

Optimizing Staff Hiring at New Locations

From the opening of its first restaurant in 1975, Rock Bottom Restaurants Inc. (RBR), established its reputation as a destination eatery featuring fresh, handcrafted beers and a diverse food menu. Expansion plans are strong for its growth vehicles — Old Chicago, Rock Bottom Restaurant and Brewery, and ChopHouses — while maintaining integrity with the more mature and sister concepts Walnut Brewery and Sing Sing. With nearly 100 eateries and brewpubs across North America, the company employs 6,500 people across its locations and has annual sales exceeding \$250 million. RBR's leadership believes in a very strong correlation between the quality of the people it employs and its ability to support its growth objectives.

Achieving an on-schedule opening of a new restaurant location requires Herculean effort in planning and execution. The “human capital” of the new location — the employees — must be quickly yet carefully chosen to ensure that brand quality and consistency are preserved in the new locale. RBR management is typically deluged with applications for employment when new sites open. At one recent restaurant opening, nearly 1,000 applicants competed for 90 positions.

This exceptional demand on management attention during the critical few weeks prior to a new opening was distracting, costly, and prone to mistakes. “There’s an incredible amount of logistics to manage in advance of a new site opening,” comments Joan Crawford, former Director/Training for the Old Chicago concept, now Director of Leadership and OD for the company. “We have to quickly and efficiently process a large number of applicants and ensure that we hire the best of the best. It doesn’t help that our managers are already under tremendous stress in preparing for the opening.”

The Challenge

Getting the best employees to represent the RBR brand is not an academic matter, but a real dollars-and-cents issue. In an industry with annual employee turnover well over 100 percent and replacement costs as high as \$2,500 per employee, RBR strives to make the best hiring decisions to mitigate the time and dollar costs associated with turnover.

Faced with an aggressive expansion plan, RBR sought a solution to optimize the hiring process for new restaurant openings. Specifically, management needed a way to quickly screen out unqualified applicants while maximizing interview time with promising candidates. Decision/support guidelines were needed to help managers select future employees judged most likely to enhance the RBR reputation for service excellence. And because many Spanish-speaking applicants often seek positions with RBR, support was needed to speed the processing of applicants in their native language.

Nearly all of the restaurants within RBR are using the Kronos Workforce Acquisition™ hiring management system for Casual Dining to improve their workforce quality. The Kronos Talent Management Division works closely with management to ensure that RBR's quality standards, best hiring practices, and skill-set assessments are integrated into an optimized selection system for each of its restaurants' job positions. RBR management also looks to the talent management division to help streamline recruiting and hiring activities for new restaurant openings and has not disappointed.

QUICK GLANCE

The Challenge

- Recruit and train an entire staff for a new restaurant opening — minimizing management time and cost
- Accommodate non-English/ speaking candidates
- Select optimal employees for heart-of-house or back-of-house jobs

The Solution

- Site-specific web-based application to recruit and screen applicants in advance of on-site group hiring event
- Easily deployed, temporary devices at special on-site, mass-hiring events
- Bilingual application and screening guides
- Automated and real-time processing of new/hire applications

The Results

- Nearly 60% of needed new hires sourced and screened weeks ahead of the hiring event
- Significantly increased candidate pool and quality of applicants
- More than 50 hours saved by managers per restaurant opening

The Solution

Online application processing

Leveraging the RBR website was among the first steps taken to improve the company's hiring effectiveness. Because increasing numbers of job seekers are Internet-savvy — and a surprisingly high percentage of especially qualified applicants use the Internet to apply for jobs — Kronos implemented an electronic job application through the RBR corporate website. Job seekers submit applications in advance of public-hiring events, permitting RBR to effortlessly assemble an initial slate of promising candidates who are worth inviting to in-person interviews. "The ability to build applicant pools for upcoming restaurant openings represents a tremendous time savings for our managers," says Crawford.

Prescreening for applicant eligibility was accomplished by including qualifying questions in the job application. By ensuring that online applicants are of legal age to work, and are legally able to work in the U.S., RBR is able to filter out unqualified applicants automatically without distracting management. Included in the online process are questions regarding eligibility for Work Opportunity Tax Credits (WOTC) and Welfare-to-Work (WTW) credits, as well as a personality assessment providing insights into each applicant's suitability for a particular position. Conveniently, the application process creates an electronic record that is preserved for later use in the hiring life cycle, as well as for uploading to other HRMS systems, including time and attendance and payroll.

On-site application devices process the crush of applications

The approaching date of a new restaurant opening is eagerly anticipated by job seekers attracted to the RBR brand. Through newspaper advertisements, notice is given to area job seekers that applications will be accepted for new positions at a group hiring event scheduled for a specified time and location. RBR prepares for the recruiting event by placing Kronos application devices at temporary facilities rented near the new restaurant. Between eight and 10 Kronos devices accommodate the hundreds of applicants that typically descend upon RBR managers at the event, where prospective applicants are directed to complete their applications in either English or Spanish. Prescreening questions posed early in the application process identify unqualified applicants and quickly move them along, removing them from the eligible applicant pool. For situations such as a mass hire, Kronos offers battery-powered mobile devices that operate for hours from a single charge.

The job application used for a group-hiring event is identical to the interactive application accessed on the RBR website and it is processed in real time. In addition to eligibility checks, the application includes specific screening questions that test for personality characteristics associated with successful employee performance for specific restaurant job positions. Screening for personality attributes especially important to service-centric jobs can help determine whether the applicant is a good fit for the positions available at the new location. This screening

also ensures a consistent approach is utilized to establish best-fit candidates for RBR. "The rationale for our Unicru [Kronos] investment is straightforward — a consistent, smooth hiring process of uniquely qualified employees," says Ned Lidvall, president and CEO, Rock Bottom Restaurants.

"Clearly we plan to grow Rock Bottom Restaurants to be the premier restaurant and brewery in our segment. We must attract and retain outstanding employees to support this growth. Our frontline employees are key to whether satisfied customers become loyalists to the brand."

Ned Lidvall
President and CEO
Rock Bottom Restaurants Inc.

"The efficiency with which applicants can be processed through Unicru's [Kronos] on-site solution is tremendous," comments Jim Mahnke, General Manager at the Old Chicago restaurant located in Gresham, OR. "At our opening recruitment event we were able to accept and process over 900 applications in just four days, successfully completing our hiring targets with top quality candidates," says Mahnke. By automatically generating all information needed to perform the interview and extend a job offer, RBR managers can make informed hiring decisions on the spot, spending far less time on ineligible candidates, and eliminating inconsistencies in the hiring process.

Of particular importance to RBR is the need for flexible scheduling of restaurant personnel to staff their extended hours of operation. Kronos' Workforce Acquisition collects applicants' preferred hours and days of work. This provides RBR managers with advance knowledge of future employee preferences and allows interviewers to consider individual shift preferences in the context of the overall applicant pool.

Beyond the shift scheduling information, Workforce Acquisition manages nearly 30 different new-hire forms for RBR, including state and federal employment tax registrations, orientation and training forms, payroll integration forms, integration records for RBR's time and attendance system, and applications for both WOTC and WTW credits. Kronos automatically generates the correct combination of forms for each newly hired employee. "Not only do we save hours and hours filling out paperwork," notes Mahnke, "but we don't worry about errors, lost forms, or incomplete information."

Summary

RBR depends upon the skills, enthusiasm, and professionalism of its employees to enhance its brand throughout its multi-concept chain. "Attention to the guest experience provided by our employees is paramount to our success strategy," remarks CEO Lidvall. Especially in the frenzied days and weeks ahead of a new location opening, the ease with which a full complement of service and support staff can be recruited through Workforce Acquisition's online and new store opening solutions sets a clear standard of efficiency and consistency for successful restaurant expansion. A slate of optimally suited employees can be selected through Workforce Acquisition as a matter of course when opening a new location, helping ensure RBR effectively achieves its objectives of sales growth through the expansion of its concept locations.

Kronos' Talent Management Division is proud to count leading brands such as Rock Bottom Restaurants, Uno's, Burgerville and Whole Foods as clients. And now mid-size companies can achieve the same operational improvement and business results with a Workforce Acquisition solution sized to meet their needs.

To find out more about Kronos, please call (800) 355-4547 or visit www.kronos.com



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