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January / February 2014

# Human Resources

The smart HR professional's blueprint for workforce strategy

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How Jumbo Group of Restaurants cooks up top training programmes to take on the competitive F&B market

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# Q & A

## Christina Kong

Senior director of HR and corporate affairs  
Jumbo Group of Restaurants

Stepping up to the plate

By SABRINA ZOLKIFI

**Q** The F&B industry is notorious for its labour challenges. Is this something you're experiencing at Jumbo?

In F&B (food and beverage), getting manpower is the biggest challenge. We are always facing a shortage of manpower; it's really about how we cope with the challenges and be innovative in recruiting. Basically, we need to change our mindset because if we always did things in the same style as 10 or 20 years ago, I would probably have to come down to the outlets and help out myself.

**Q** Why do you think it's so hard to attract people into the industry?

This is not a glamorous job so it's difficult to get people, especially locals, on board. We've tried many different ways to attract younger people, such as training programmes, career progression and upgrading opportunities.

**Q** What's the one biggest thing Jumbo provides for staff to help with attraction and retention?

Providing training has always been a part of Jumbo's culture. My boss strongly believes in training and upgrading staff. Since I joined, I've helped set up more training programmes; it's pretty tough to change some of the mindsets, but after a while, because we were very persistent about it, our employees realise the training improves their work.

We have 16 outlets and HR cannot be on the ground all the time, so when staff return to their outlets after training, the training has to continue on the job. It's not

just sending someone for training and having them come back. There has to be a lot of follow up to make sure the training is effective.

**Q** Jumbo recently implemented a lot of new technology within the company. What was the partnership between the HR and IT departments like during the execution stages?

Before we implement anything, the IT team will come down to the outlets and conduct a training session. They provide a manual which lists the process step-by-step. In the beginning stages of implementation at each outlet, because there are, of course, going to be hiccups, our IT team is always on standby.

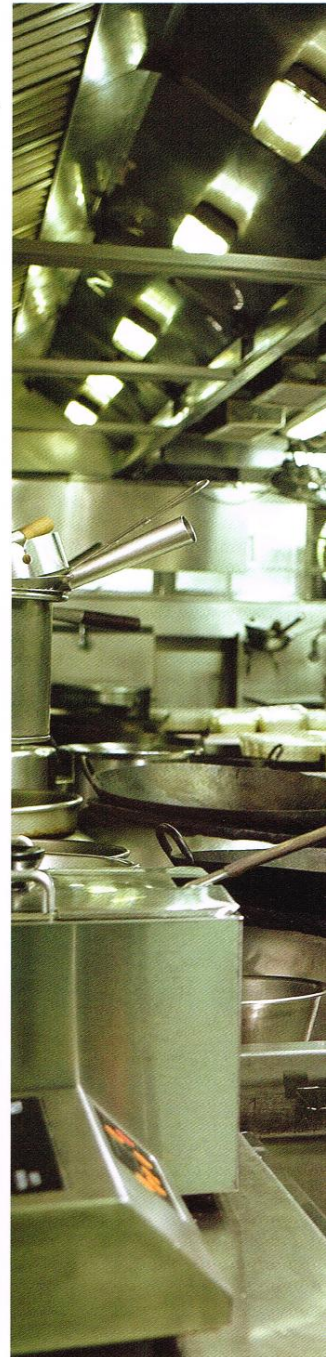
We also don't implement new technology across the organisation – we'd rather do it outlet by outlet so that we can make sure everything is stabilised. It also helps the IT team gain more experience for when it is implementing it in the other outlets. Each time we implement a system in a new outlet, there are fewer problems.

**Q** How do you execute the follow up programmes post-training?

For us in the training department, we do an audit check after implementation. Through all this checking, we will also see whether they are on par with the rest of the outlets and if the training has been effective. We make it very simple because we know the main core of our employees' job is operations – we don't want to test them so much on the technical aspect.

### VITAL STATS

Christina Kong has been working with Jumbo since 2007, and was with the Ministry of Manpower before that. As a qualified trainer and auditor, Kong has been key in the development of the company's HR and training divisions.



Art direction: Shafron Kamaluzaman; Photography: Stuart Jenner - shafronphotography.com; Makeup & Hair: Mic Makeover using Make Up For Ever & hair using Sebastian Professional - www.micmakeover.com





We want to keep things as easy as possible – their main job is not to do IT; the technology is meant to ease their job.

**Q What were the challenges faced by employees when the new systems were rolled out?**

In the beginning, it was a bit difficult. Employees would give excuses and say they couldn't make it for training or just not turn up. It was actually by word-of-mouth from people who attended the training and shared their experience of how they could apply it to their job that helped.

As management, we can write emails but that information has to be disseminated to the managers who then pass it along to the staff. There is a big gap between us and the staff, and the staff are the ones who really need to know the information.

**Q So did the word-of-mouth chatter among employees really help?**

It's really thanks to the staff who have attended the training and seen how it helps and how there's been an improvement in their work that has helped changed the mindsets of those who didn't want to do the training programmes.

**Q What is the general response to training now?**

The younger employees we have now are very open to training. In fact, they are the ones asking us for it. Of course, we have different groups of employees, so we have to handle them differently when it comes to training. It takes time and we haven't achieved everything yet, but we've had a bit of success in this area.

**Q What are some of the training programmes you offer to employees?**

All employees have to go through a food hygiene course, but there is also a list of programmes available for them to attend. One is with WDA (Workforce Development Authority), which is more service related. If staff join us fresh, there are certain modules they have to complete before they can start work.

When a new employee comes on board, within the first three months of work, they have to complete a certain number of modules and finish everything within 12 months. From there, we have other programmes which include management training or IT courses.

**Q Are there also programmes which are specific to career progression?**

When employees get promoted – for example from a service captain to a supervisor – sometimes their mindsets don't change, so we send them for courses to help them gain confidence, and customise nine internal modules targeted at newly promoted supervisors. These nine modules include a foundation module, how to do appraisals and business management.

**Q Jumbo also provides a fast-track training programme for high-performing employees.**

We do have a lot of high potential employees, so every year there are opportunities to promote them during the two appraisals we conduct. We found there are employees who are fast learners and have great performances, so those are the ones we put on a fast-track programme. It is a compressed training programme, where they receive on-the-job training for their next role and will be assessed if they are competent for the role.

**Q How does being on a fast-track programme help with career progression?**

Usually, it would take someone five years to be promoted from being a waitress to a supervisor, but if they are being fast-tracked, they can do so in one or one and a half years. We found that with a lot of these high performers, if you stretch them for too long, they may not want to stay.

**Q These training programmes must also help in retaining the majority of the workforce.**

Some of the training programmes create career progression and skill upgrading opportunities for the employees. We really hope employees will see there are opportunities to grow within the company. We are not paying the highest, so in order to retain staff, we need to offer better welfare and benefits.

**Q Because Jumbo has been around for so long and your employees were very comfortable with the traditional way of operating, did the implementation of technology come as a shock?**

Nowadays, you can find the POS (point of sale) system everywhere so that's not much of a problem. A lot of the technology

**"We want to keep things as easy as possible – their main job is not to do IT; the technology is meant to ease their job."**

we use is pretty straightforward, so it doesn't take a long time for them to adapt. It also helps once they realise how much of their time is saved using technology. With the new technology, I find that people are more for it, especially the younger staff.

**Q What has been the biggest driver in helping staff get used to the new technology?**

Our staff are definitely on board with technology because they see the increase in productivity. This is especially so in outlets where they've seen the switch from the old to the new system. When I ask them if they would like to return to the old system, they said "never". Once you get them on board, I don't think they would want to turn back.

As HR, what we really need to do is ease the training and make it easy for them to adapt to the new technology.

**Q One of the biggest reasons behind the labour shortage in F&B seems to stem from misconceptions about the industry. How do you cope with this?**

Our recruitment efforts start at the secondary school level. Schools are very active at sending their students for work experience. Our approach and hope is to get





them to appreciate the service industry. To do service, you need to have the passion for it. A lot of the students we've worked with have realised they actually do love the job, so that's a good starting point.

From there, we work with N-level students so they can join the workforce under a training programme so they can earn money and enjoy all the benefits of working while gaining the experience.

**Q What about students graduating from higher education?**

We provide scholarships under a two-year bond after graduation. During these two years, they will be attached with the operations department of the company for the first year.

When they understand how the operations work, they will be able to link it back to their work better because they will understand the needs and demands of the customers. We believe it adds a lot of value to their jobs.

**Q What advice would you give other HR practitioners to better refine their recruitment efforts?**

It's very important to spell it out to those

joining the company what we have to offer them but, of course, you have to always be telling the truth.

If you promise them one thing and it ends up not coming through, word will get around. We also participate in a lot of career fairs so that we're able to better understand what the demands of the workforce are.

**Q On top of training and career development initiatives, what else is Jumbo doing in 2014 to help improve staff engagement and satisfaction?**

At the start of this year, we are implementing a staff satisfaction survey as well as a 360-degree appraisal. We believe good managers will create good workers. Previously, we did this on an ad-hoc basis and found that we were unable to gather a lot of information and hear from everybody.

**Q Are you expecting any challenges?**

There has to be a change of mindset from the managers. They cannot look at it as a way for their staff to complain about them. Rather, they need to look at it as a way of finding out how we can improve the employees' wellbeing. **H**



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