format.
- **OMAC** continues to support discrete manufacturing environments with training resources, particularly where machine-to-machine communication and interoperability are priorities.
- **The OpX Leadership Network** is currently developing operator training guidance specifically aimed at helping CPG companies build workforce capability aligned with modern manufacturing needs.

These programs help companies avoid the pitfalls of siloed knowledge by promoting consistent, role-relevant skill development.

But training isn't just about access to information—it's about creating a culture where learning is expected, supported, and rewarded. The most successful companies don't treat training as a one-time onboarding task. They treat it as a career-long journey. From microlearning modules and internal certifications to mentoring and stretch assignments, companies must build internal ecosystems that continuously develop employee potential.

### Redefining roles, not eliminating them

A common misconception about automation is that it eliminates jobs—but in reality, it redefines them. As machines take over the most repetitive and labor-intensive tasks, employees are empowered to take on responsibilities that require critical thinking, adaptability, and collaboration.

In this future-forward environment, line workers become system stewards. Maintenance techs evolve into automation specialists. Operators become analysts: interpreting data, responding to predictive alerts, and contributing to continuous improvement initiatives.

This doesn't mean everyone needs to be a programmer or a data scientist. But it does mean that all frontline employees need to be comfortable interacting with digital systems, interpreting machine behavior, and applying their expertise in new ways.

### Training is the new ROI

The companies that succeed in the age of automation will not be those with the most robots or the most AI. They'll be the ones who invest in training—not as a compliance exercise, but as a strategic enabler. Training is how you scale technology. It's how you future-proof your operations. And it's how you build the workforce of tomorrow.

Automation is a catalyst, not an endpoint. In the food and beverage industry, it's reshaping what's possible for people on the plant floor. By upskilling today's workforce, we're not just preparing for the future, we're building it.

As we wrap up, one truth stands out across every topic we've covered: People are still at the heart of manufacturing. The tools may change, but the need for skilled, curious, and committed workers endures. Our job now is to give them the tools—and the training—to thrive. 