

Manpower Update Report

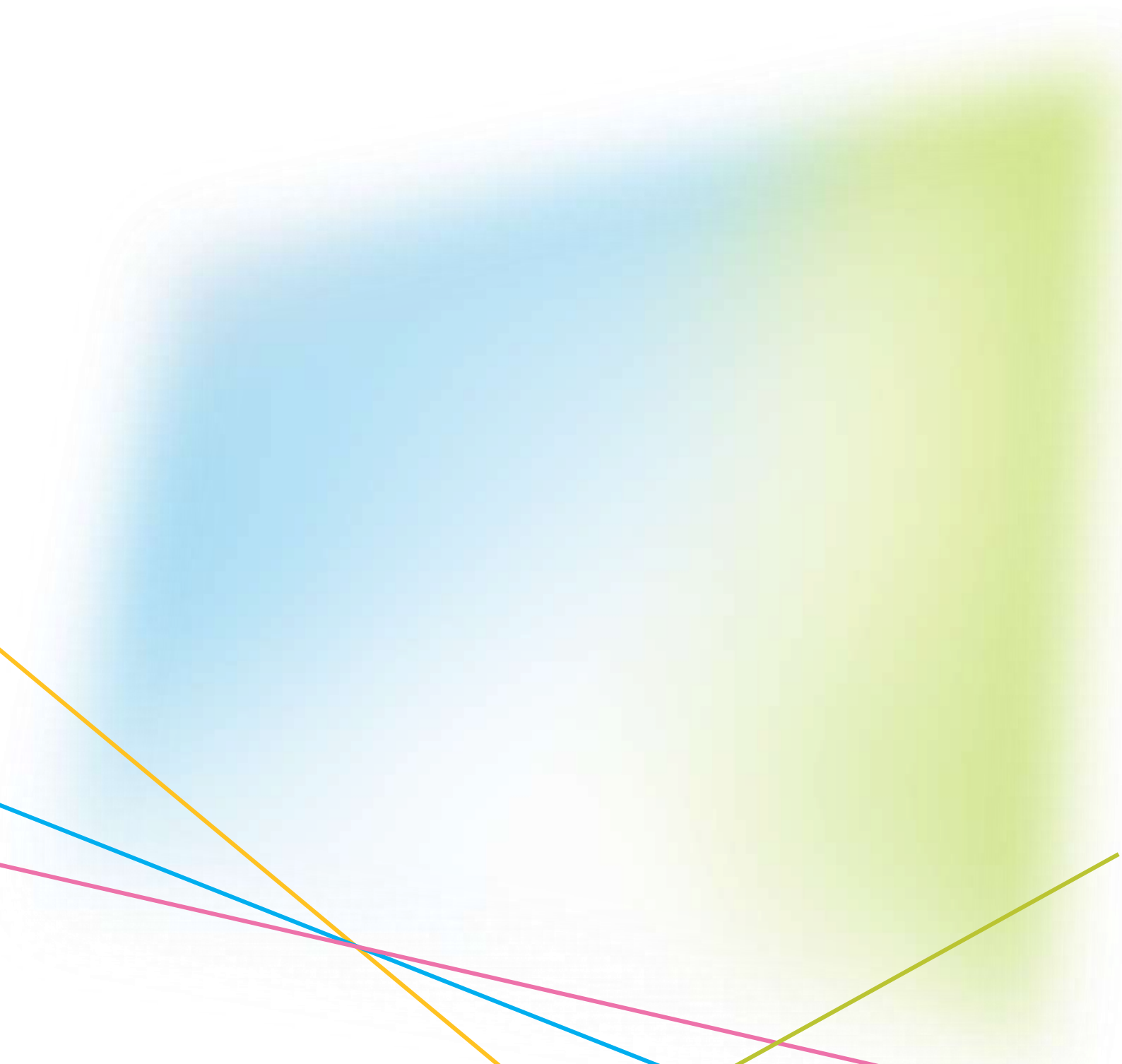
Catering Industry

2026



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Hotel, Catering and Tourism Training Board (HOTB) would like to express its gratitude to the members of the focus group for their valuable insights on the manpower situation of the catering industry. The perspectives shared by focus group members, alongside the insights from HOTB members and key recruitment platforms, have been instrumental in shaping the findings presented in this report.



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Introduction

Background

The Hotel, Catering and Tourism Training Board (HOTB) of the Vocational Training Council (VTC) is responsible for determining manpower demand of the industry, assessing whether the manpower supply matches manpower demand, and recommending the development of vocational and professional education and training (VPET) to meet the assessed training needs.

To better capture workforce dynamics, HOTB conducts a comprehensive quantitative manpower survey every four years, complemented by two manpower updates focused on qualitative insights. The latest full manpower survey for the catering industry was completed in 2022, with the first manpower update delivered in 2025 and the second in 2026, to capture emerging developments in the industry.

This manpower update report consists of:

(a) insights from a focus group meeting held on 28 April 2026 to collect views from industry experts on latest industry developments, workforce demand, recruitment difficulties, training needs, and recommended measures to address the challenges the industry faces; and

(b) desk research and analysis of recruitment information obtained from major recruitment platforms covering the period from April 2025 to March 2026.

Objectives

The objectives of the manpower update report of the catering industry are:

- (i) to examine the latest trends and developments in the industry;
- (ii) to explore the job market situation and recruitment challenges;
- (iii) to identify the training needs; and
- (iv) to recommend measures to meet the training needs and ease the manpower shortage problem.

Methodology

Overview

This manpower update report adopts a qualitative approach to capture recent developments in the catering industry through a focus group meeting, supplemented by desk research analysing recruitment trends and skill requirements.

Focus Group Meeting

The focus group meeting was conducted on 28 April 2026, and topics discussed were supported by the Working Party on Manpower Survey of the Catering Industry under the HOTB. To gather comprehensive industry insights, the focus group comprised representatives from different segments of the catering industry, including hospitality groups, club catering, independent restaurant groups, and bakery operations. The discussion covered business transformation, manpower demand, training needs, recruitment challenges, and technological developments. The discussion provided a qualitative basis for analysing the current manpower situation and was recorded and transcribed to facilitate systematic analysis.

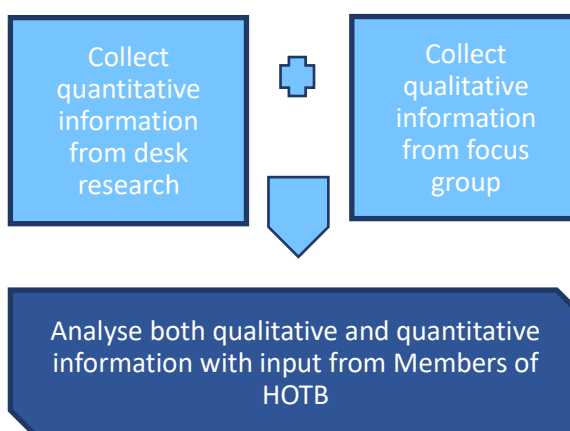
Desk Research

Manpower information covering the period between April 2025 and March 2026 was collected through desk research. An

employment information system was developed to capture the relevant recruitment data from major online recruitment portals. A total of 19,619 recruitment records of the catering industry were collected during the research period, serving as indicative information of the job market trend. The list of related companies under the Hong Kong Standard Industrial Classification was mapped to remove duplicated records.

Data Analysis

The analysis consists of three steps:



After the above qualitative and quantitative analysis, the findings and recommendations were augmented and endorsed by the HOTB.

Limitations

Different from the extensive quantitative manpower survey performed in 2022, this update report aims to discover the emerging themes in the manpower development of the industry. The employment trends and behaviour, recruitment difficulties, insights and observations from the stakeholders' experience were captured through this focus group and desk research. While the update report has adopted the qualitative approach of focus group discussion which covered a controlled selection of stakeholders, it might not be generalised to the entire population. Desk research that gathered information of job vacancies from advertisements in major recruitment websites also might not be exhaustive without reference to any historical data, those were used as reference supplementary to the observations of the focus group.

Findings

Factors Affecting the Industry Development

Changes in Dining Patterns

Consumer spending across the catering sector has become noticeably more cautious and highly value-driven. Diners now frequently expect attractive promotional discounts and bundled set menus as standard offerings rather than occasional incentives. This shift places pressure on operational profit margins. Furthermore, there is evidence of a reduction in the overall duration of evening dining. Patrons are completing their meals earlier and spending considerably less time in restaurants for dinner gatherings. This structural change has narrowed the operational window for dinner services and reduced opportunities for high-margin, second-round beverage sales. As a result, restaurants may need to rely on faster table turnover to support overall revenue performance.

Demographic Changes and Event Scale

The structural reduction in average family sizes across the territory has affected the landscape for catering events. There has been a corresponding reduction in large-scale celebratory banquets and multi-table festive orders. This demographic shift has

had a notable impact on the traditional business models of large-scale Chinese restaurants and retail bakeries that historically relied on extended family gatherings for bulk orders. At the same time, continued normalisation of cross-border consumption has diverted a portion of regular weekend traffic from local catering venues. Local operators are increasingly required to adjust their focus towards capturing weekday corporate dining or cultivating stronger neighbourhood-based customer loyalty.

Employment Regulation Impact

The catering industry is undergoing adjustments in workforce structure to adapt to changes in the continuous contract threshold under the Employment Ordinance. Historically, the sector has relied on a flexible pool of casual labour to efficiently manage weekend peaks and seasonal demand. Under the “468 rule”, the administrative tracking, payroll forecasting, and compliance costs associated with temporary labour have increased. This regulatory development has prompted establishments to review their workforce models, encouraging a gradual shift towards more stable part-time or full-time employment arrangements to

balance compliance and operational requirements.

Technology and AI Adoption

The application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital tools shows a clear variation between back-office management and customer-facing functions. In the back-office, generative AI and digital tools are being used to support administrative efficiency. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) without dedicated administrative teams use these tools to generate marketing content, translate menus, and design packaging, while larger hospitality groups apply digital systems to monitor inventory and support demand forecasting. However, adoption in customer-facing roles remains more limited. This is partly due to space constraints and customers' preference for human interaction. As a result, technology tends to provide more immediate benefits in back-office functions. There are also concerns regarding potential over-reliance on AI-generated outputs, highlighting the need for human judgement and verification in its application.

Manpower Demand

Demand for Back-of-House Manpower

The catering industry faces a continuing shortage of local candidates willing to undertake physically demanding roles. As a result, the industry increasingly relies on

imported labour for back-of-house duties, including stewarding, deep cleaning, and basic food preparation. However, this imported workforce is typically engaged on fixed-term contracts, which may create challenges in operational stability and team integration, particularly in physically demanding areas of the operation. A reliable back-of-house operation is important, as it enables operators to focus on enhancing service quality and customer engagement at the front line.

Extension of Cross-Functional Roles

To address rising operational costs and manpower constraints under evolving compliance frameworks, establishments are increasingly moving away from rigid, single-task job roles, leading to stronger demand for cross-functional employees. An individual hired primarily for front-of-house service may now be expected to perform additional duties such as basic dessert plating, beverage preparation, or inventory-related tasks during non-peak periods. At the same time, staff with relevant knowledge and skill sets may also contribute to social media engagement and capture food photography during quieter periods. Broader roles can help reduce operational monotony and provide staff with dynamic skill development opportunities.

Flexible and Modular Scheduling

In response to the lifestyle preferences of younger workers and part-time job seekers, scheduling practices are evolving. The traditional split-shift model, which requires long, unpaid breaks during the day, poses challenge for recruitment. To attract a broader workforce, including students and homemakers, some operators are transitioning to continuous shifts and shorter, modular working arrangements of four to five hours. This scheduling approach can support recruitment efforts in a competitive labour market.

Operational Management Challenges

As workforce composition becomes more varied, with a mix of full-time, part-time and imported labour, the complexity of day-to-day restaurant operations has increased. This has led to growing demand for experienced managers, supervisors and team leaders to coordinate multi-skilled teams, oversee service flow and manage customer interactions. These roles are essential for team coordination, service consistency and compliance with operational and regulatory requirements during peak service periods.

Desk Research

Desk research captured a substantial volume of recruitment data, totalling 19,619 recruitment advertisements across different segments of the catering industry. To identify shifting manpower demands, the top five principal job vacancies for 2026 are compared against historical data from 2024:

Principal Jobs		
	2025-26	2024-25
1	Baker; Pastry Cook; Cook 11.1%	Waiter/Waitress; Receptionist; Hostess 13.5%
2	Waiter/Waitress; Receptionist; Hostess 9.9%	Baker; Pastry Cook; Cook 11.4%
3	Captain; Supervisor 6.6%	Kitchen Helper; Cleaner; Dishwasher; Steward; Pantry Server/Helper; Washroom Attendant 6.3%

Principal Jobs		
	2025-26	2024-25
4	Kitchen Helper; Cleaner; Dishwasher; Steward; Pantry Server/Helper; Washroom Attendant 4.9%	Captain; Supervisor 6.2%
5	Beverage Assistant; Bartender; Barman; Mixologist; Barista 3.9%	Beverage Assistant; Bartender; Barman; Mixologist; Barista 4.0%

An analysis of these job vacancies highlights the following workforce trends:

Decrease in Service Vacancies

The demand for junior cooking roles has overtaken front-line service to become the most sought-after category in 2026, accounting for 11.1% of total vacancies. The relative decline in service vacancies may be associated with the adoption of QR-code menus and digital mobile ordering, which reduce the need for front-line staff to perform manual order-taking tasks.

Growth in Supervisory Demand

The proportional demand for Captains and Supervisors expanded to 6.6%. This may reflect the industry's growing need for experienced floor managers to coordinate

the increasingly complex, cross-functional shift patterns and oversee diverse teams within restaurant operations.

Imported Labour for Support Roles

Vacancies for cleaning and kitchen support have decreased from 6.3% to 4.9%. This may reflect the increasing use and gradual integration of imported labour, which has reduced the need for frequent recruitment of local candidates for these roles.

Training Needs

Service Professionalism and Expectation Management

New local entrants often require strong support to develop the professional attitude and emotional resilience needed to thrive in a fast-paced commercial catering environment. The transition from a relaxed academic setting to the high pressure demands of a commercial kitchen or dining room can be overwhelming. As a result, training programmes must place greater emphasis on cultivating certain behavioural attributes required in the industry. Practical courses should incorporate rigorous training on interpersonal communication, real-time problem solving, and techniques for de-escalating customer complaints. Developing these competencies is essential to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and the realities of working in the hospitality sector.

Applied Localisation for Non-Local Talent

The industry's increasing integration of non-local workers into customer-facing roles creates an urgent need for targeted linguistic and cultural training. To uphold Hong Kong's reputation for high service standards, training must include practical language immersion. Equipping non-local staff with conversational workplace Cantonese and basic hospitality English is vital. This applied language training ensures smooth daily operations, prevents communication breakdowns on the restaurant floor, and empowers imported talent to interact confidently with a diverse local and international customer base.

Digital Competency and AI Command

Staff across administration, culinary, and service departments require enhanced analytical skills to leverage modern digital tools effectively. Training must cover how to command AI as an effective tool to draft professional correspondence, summarise meetings, and accurately interpret business data dashboards. Furthermore, as social media has become a primary marketing channel for the sector, training staff in digital content creation is now a highly valued vocational skill. Teaching frontline employees how to capture high-quality smartphone photography and manage engaging social media posts

directly from the dining floor is essential for modern catering operations.

Practical ESG Implementation

Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices are becoming increasingly relevant in daily catering operations, particularly in response to regulatory developments such as disposable plastic controls. While municipal waste charging remains subject to policy developments, ongoing preparation within the industry continues to influence operational practices. Rather than focusing solely on theoretical sustainability concepts, training should emphasise practical implementation, including reducing single-use plastics, managing packaging alternatives, and handling food waste effectively. This supports compliance while maintaining operational efficiency.

Cross-Functional Skill Development

The necessary consolidation of staff roles, driven by both technological adoption and changes in recruitment patterns, requires training programmes shift toward modular, cross-disciplinary skill-building. Employees engaged in service must now be equipped with basic back-of-house capabilities. Training should ensure that staff can effectively operate digital point-of-sale systems, understand and follow food hygiene protocols, and perform basic kitchen preparation duties. This

polyvalent capability is absolutely essential for maintaining efficient service standards when operational rosters are deliberately kept lean.

Recruitment Challenges

Expectation Mismatches

The sector faces a significant challenge with the unrealistic career expectations of recent graduates. Many new entrants expect to be hired directly into supervisory roles and are unwilling to perform manual daily tasks, such as basic food preparation, line cooking, or traditional table service. To address this issue, the industry must clearly communicate that mastering these foundational skills is a necessary first step for a successful career path in the industry.

Early-Stage Attrition

Transitioning from a structured, comparatively relaxed academic environment to the catering industry with intense pressure remains a major cause of attrition. New entrants often find the physical demands, including prolonged standing, intense heat, and fast-paced operations, challenging. Without appropriate guidance, clear operational expectations, and structured support during the initial stage of employment, resignation is more likely, leading to inefficiencies in recruitment and training.

Perception of Working Conditions

The catering industry continues to struggle immensely with its longstanding public image of demanding working conditions. The entrenched perception of split-shifts, unpredictable schedules, and long working hours on weekends severely discourages potential candidates from viewing catering as a viable career choice. This negative perception often leads parents and career advisors to steer young talent toward alternative industries that offer predictable, standard office hours and seemingly clearer pathways for advancement.

Workplace Cultural Integration

Sourcing operational talent from diverse geographic regions, alongside the growing integration of part-time modular workers and mature career changers, requires organisations to develop a more inclusive workplace culture. Without dedicated and structured peer support systems, minority, non-local and newly transitioned workers may experience difficulties in integration and feel insufficiently supported in daily operations. This lack of integration ultimately impacts overall team morale and may affect operational coordination and contribute to high staff turnover.

Recommendations

Government and Relevant Authorities

Strategic Redirection of Mega-Event Traffic

The robust push for a mega events economy has contributed to increased business activity for premium hotels and large-scale exhibition venues. However, to maximise the broader economic benefits for Hong Kong, there is scope to extend these benefits across different sectors, particularly the food and beverage industry. Relevant authorities and tourism promoters are encouraged to explore the use of digital routing tools and targeted promotional strategies to direct high-yield visitors toward authentic local dining experiences. Such efforts may help independent restaurants and SME operators across Hong Kong to capture potential economic spillover from major events, thereby supporting the continued vibrancy of the local culinary scene. Closer coordination between event organisers, government authorities and industry stakeholders may also facilitate more effective manpower planning during major events. Improved forecasting of manpower requirements would support workforce deployment and temporary staffing arrangements during peak demand periods.

Digital Support for SMEs

As the catering industry navigates updated employment regulations and a persistently high-cost operating environment, enhancing the digital capacity of SMEs remains an important consideration. Relevant authorities are encouraged to continue promoting broader accessibility to smart human resource management systems and modern operational technologies. Equipping independent operators with the necessary resources to make use of automated rostering, digital inventory tracking, and smart ordering tools can help improve overall labour productivity. This support may enable the industry to adapt to evolving operational demands while reducing repetitive administrative tasks that may constrain SME development.

Guidance for Regulatory Transition

To assist the industry in adapting to evolving statutory requirements, including employment-related continuous contract thresholds and environmental sustainability measures, authorities are encouraged to develop practical, industry-specific operational toolkits. Providing clear and accessible frameworks for rostering arrangements, alongside actionable guidance on sourcing and deploying sustainable packaging alternatives, can help support operators in addressing regulatory requirements more

effectively. Such practical guidance may enable establishments to meet statutory obligations more efficiently, while maintaining operational continuity.

Strengthening Education-Industry Linkage

To ensure a sustainable and consistent supply of technical personnel, continuous collaboration between relevant authorities, vocational training institutions, and the catering sector is beneficial. By facilitating structured, work-integrated learning opportunities and enhancing public recognition of catering career pathways, authorities can help the industry attract a more dedicated and capable talent pool. Initiatives that bridge the critical gap between theoretical classroom training and actual workplace requirements can play an important role in supporting long-term workforce stability.

Industry

Strategic Utilisation of AI and Operational Technology

Employers are encouraged to strategically deploy digital tools and AI to improve back-end efficiency. By establishing clear internal guidelines for the safe and effective use of AI tools, such as using generative platforms for menu translation, marketing copywriting, or supply chain forecasting, catering operators can help reduce the time spent on manual administrative tasks. Employers should

adopt this technology in a manner that helps to free staff from repetitive duties, enabling them to focus on enhancing product offerings and service standards. Digital tools may also support service optimisation by helping operators identify lower-demand activities and allocate resources towards services and facilities that are most valued by customers. This may contribute to more effective resource utilisation while alleviating manpower pressures in a high-cost operating environment.

Rostering Reform

Operators are encouraged to review and update their scheduling frameworks to attract and retain the contemporary workforce. A shift away from the traditional split-shift model towards modular rostering, such as continuous straight shifts or flexible four-to-five-hour work modules, may be beneficial. This approach is increasingly aligned with the preferences of younger workers and part-time job seekers who prioritise flexibility and work-life balance, thereby supporting the expansion of the available talent pool.

Performance-Based Incentives

To maintain staff motivation and recognise operational performance, employers are encouraged to introduce structured, performance-based incentives. Acknowledging and rewarding both service and kitchen staff who effectively manage peak service periods, or who demonstrate strong communication skills, can be

effective. Linking operational performance to tangible benefits, such as bonuses, vouchers, or additional leave, may help enhance staff morale and encourage consistent service standards.

Structured Mentorship Frameworks

To address early-stage attrition, operators are encouraged to move beyond basic orientation and introduce structured mentorship frameworks.

Pairing new recruits — including local graduates, career changers, and imported workers — with experienced staff can provide practical guidance and support during the initial stage of employment. In addition, providing clear and accessible operational guides, such as digital checklists for daily procedures, can help reduce early-stage uncertainty and support workforce integration. Leadership and supervisory training may also be strengthened to enhance communication between managers and employees from different generations. Improving mutual understanding of workplace expectations can help bridge generational differences, strengthen employee engagement and contribute to workforce retention.

Skill-Based Career Pathways

To address issues of unclear career progression and retain talent, companies are encouraged to develop transparent, skill-based career pathways. For example, communicating that mastery of specific cross-functional skills, such as point-of-

sale operation, basic kitchen preparation, and service recovery can support progression opportunities. This approach provides employees with clearer development pathways and offers professional variety, which may help reduce job monotony and support longer-term retention. Providing opportunities for younger employees to contribute ideas and demonstrate their capabilities through operational improvement initiatives may further strengthen engagement and reinforce long-term career commitment within the industry.

Education and Training Providers

Commercial Service Simulations

To lessen the gap between post-graduation expectations and the real working environment, education and training providers should provide students with opportunities to experience the intense and fast-paced nature of commercial catering operations before they enter the workforce. They can incorporate high-volume service simulations into their curricula to replicate peak-hour pressures, customer complaint handling, and service standards. This practical approach can help develop the emotional resilience and physical readiness required in the industry and may contribute to reducing early resignation rates.

Integration of Digital, AI and Marketing Skills

Catering establishments increasingly require basic digital competency across operational roles. Education and training providers should ensure that students are familiar with relevant restaurant technologies, including Kitchen Display Systems (KDS), digital table management, and inventory software. In addition, it is desirable for students to be equipped with knowledge of AI-assisted workflows and digital marketing skills, such as food photography and social media content creation, as part of hospitality training. Students should also learn to critically evaluate AI-generated outputs and understand the importance of data privacy when using such tools in a commercial context.

Conflict Resolution Skills

Education and training providers are encouraged to place emphasis on applied communication skills within their curricula to address the growing reluctance of among new entrants to interact with customers or manage challenging situations. This may include structured exercises such as role-play, service recovery simulations, and interpersonal conflict scenarios. Such training can help develop the confidence required to manage difficult situations professionally and empathetically in customer-facing roles.

Language and Cultural Integration

Education and training providers are encouraged to incorporate enhanced language and communication modules into their programmes, beyond basic hospitality English. These modules may also include workplace Cantonese to support effective team communication, particularly during peak operational periods. In addition, training in cultural awareness, teamwork, and mutual respect is important in supporting collaboration in diverse work environments. These competencies can help ensure that graduates are prepared to work effectively in highly diverse and fast-paced hospitality settings.