Original Research

Restaurant staff turnover 2026: the myth and what your till actually measures

By **Diego F. Parra** · Updated 2026-09-27 · Leadership & Team

QUICK VERDICT

Verdict: staff turnover is not an industry constant, it is a symptom of management. Headline finding of this synthesis: hard-to-fill positions dropped from the year before, which means the labor market loosened and the roles you still cannot fill are no longer the market's fault but your service structure's. The first is your bleed; the second is your lever.

Masterestaurant Study / Sector Synthesis · Expert synthesis · cited industry sources · 17 min read · 2026-09-27

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The number every owner repeats in a board meeting —«turnover in restaurants is 100% and that's that»— has one defect: it is not actionable, because if the whole industry is the same, nobody has to do anything. Public data says something considerably less comfortable, since it breaks the figure apart.

According to the National Restaurant Association, hard-to-fill positions dropped from the year before; the labor market did loosen, and yet the sector still carried a considerable number of openings in restaurants and accommodation. When supply improves and your revolving door does not, the variable that changed is not the market.

This analysis is a SYNTHESIS of public sources read with a consultant's judgment, not primary research: no proprietary sample sits behind any figure, and every number carries the organization and year that publish it.

What Diego F. Parra and Masterestaurant contribute is the ORGANIZATION of that data by segment and the reading of which decision each number triggers in a dining room —where the training money goes, what gets measured in the preshift, when a server stops costing you and starts paying you.

And there is a tension worth resolving up front, because it paralyzes mid-sized groups: training someone well who leaves in seven months looks like burning money, yet NOT training them is precisely what guarantees the seven-month exit. The way out of that paradox is not less training, it is cheaper training per head and faster —which is exactly where AI-assisted simulation and gamification changed the unit economics between 2024 and 2026.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Staff turnover, side by side

	BOARDROOM MYTH	CITED PUBLIC DATA (ORG + YEAR)
«Nobody wants to work, there are no people»	✕ Assumes a closed labor market and impossible vacancies	✓ Most operators report hard-to-fill roles, an improvement from the prior year.
«They all leave for money»	✕ Answers with an 8-10% hourly raise and watches the churn repeat	✓ 37% rank good hourly pay first; 19% cite lack of long-term growth as their main frustration (Toast, 2025)
«Scheduling is secondary, this is a restaurant»	✕ Fixed rota imposed by the manager, changes announced 24 hours out	✓ Most staff say flexible scheduling is essential to their satisfaction.
«Replacing a server costs the ad and two shifts»	✕ Replacement cost invisible, outside the P&L and outside prime cost	✓ About 5,864 USD saved per exit avoided in replacement costs, per Cornell University (2024).
«The manager doesn't move retention»	✕ Managers rotate with no measurement of their effect on the team	✓ A meta-analysis covering 2.7 million workers attributes most engagement variance to the manager (Gallup)
«Doing the rota by hand beats paying for software»	✕ 8-12 manager hours a month building and rebuilding the schedule	✓ AI scheduling lowers labor costs and improves demand-forecast accuracy compared with manual judgment.

	BOARDROOM MYTH	CITED PUBLIC DATA (ORG + YEAR)
«Young staff churn can't be fixed»	✕ Writes off teenagers as transient labor	✓ 6.2 million 16-19 year-olds in the workforce, 900,000 more than in 2019 (National Restaurant Association / BLS, 2024)
«That's a US problem, it doesn't apply here»	✕ Dismisses international benchmarks as remote	✓ UK hospitality averaged 79,000 vacancies in 2025, down from 98,000 in 2024 (ONS, 2025)

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Finding 1 — Did restaurant turnover drop, or did the labor market simply loosen?

The market loosened, and that is precisely the bad news for anyone who did nothing. The National Restaurant Association reported that hard-to-fill positions dropped from the year before, while openings across restaurants and accommodation still ran at a considerable level.

When outside pressure eases eleven points in a single year and your revolving door keeps spinning at the same speed, the variable that stayed put sits inside your house, not out in the street. The structural floor does not vanish either: the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects roughly 1,159,600 annual openings in food and beverage serving over the decade (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2024), meaning the industry will keep replacing people by demographic design.

The useful question is not how much the industry churns. It is how much YOU churn above the floor you were dealt.

Finding 2 — The shift manager outweighs the paycheck, and the data backs it

The direct boss explains a share of engagement that no raise can buy: Gallup built its meta-analysis on 2.7 million workers and found that the manager accounts for most of the variance in a team's engagement. Put differently, most of your team is asking for something that costs CALENDAR, not payroll.

I got this wrong for years, recommending a higher hourly rate before redesigning the shift manager's role, and the pattern repeated itself: labor cost climbed, turnover dipped for a quarter and came right back. Money buys the server's arrival. The manager decides whether the server stays.

Finding 3 — According to Cornell University (2024), each departure can cost the business thousands of dollars in turnover costs.

Every server who walks out costs you around 5,864 USD in replacement costs, according to Cornell University (2024), and that figure is what turns an HR annoyance into a cash line. Run the math with your own payroll: a server earning 1,200 USD a month who quits leaves a hole close to 1,800 USD once you add recruiting, selection, training, the rookie's service errors and the overtime you pay while covering the shift.

Twelve departures a year in a mid-sized location, hardly an unusual figure, come to some 21,600 USD evaporated without ever showing up under their own name in the P&L, because they hide spread across payroll, waste and recruiting fees. That is why the replacement cost is the number to carry into the board meeting: it translates

the revolving door into currency and forces a decision.

Finding 4 — What the worker declares when you ask the right question

The first grievance they name is not money: 19% of restaurant workers point to the lack of long-term growth as their main complaint, ahead of other reasons, per Toast (What Restaurant Workers Want, 2025).

Add the intent-to-leave snapshot from the 2023 Toast survey of 1,011 workers, where 30% planned to exit the industry within two years, and the reading arranges itself: plenty of people are not fleeing your restaurant, they are fleeing a trade nobody presented to them as a career.

The demographic profile sharpens the contrast, because 6.2 million teenagers aged 16 to 19 are in the U.S. labor force, roughly 900,000 more than in 2019 (National Restaurant Association / BLS, 2024). Young people come in by the thousands. They leave because in your restaurant the next position does not exist, not even on paper.

Finding 5 — The training paradox: coaching someone who leaves in seven months

Training someone properly when they will quit in seven months looks like throwing money away, and NOT training them is exactly what guarantees they quit in seven months; the way out of that paradox is not less training, it is lower cost per head and a shorter road to competence.

Flip it for a minute: if you decide to spend nothing on development to protect margin, the rookie takes longer to sell well, average check slips, the manager covers mistakes on the floor, your good people get tired of dragging them along and leave too, and that roughly 5,864 USD replacement cost (Cornell University, 2024) now gets paid twice instead of once. That is the full scenario, not a rhetorical threat. Investment in training is not justified by loyalty. It is justified because it shortens the productivity curve before the exit.

Finding 6 — Simulation and AI scheduling: where the unit economics shifted

Technology moved the equation on the cost side, not on the sentiment side. In a location with a 20,000 USD monthly payroll, freeing 10% means 2,000 USD a month, enough to sustain a formal development program and attack the 19% who leave over missing growth (Toast, 2025). Diego F. Parra and Masterestaurant organize these sources by segment so you can decide where each dollar goes.

Finding 7 — The British market as a mirror: fewer openings does not mean fewer problems

The United Kingdom shows what scarcity turns into once it passes: hospitality vacancies averaged 79,000 in 2025, down from 98,000 in 2024 and from the roughly 121,000 of the July-September 2024 quarter, per the Office for National Statistics (ONS, via Chefs Bay and Morning Advertiser). The decline reads nicely in a headline, yet it arrived alongside closures and headcount cuts, which is the other way to solve a staffing problem.

Against that, a considerable number of openings in the American market describes a market still under strain. Two geographies, two directions, one identical operating conclusion for the owner: the availability of people is a cycle you do not control, and the only ground where you command anything is how long your good staff choose to stay.

Finding 8 — What to measure Monday so this stops being dinner conversation

Start by separating first-90-day turnover from all the rest, because they are two different diseases with two different treatments and almost nobody measures them apart. An early exit speaks about selection and onboarding; the exit of a server with two years speaks about a ceiling, which is the 19% that Toast (2025) identifies as a lack

of long-term growth.

Put the replacement cost of roughly 5,864 USD (Cornell University, 2024) next to each position, and for the first time you hold a figure a partner understands without translation. Set a numeric turnover target per segment and review it monthly with the shift manager sitting across from you.

Finding 9 — Sources, scope and method of this synthesis

SOURCES SYNTHESIZED (6): National Restaurant Association (2024 and 2025, the latter via BLS JOLTS), Toast — What Restaurant Workers Want in 2025, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics — Occupational Outlook Handbook 2024, StaffedUp — Restaurant Professional Development 2025, Gallup (engagement meta-analysis) and TimeForge (2025). Data window: publications from 2023 to 2025, plus BLS ten-year occupational projections.

SELECTION CRITERION: we kept only sources publishing a figure with an identifiable organization and year, covering food and beverage explicitly, and allowing a breakdown by segment or by the worker's stated reason. Blog aggregations without a primary source and vendor surveys with no declared size or date were excluded. Where two sources measure the same thing with different methods —NRA/JOLTS vacancies versus UK ONS— they are reported separately and contrasted in the benchmark, never averaged.

Finding 10 — Sources, scope and method of this synthesis — in practice

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS, before the scorecard. Staff turnover: exits in a period divided by average headcount for the same period, annualized as a percentage. Replacement cost: recruiting plus training plus lost productivity plus overtime coverage, expressed as a multiple of the role's annual salary. Labor cost: total payroll plus burden over net sales, in percent. Prime cost: food cost plus labor cost over net sales.

Skills gap: the distance between the competency your service standard demands and the competency the employee has certified, measured by on-shift observation. Contribution margin: selling price minus variable dish cost, in currency per unit. HONEST LIMITATIONS.

First: source coverage skews to the United States and the United Kingdom, so vacancy ranges and replacement-cost multiples read as ORDER OF MAGNITUDE in Latin America rather than transferable figures —the Colombian datapoint we do cite, a 9.8% rise in dish prices since February 2025 to sustain 98,000 jobs (ACODRES, 2025), anchors local labor cost.

Finding 11 — Sources, scope and method of this synthesis — key points

Second: several figures come from self-reported worker surveys, with the social-desirability bias that carries. Third: the 2023-2025 window crosses a post-pandemic labor reshuffle, so the downward vacancy trend may be cycle rather than structure; the analysis therefore does not extrapolate past 2026. WHAT THIS DOCUMENT IS NOT: there is no proprietary sample, no audit of N venues, no number derived from Masterestaurant's own operations.

Diego F. Parra's track record —more than 8,400 restaurants across 43 countries over twenty years— is the authority context from which this public data is READ, never the source of a figure. Every quantitative statistic here is external, named and dated.

POINT BY POINT

Myth against data, criterion by criterion

DIAGNOSIS OF THE CAUSE

A · BOARDROOM MYTH The myth blames the labor market and a generation that «won't work»

B · MASTERESTAURANT The data blames the stated reason: lack of growth and, above all, the demand for schedule flexibility.

Verdict: Data wins: the market loosened and churn persisted, so the cause sits inside.

WHERE THE COST SHOWS UP

A · BOARDROOM MYTH The myth keeps replacement off the P&L, dissolved in overtime and notice

B · MASTERESTAURANT The data prices it at roughly 5,864 USD per exit, according to Cornell University (2024).

Verdict: Data wins, with immediate consequence: that line next to prime cost changes the board conversation in a single committee.

INTERVENTION LEVER

A · BOARDROOM MYTH The myth lifts the hourly rate and waits

B · MASTERESTAURANT The data points to career, flexibility and certification, since only 37% rank pay first (Toast, 2025)

Verdict: Data wins on pure economics: a general raise is permanent while a career map is staged.

UNIT OF PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

A · BOARDROOM MYTH The myth

measures turnover per venue and compares cities

B · MASTERESTAURANT The data points

at the manager: Gallup documents across 2.7 million workers that engagement variance concentrates there

Verdict: Data wins above ten venues; in a single venue the sample is so small that the 90-day window remains the useful indicator.

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

A · BOARDROOM MYTH The myth sees

software spend that never touches the floor

B · MASTERESTAURANT The data

measures effect: labor savings and higher forecast accuracy, plus simulation to close the skills gap.

Verdict: Data wins, on one condition without which nothing holds: if the service standard is not written down, no simulator has anything to certify.

DECISION HORIZON

A · BOARDROOM MYTH The myth reacts

once the shift falls and hires in panic

B · MASTERESTAURANT The data

anticipates a sustained gap between open roles and available staff across the sector.

Verdict: Data wins: keeping a live shortlist with no opening costs less than lowering the standard under pressure.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

What the myth makes you do MYTH

- ✗ Raise the hourly rate as the first and only answer to churn, when just 37% of workers rank hourly pay first (Toast, 2025).
- ✗ Measure whole-venue annual turnover against a legendary 100%, with no breakdown by tenure, season or shift.
- ✗ Treat replacement cost as invisible admin spend instead of loading it into real labor cost and watching it eat contribution margin.
- ✗ Train only whoever «is going to last», a call made on the manager's hunch that fulfils itself.
- ✗ Accept that the preshift is a three-minute pep talk rather than a measurement instrument.
- ✗ Hire in panic every time someone quits, with the shift already down and no shortlist in hand.

What the data asks you to do MASTERESTAURANT

- ✓ Separate first-90-day turnover from the rest: that is where the fixable share sits, and the 19% citing lack of growth (Toast, 2025) shows up earlier in that window.
- ✓ Put the roughly 5,864 USD replacement cost per employee (Cornell University, 2024) on a visible monthly P&L line so the board sees the bleed next to prime cost.
- ✓ Offer genuine schedule flexibility, which many staff call essential, driven by demand forecasting rather than the judgment of a tired manager.
- ✓ Standardize training with simulators and gamification so cost per trained head falls and stops being a bet.
- ✓ Judge managers on six-month team retention, consistent with what Gallup documents across 2.7 million workers.
- ✓ Keep a live candidate shortlist even with no opening, so you never hire with a knife at your throat.

THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

The 2026 scorecard: public figures and what each one decides

19%
leave over lack of long-term growth, not over money

98000
Annual average accommodation and food vacancies in the UK in 2024 (ONS)

up to 20%
Turnover reduction with predictable scheduling

79.6%
Average annual US restaurant industry turnover rate over the past 10 years

5864
USD PER EMPLOYEE
Total cost of turnover per employee

5864 USD
Average real turnover cost per restaurant employee

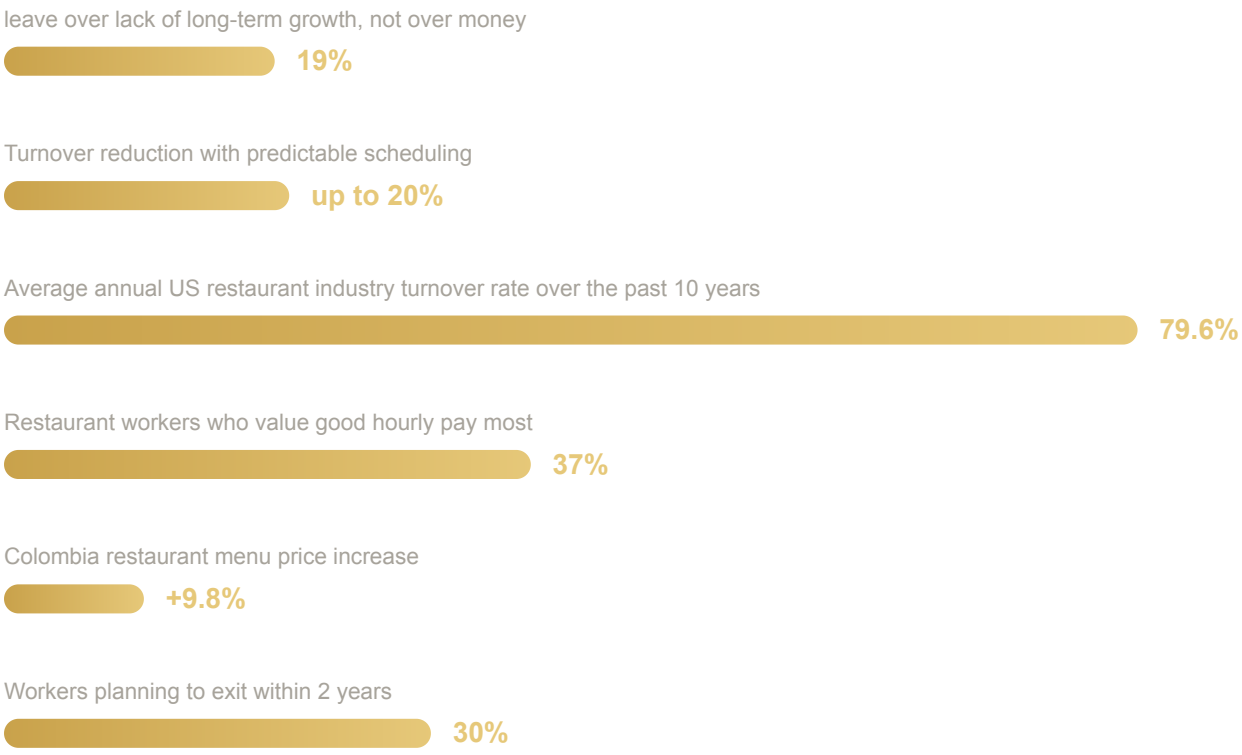
37%
Restaurant workers who value good hourly pay most

+9.8%
Colombia restaurant menu price increase

30%
Workers planning to exit within 2 years

VISUALIZATION

The numbers, visualized



Sources: Toast 2025 · Office for National Statistics, via Chefs Bay · All Gravy — Absenteeism in Hospitality · Toast — What is the Average Restaurant Industry Turnover Rate for Employees? 2024 · Cornell University 2024

Chart by masterestaurant.com

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE (COMPOSITE)

“We moved training into a two-week simulator track and ran the preshift on three measured questions, and first-90-day exits dropped from 6 to 2; labor cost fell 1.8 points without touching a single hourly rate.”

— Operations director, three-venue full-service group, Bogotá, 2026

Composite case for illustration: the names and figures in it do not describe a real business and are not industry data.

HOW TO APPLY IT IN YOUR RESTAURANT

How to place yourself: three scenarios and the healthy range by segment

1

1. Single venue (12-25 employees): measure the 90-day window, not the year

In one venue annual turnover misleads, because two exits swing the percentage twenty points. Measure instead how many of the last ninety days' hires are still there; lose more than a third and your problem is onboarding, not the market. Healthy range for this segment: keep at least two of every three hires past day 90. One action this week: write your service standard as two-minute cards and certify it with a simulator, not with a talk.

2

2. Groups of 3 to 10 venues: put replacement cost on the P&L

At this scale the bleed is already material and still invisible. Take the roughly 5,864 USD replacement cost per exit (Cornell University, 2024), multiply by the quarter's exits and set that line next to prime cost in the monthly committee; the number stops being HR and becomes finance. Healthy range: keep it under 2% of quarterly net sales. In parallel, attack the stated reason before the price, because 19% leave over lack of long-term growth while only 37% rank hourly pay first (Toast, 2025). A three-tier career map with level certification costs less than a round of raises.

3

3. Multi-unit (10+ venues): measure managers, not venues

With twenty managers, variance between them explains more than variance between cities; Gallup's meta-analysis across 2.7 million workers holds that the manager concentrates most of the engagement difference. Build a six-month retention dashboard by manager rather than by venue, and treat the result as a performance indicator with real weight in the bonus. Healthy range: no manager sits more than fifteen points below the group median two quarters running. Add forecast-driven scheduling to remove the impossible-rota excuse.

4

4. All three scenarios: turn the preshift into an instrument

That three-minute preshift is the only daily touchpoint you already have with the ENTIRE floor, and almost nobody instruments it. Automate three rotating questions on the dish of the day, the pairing suggestion and the critical service step, log who misses what, and you will have the team's skills gap mapped in two weeks without a single classroom hour. That measurement feeds the Interactive Training Kit, which pushes short simulations to whoever needs them instead of sitting all twelve through the same session. The effect on average ticket lands before the effect on turnover, and it funds the rest of the program.

5

5. Close the loop: recruit before you need to

Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024), you compete for the same person your neighbor wants. Keep three live candidates per critical position, interviewed already and welcome-simulator assigned, even with no opening today. Hiring with the shift down is what pushes you to lower the standard, and lowering the standard produces the next exit.

FAQ

Questions that arrive after the scorecard

What is a normal restaurant staff turnover rate in 2026?

There is no single figure, and the 100%-a-year myth does not help you decide. The actionable metric is the 90-day window: lose more than a third of recent hires and the problem is onboarding. Market context already improved, so the closed-market excuse holds less and less weight in restaurant management.

What does it really cost to replace a server?

According to Cornell University (2024), each avoided exit saves roughly 5,864 USD in replacement costs, covering recruiting, training, lost productivity and overtime coverage. On a mid-wage floor role that is about eighteen months of pay, scattered across lines nobody aggregates. Put it as a visible line beside labor cost and front of house training stops looking like discretionary spend.

Does raising wages reduce staff turnover?

A career map with level certification and a predictable rota cost less than an across-the-board raise and address two stated reasons rather than one.

Is AI useful for retaining floor staff or only for scheduling shifts?

Both, and the second is the underused one. On scheduling, forecast-driven tools help deliver the flexibility teams ask for. In restaurant management training, simulation and gamification cut cost per trained head and close the skills gap person by person, which is what holds the standard when the market tightens again.

DATA & SOURCES

2026 data on staff turnover

Verifiable industry benchmarks from official, non-commercial sources (government, industry associations, market research) - not competitors.

Metric	Value	Source
Share of operators reporting softer customer traffic (affects the cost control a restaurant manager must master), U.S., 2026 report	**60 % de los operadores**	National Restaurant Association — Persistent Cost Increases and Enduring Demand Will Shape the Restaurant Industry in 2026 (2026)
Median annual wage of food service managers (management labor cost a restaurant manager must master), U.S., May 2025	**69.390 dólares al año (mayo de 2025)**	BLS — Occupational Outlook Handbook: Food Service Managers (2025)
Food service manager jobs in the U.S. in 2025 (those who handle the costs a restaurant manager must master)	**unos 344.300 empleos en 2025**	BLS — Occupational Outlook Handbook: Food Service Managers (2025)
Surplus food generated by restaurants and foodservice (waste cost a restaurant manager must master), U.S., 2024	**12,5 millones de toneladas en 2024**	ReFED — Restaurants and Foodservice (2024)

Metric	Value	Source
Share of U.S. surplus food coming from restaurants and foodservice (waste, a cost a restaurant manager must master), 2024	**17,9 % del excedente total**	ReFED — Restaurants and Foodservice (2024)
2026 growth forecast for Mexico's restaurant industry after input cost increases (costs a restaurant manager must master), per Canirac	**0,5 % aproximado (rebajado desde 3,5 %), 2026**	El Ingrediente — Canirac reduce a 0.5% el crecimiento restaurantero en 2026 (2026)

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