

# today's hotelier

July 2022 | todayshotelier.com

The Official Publication of AAHOA

**WORKFORCE  
DEVELOPMENT ISSUE**

**Laura Lee Blake**  
AAHOA President & CEO

*Lopsided Leverage*  
 “At the heart of this bill, we’re asking for transparency from franchisors.”  
**RAJ MUKHERJI**  
 NJ STATE REPRESENTATIVE  
**PAGE 11**

*The Right Leadership*  
 at the Right Time **PAGE 12**



**CRACK THE CODE AND  
SOLVE THE WORKFORCE  
PUZZLE TO RETAIN TOP  
PERFORMERS**

**PAGE 22**

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# contents

July 2022 | todayshotelier.com

## 16

### Sink or swim

Short-staffed hotel companies test new hires early while still providing career-development opportunities

by NICK FORTUNA

## 22

### Solving the workforce puzzle

Crack the code to retain your top performers

by ALICIA HOISINGTON



## departments

- 7 5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT AAHOA THIS MONTH
- 8 LETTER FROM THE CHAIRMAN
- 9 LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT & CEO
- 11 ADVOCACY IN ACTION
- 43 TELL ME SOMETHING GOOD
- 44 AAHOA CLUB BLUE, PLATINUM & SILVER INDUSTRY PARTNERS
- 46 AAHOA MEMBERS IN ACTION
- 48 CLASSIFIEDS
- 50 ADVERTISERS INDEX

## columns

### THE C-SUITE

Introducing: Laura Lee Blake, AAHOA's President & CEO ..... 12  
by MELISSA STERN

### LEGAL CORNER

Dodging disaster: Getting to "you're hired!" without a lawsuit..... 28  
by JOHN A. MAVROS and NELLY PINEDA

### TRENDS

Riding the on-demand wave for employee payment: Getting creative with payday flexibility ..... 30  
by FLORENCE HOSANNA

### OPERATIONS

Finding solid ground: Building a culture of safety and security on a firm foundation ..... 32  
by PAUL MOXNESS

### INDEPENDENT HOTELIERS

If you build it, they will come: Workforce issues and the independent hotelier ..... 34  
by AMIT C. GOVINDJI

### HUMAN RESOURCES

Unlocking communication secrets: Digitalizing information to keep teams happy and engaged ..... 36  
by CHRISTY SHAPARD

### FINANCE

Staying on target: How to choose the right resource to arrange hotel financing ..... 40  
by RUSHI SHAH

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# 5 Things to Know About AAHOA This Month

1

## AAHOA CO-HOST TWO ALIS SUMMER UPDATE EVENTS.

AAHOA Past Chair Vinay Patel (2021-2022) will speak to attendees on July 14 in Nashville, and Chairman Neal Patel will share his hotel development outlook on July 19 in Dallas. AAHOA is proud to co-host and collaborate with BHN Group to produce both events. Make plans to join us in Nashville and Dallas this month. There's still time to register.

[Burba.com/ALISsummerupdate](http://Burba.com/ALISsummerupdate)



## EXPLORE THE AAHOA BROADCAST AND BECOME AN INDUSTRY INSIDER.

Did you know the AAHOA Broadcast gives you recent membership news, hospitality updates, and exclusive discount codes to leading hotel industry events? Stay informed every day and

become an industry insider when you bookmark the AAHOA Broadcast as one of your new favorite websites. [AAHOA.com/Broadcast](http://AAHOA.com/Broadcast)



## AAHOA HAS FOUR REGIONALS LINED UP THIS MONTH.

Our regionals demonstrate AAHOA's dedication to engaging members and industry partners at the grassroots level. With four regional events lined up this month, you won't want to miss the chance to meet top vendors, network with hospitality peers, and receive region-specific hospitality updates. All hotel owners can attend, even if you're not already an AAHOA Member. Check the events calendar for more information, and join us! [AAHOA.com/2022Regionals](http://AAHOA.com/2022Regionals)



2

## JOIN AAHOA AT THE LODGING CONFERENCE IN SEPTEMBER.

The Lodging Conference, set for September 19-22 in Phoenix, brings together the hotel industry's most influential owners, operators, presidents, CEOs, and dealmakers to strategize about every aspect of the industry's development, finance, franchising, management, construction, design, and operations. Again this year, AAHOA is hosting a reception at the Lodging Conference on Tuesday, September 20 from 5:30-7 p.m. at The JW Desert Ridge at The Isle of Capri. You will not want to miss the exciting sessions and conversations. Register to attend at [LodgingConference.com](http://LodgingConference.com).



## AAHOACON23

### SAVE THE DATE: REGISTRATION FOR AAHOACON23 WILL BE OPENING SOON.

Join us in Los Angeles for the event of the year! The 2023 AAHOA Convention & Trade Show is set for April 11-14 in Los Angeles, CA, and registration will be opening this fall, so mark your calendars. AAHOACON23 will bring together industry professionals, deal-making on the trade show floor, networking opportunities, and subject-matter experts for the largest gathering of hotel owners, not to mention the exciting Welcome Reception and Block Party – which always create a memorable week for attendees. Mark your calendars and stay tuned for updates! [AAHOA.com/Convention](http://AAHOA.com/Convention)



**NISHANT (NEAL) PATEL,  
CHO, CHIA**  
AAHOA CHAIRMAN (2022-2023)

“  
Innovation and  
implementation  
are the new  
keys to success.  
We need to  
find a way to  
overcome this  
obstacle, and  
I’m a strong  
believer that  
technology will  
help us do it.”

## In a league of your own

**GREW UP IN SURAT, INDIA, BUT NEARLY TWO DECADES AGO, MY FAMILY HEADED TO** Mississippi, leaving everything behind in search of the American Dream. Six months later, we moved to Texas.

My cousins played baseball because we all played cricket growing up, and I soon signed up, too, without even knowing the game. It also was a way to make friends as I was learning English and acclimating to a new culture.

We were immersing ourselves in the “American Experience.”

On the first day of practice, we were all standing in line, and the coach went around asking everyone what positions we wanted to play. Everyone told the coach what position they played – first base, and so on. Then they asked me, and I had no idea. So, I pointed somewhere in the middle of the field and said, “over there.”

I didn’t realize at the time that I pointed at the shortstop position, which is one of the hardest positions in baseball. At least, for me, it was.

I still remember breaking windows at the independent motel – a 21-room motel in Giddings, Texas – while practicing on the asphalt. My parents were less than pleased.

We didn’t have a lot of resources, and my brother and I, despite being so young, helped our parents with various tasks around the motel, as we didn’t have the budget yet to hire more staff. We lived on-site, wore many hats, and sometimes worked all day without eating lunch or dinner.

I used to watch my parents closely when they dealt with guests or any issues that came up at the hotel. They taught us that hard work and education are keys to success.

Fast forward 20 years, and I’m now running the family business. Like many other businesses, the labor shortage was tough on us. We increased wages but still didn’t have enough people to cover the overnight shift. From housekeeping to front desk agents, we struggled to fill positions.

As I always say, innovation and implementation are the new keys to success. We need to find a way to overcome this obstacle, and I’m a strong believer that technology will help us do it. I’m hopeful for the future.

Economy and extended-stay hotels’ revenue numbers are actually outnumbering 2019 numbers. But upscale or midscale hotels are struggling to bounce back. I think it will take a few years for them to break even.

So, if you’re like me as a young boy, and asked what position you want to play, have the confidence to just point and figure it out. And I’m not just talking about baseball. That’s all we’re doing here, right? Everyone is just figuring out how to move forward given all the uncertainties as we finally see the light after years of darkness because of the pandemic.

As we all chip in until our economy and staffing get back to normal, it might be a little uncomfortable.

You might break a window here and there, but practice makes perfect and it always can be fixed. ■



**LAURA LEE BLAKE, ESQ.**  
President & CEO

“  
During my first six months to a year in my new role, I'd like to help lead AAHOA as it relaunches its operational mission and advances to achieve its goals, with guidance and strategic direction from the AAHOA Board of Directors, Committee Members, and Ambassadors.”

## The detour is the destination

**NEVER PLANNED TO BECOME AN ATTORNEY. I HAD ASPIRATIONS OF BECOMING** a reporter and anchor in one of the top TV news markets, such as New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago.

I interned at a local station in Chicago while I was in college and saw firsthand how these journalists were covering hard news stories that were helping and making an impact on people in the communities they served. It made a lasting impression on me, and I decided to go to law school to become a legal or justice correspondent.

During my law school years, I had an opportunity to work as a summer associate for several national and medium-size law firms and fell in love with the law, especially civil litigation and trial work.

While the practice of law can be very demanding, it's extremely rewarding to serve clients and help them find justice and fairness in their business transactions and related disputes.

As the ancient proverb says, "Clothe yourself with strength and dignity, so you can laugh at the days to come." That's a lot, but it will give your life meaning and purpose, and you will never regret the choices you have made.

Fast forward 25 years, and here I am.

With AAHOA's upgraded 12 Points of Fair Franchising and the future of franchising in general, I'm excited to return to AAHOA and open the dialogue with the leading franchisors for the benefit of our members, the brands, and all franchise systems.

I'm excited to follow the lead of our members in building and expanding on the influence of this great association to have a lasting impact for years to come.

During my first six months to a year in my new role, I'd like to help lead AAHOA as it relaunches its operational mission and advances to achieve its goals, with guidance and strategic direction from the AAHOA Board of Directors, Committee Members, and Ambassadors.

This includes rebuilding the AAHOA team, taking advantage of the great dynamic talent we have, refocusing our tactical priorities, working through an incredible Regionals season, and continuing AAHOA's efforts.

Before I even officially started in my new role as president and CEO at AAHOA, I testified during a hearing on a fair franchising bill in New Jersey. Several AAHOA Members shared their personal experiences related to provisions of the bill during the hearing. This team effort, and AAHOA Members' sharing their testimonies, is truly what made an impact. In the end, the committee passed the bill. To learn more, see page 11.

As an attorney, I'm always honored to represent my clients and am most proud when I can truly make a difference for them. As AAHOA's newest president and CEO, it's an honor to represent the members, and this is just the start of the difference I plan on making for you. ■



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# AAHOA takes Trenton

## New Jersey bill bolstering franchisees' rights is expected to gain passage

by NICK FORTUNA

**I**N THE GARDEN STATE, A BIPARTISAN effort to grow the rights of franchisees in the hospitality industry is sprouting, and legislators expect it to bear fruit later this year.

Assembly Bill 1958 would make important changes to the New Jersey Franchise Practices Act that would benefit many hotel operators in the state and – if it eventually becomes law – part of the credit will go to AAHOA and its members.

On May 12, a group from AAHOA traveled to Trenton to testify in support of the legislation before the state Assembly's judiciary committee. Attendees included prominent hotel owners and association leaders such as Mahendra (MZ) Patel, regional director for the Mid-Atlantic; Bhavesh Patel, who served as AAHOA's chair in 2017-18; and Laura Lee Blake, who was named president and chief executive earlier in the month.

The bill contains several key provisions affecting operators of franchised hotels, including:

- Limiting the duration of non-compete agreements to six months.
- Prohibiting franchisors from requiring a capital investment greater than \$25,000 from franchisees more than once every five years, unless franchisors can establish a return on the investment.
- Requiring franchisors that receive “any rebate, commission, kickback, services, other consideration, or anything of value” to fully disclose them to franchisees and turn them over to franchisees.
- Putting restrictions on the mandatory sourcing of goods or resources.
- Prohibiting franchisors from suspending, restricting, or preventing access to franchise services.

Assembly Bill 1958 is sponsored by Democrats Raj Mukherji, Robert J. Karabinchak, and William W. Spearman, along with Republican Ronald S. Dancer.

Mukherji represents densely populated Hudson County, where a large number of hotels compete to serve the New York City and North Jersey markets. After the bill cleared the judiciary committee in May, he said he was “reasonably optimistic” that it would pass the Assembly and state Senate later this year, sending it to Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy to be signed.

“AAHOA's advocacy has been instrumental in moving this legislation forward because they shared with us, on behalf of their members, what could be done to make the hospitality industry more equitable and how to protect franchisees from unfair, unscrupulous practices,” Mukherji said. “At the heart of this bill, we're asking for transparency from franchisors.”

According to a 2021 research study by Oxford Economics, AAHOA Members own 45.4% of the hotels in New Jersey, employ more than 72,000 workers, contribute \$7.3 billion to the state's GDP, and pay more

than \$2 billion in federal, state, and local taxes.

Mukherji said protecting New Jersey's hotel operators from unfair business practices took on added importance due to the pandemic, which resulted in “unfathomable” hardships for the hospitality industry.

“In trying to help these businesses recover, we learned about a number of practices by franchisors that are just unfair and seem to be exploiting the lopsided leverage and bargaining power they have,” he said. “In general, I'd rather not have government interfere with the free market, but this is one of those times when public policy and government need to step in and level the playing field somewhat.” ■



**Raj Mukherji**  
New Jersey State Representative



# Introducing Laura Lee AAHOA President & CEO Blake

by MELISSA STERN

**F**OLLOWING A VOTE BY THE AAHOA BOARD OF DIRECTORS, LAURA LEE BLAKE, ESQ. IS THE NEW PRESIDENT AND CEO of AAHOA, the nation's largest hotel owners association. Laura Lee has been an attorney for more than 25 years and most recently was a partner with Connor, Fletcher, and Hedenkamp LLP in Irvine, California. She brings decades of experience in the fields of law, government, business, and academia to AAHOA.

Melissa Stern, AAHOA's director, corporate communications, sat down with Blake for a Q&A to learn more about her and her vision for the future of AAHOA.

## MELISSA STERN: CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR OVERALL EXPERIENCES IN THE FIRST FEW WEEKS AS THE PRESIDENT AND CEO OF AAHOA?

**LAURA LEE BLAKE:** The only word to describe the first few weeks in this new role is "exhilarating." To be back with AAHOA and serving our nearly 20,000 members, as well as working with the AAHOA team members and collaborating with our Officers, Board members, and Ambassadors, is definitely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Plus, with AAHOA continuing to strengthen its influence in the hotel industry and political circles, this provides a new platform to voice our concerns and make a true difference for the benefit of our members. I'm looking forward to the challenges ahead and loving every minute of it.

## MS: YOU WORKED WITH AAHOA FROM 2005 TO 2014. IS THIS TRANSITION EASIER FOR YOU SINCE YOU ALREADY KNOW AAHOA AND MANY OF THE MEMBERS FROM YOUR PRIOR YEARS WITH THE ASSOCIATION?

**LLB:** Yes, my relationships with many of the leaders and key members of AAHOA have continued strong, and it's a joy to be back. I've commented several times that it's as if nothing and everything has changed. It reminds me of the popular Yogi Berra quote that "It's like déjà vu all over again." Coming back, I'm seeing so many familiar faces. I'm reconnecting with many of my friends, colleagues, and the strong members I had worked with before. We had close relationships back then, and we are picking up where we left off.

Now that I'm back, not only will I be working with them again, but in many situations, I will also have the opportunity to work with their children who have become strong leaders in their own right.

It's truly the American Dream for our members to have come to the U.S. to build their businesses and communities, and to now have their children – who grew up in the hotel industry and many of whom have been educated in our top universities – take over the hotels with a new vision and focus. To participate in this multi-generational setup within the families and the community enhances every aspect of my new position because they're ready to proceed to take AAHOA to new heights in the upcoming years.

On top of that, AAHOA has also grown tremendously.

There is a level of professionalism and overall influence that is more pronounced than it was before. This is a tribute to the hard work of all past AAHOA leaders. It's an exciting time to come back and step into this role of serving AAHOA and leading in a new capacity. It's truly an honor, and there is nowhere I would rather be.

## MS: WHAT DO YOU WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE WORKING ON FOR YOUR FIRST 30, 60, 90 DAYS?

**LLB:** The list of goals and objectives for my first 30, 60, and 90 days is highly ambitious and, as you might expect, continues to grow by the day. There is so much opportunity at AAHOA, and our leaders are boldly taking on the challenges to serve the members in new and innovative ways. One of

my key initiatives is a focus on fair franchising and AAHOA's overall franchise-relations efforts. Members are reporting increased challenges and concerns with their respective franchise systems, and they want more balanced, fair, and equitable terms and practices. We are closely analyzing this from the perspective of the revised 12 Points of Fair Franchising. We're also opening dialogues with the various franchisors and brands, while supporting legislation that moves the proverbial needle and makes a long-term difference for the benefit of our members. I was very passionate about these efforts in prior years when I was working with AAHOA, and I haven't lost that passion or focus. Rather, it has only been made stronger after hearing the stories from our members about many unfair and unjust practices.

To be clear, I should emphasize that franchising provides numerous advantages and benefits for franchisees across the various industries. It has opened doors of opportunity for our AAHOA members and countless other small business owners who have owned and operated highly successful franchised businesses. We have seen great efforts by many of the franchisors to work closely with their franchisees to help them grow, expand, and thrive. For those franchisors who aren't leading with fairness and are failing to promote practices

that benefit their franchisees, we urge you strongly to make the necessary changes for the benefit of the entire franchise system. This would be a win-win for all.

On a personal front, my father was a General Motors franchisee when I was growing up. He had a car dealership in a small rural community in Northwest Iowa, and he sold Pontiacs and Buicks to members of the local community. During those years, I saw the challenges he faced as a result of several GM mandates that were unfair and burdensome, especially for smaller dealers that didn't have the same resources and reserves as the bigger dealerships in larger urban communities. Since my father would bring our entire family to the large automobile conventions, I would join him at the NADA (National Automobile Dealers Association) meetings during these events. As I watched the NADA leaders and representatives advocating for the members and speaking out on their behalf, I frequently wanted to join them to represent the interests of the smaller dealers. I wanted to seek changes



“

It's a blessing to be given this opportunity to serve our AAHOA members in this way and seek changes that will benefit their businesses, employees, families, communities, and guests.

that were favorable and balanced. There is a deep personal connection and drive to assist AAHOA Members, especially those with smaller hotels who might be struggling to support their families and their communities. It's a blessing to be given this opportunity to serve our AAHOA members in this way and seek changes that will benefit their businesses, employees, families, communities, and guests.

**MS: WHAT REASSURANCES WOULD YOU OFFER TO MEMBERS, INDUSTRY PARTNERS, OR ANYONE WITH UNCERTAINTIES ABOUT AAHOA'S FUTURE?**

**LLB:** AAHOA is strong, and I would reassure them that the ardor and dedication of our Officers, Board Members, and members are unparalleled in the industry. Many of the new initiatives this

year involving fair franchising, advocacy, education, and the innovative use of technology to improve operations are brilliant in their design and sustainable for the future. It's becoming increasingly clear that AAHOA will progress further and beyond any point previously explored. There are teams of leaders determining how best to move forward and capitalize on the many opportunities that lie ahead for the organization. There should be absolutely no doubt that if it can be done, AAHOA will do it.

In addition to the efforts of the Officers and Board Members, we also have a very strong Past Chair Committee with past AAHOA Chairs who serve as the honorable "senior statesmen" of the association. The Past Chairs have the wisdom and commitment to ensure we are on the right path and doing things that are in the best interest of the members.

We won't stop until we have achieved our goals. I trust our members will stand united and join the efforts to effect change for the long term.

**MS: WHAT ELSE ARE YOU FOCUSING ON REGARDING CHANGES WITHIN AAHOA, INTERNALLY, AND HOW DO YOU PLAN TO NAVIGATE THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES AS WE TRAVEL DOWN THE ROAD TO RECOVERY FROM THE PANDEMIC?**

**LLB:** As many organizations continue to address the employment changes and concerns arising from COVID, the same is true with AAHOA. We are contemplating, for example, whether it's best to bring the entire team back to the office on a full-time basis, or use a hybrid approach as we move back to normal.

In addition, we are looking at restaffing key leadership positions, rebuilding the team, and



creating plans to better serve our members as AAHOA grows and evolves. Our AAHOA team members have been diligently serving the association and the members, and my goal is to help them continue to identify and achieve their own career goals and objectives, and provide the experiences, training, and resources they need to do so. We have some fantastic leaders on our team, and I will be striving to be a champion for promoting their work and the great things they do for the association.

Chairman Neal Patel has identified important priorities for this year. To achieve these goals, we must build the right teams, create strategic plans, and execute the long-term goals. AAHOA is ready to go to the next level. The AAHOA team is here to turn ideas into initiatives, initiatives into plans, and plans into reality.

#### **MS: WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR HELPING AAHOA'S NEARLY 20,000 MEMBERS?**

**LLB:** My vision is to make changes in the franchise industry that will achieve balance for both the franchisors and their franchisees over the long term. This will improve the bottom line for many of our franchisee members while attracting the next generation of hoteliers to enter the industry because there will be an ROI and profit that hasn't been diminished by amenity creep or any prolific fee increases. My vision also encompasses a greater role for AAHOA as a strong advocate and influencer with elected officials and decision-makers at the federal, state, and local levels, especially given the unsurpassed strength of our grassroots efforts when our members show up to speak

their concerns. Finally, I envision that AAHOA will continue to host an event lineup that is unrivaled in the industry with our spectacular Conventions, Regionals, Townhalls, and all related meetings.

I recently read a quote from J.P. Morgan that aptly sums up the decisions being made, as well as the strong efforts for AAHOA to take the lead as a powerful voice for hoteliers in effectuating important changes across the industry. The quote reads as follows: "The first step towards getting somewhere is to decide you're not going to stay where you are." I'm looking forward to discovering new and unmatched opportunities that previously haven't been seen. It's a new day. It's a new start. This is AAHOA. ■

# 20 questions

A quick get-to-know-you

with  
Laura  
Lee  
Blake

Television series or **movie?**

Delivery or **sit-down restaurant?**

**Beach** or mountains?

Baseball or **volleyball?**

Coffee or tea? **Both!**

Play or **musical?**

Morning or **night?**

**Chinese take-out** or tacos?

**Heels** or flats?

**Spring** or Fall?

Swimming pool or **lake?**

Fake or **real Christmas tree?**

Attend a party or **host a party?**

**City** or countryside?

**Art museum** or history museum?

Ability to fly or **ability to read minds?**

**Music** or podcasts?

**Red wine** or white wine?

Madonna or **Michael Jackson?**

Netflix or **Amazon Prime?**

# SINK

or

# swim



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# Short-staffed hotel companies test new hires early while still providing career-development opportunities

by NICK FORTUNA

**D**URING A RECENT DRIVE TO THE AIRPORT, Sarah Saracino counted half a dozen hotels within shouting distance of the parking lot, all competing for the same travelers and the same jobseekers. As senior vice president of human resources for Meyer Jabara Hotels, she immediately thought about the staffing challenges those properties must be facing amid historically low unemployment rates and rising wages.

If employees at any one of those hotels were feeling underappreciated, she wondered, what's stopping them from quitting and going to the hotel next door, where they likely would be greeted with open arms?



“

Early in the pandemic, when occupancy rates and staffing levels hit record lows, many hotel companies used cross-training programs to get more from the employees who remained. As a result, ambitious workers emerged with new skills that could lead to better opportunities within the company or elsewhere.”

To Saracino, that moment reaffirmed the importance of her company’s career-development initiatives, aimed at retaining talented workers, building a pipeline of future managers, keeping employees engaged, and giving Meyer Jabara Hotels a leg up in recruiting. The Danbury, CT-based company has 28 hotel properties under brands such as Marriott, Hilton, and Hyatt.

“If they’re not going to get career-development opportunities from us, they’re going to go to a different hotel group that can give it to them, so you basically get what you give,” Saracino said. “Someone who feels that we’ve invested in them is more inclined to stay.”

Early in the pandemic, when occupancy rates and staffing levels hit record lows, many hotel companies used cross-training programs to get more from the employees who remained. As a result,

ambitious workers emerged with new skills that could lead to better opportunities within the company or elsewhere.

**TEACH THEM WELL**

Facing a persistent labor shortage as business picks up, hotels now find themselves with limited time and resources to train new and existing employees, according to Gary Gobin, director of operations for hihotels by Hospitality International. The Tucker, GA-based company has about 230 hotels under the brands Red Carpet Inn, Scottish Inns, Master Hosts Inns, Downtowner Inns, and Passport Inn.

Gobin said that in addition to teaching basic job functions, hihotels is training employees to clean and sanitize facilities according to elevated standards and to recognize signs of human trafficking. The company has used AAHOA’s online training resources to address human trafficking, and at a recent regional conference, a Houston police officer spoke to company employees about the topic. Subsequently, hihotels made his presentation available to all of its employees online.

But besides covering those “hot topics,” Gobin said, hotels generally are providing a lean training program designed to get new hires contributing to operations almost immediately.

Hotel executives readily acknowledge the benefits of robust onboarding, cross-training, and

employee-development programs, but when you’re severely understaffed, who has the time?

“I believe that with the present labor shortage and higher-than-normal turnover of employees, hoteliers more than ever have had to rush employees into jobs because they need a body there to work, often not taking the necessary time to fully train new hires,” Gobin said. “They’re not getting the full experience. They’re being taught the basics, and then hopefully somebody’s around to assist them should they need deeper knowledge.”

**LET THEM LEAD THE WAY**

Despite that reality, hoteliers must find time to train employees and map out a plan for their success if they want to reduce turnover and bolster recruitment, Saracino said. At Meyer Jabara Hotels, there are two main branches to the career-development program:

- 1** Individualized learning plans (from which all employees can benefit)
- 2** Leadership development for managers in training

The learning plan is a simple form that workers and their supervisors fill out together, outlining new skills the employee would like to learn and setting a timeline for doing so. For example, a front-desk associate might want to become a night auditor, so the employee and his manager will identify the skills he’ll need to develop, including mastery of the company’s accounting system.





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# Let education be your **anchor**

Major employers such as Amazon and Walmart have made headlines recently by providing free college tuition to some employees, a perk that many hospitality companies simply can't match following several years in the red.

Hilton is a notable exception, announcing in January a partnership with Guild Education to give employees free access to continuing-education classes. Guild Education provides access to about 2,200 academic programs through large, public universities like Oregon State, historically Black colleges such as Spelman, nonprofit schools like Southern New Hampshire University, and other organizations offering professional credentials and certificates.

The program began this spring and is open to employees at Hilton's U.S. properties and corporate offices. At the time of the announcement, Hilton said it had almost 2,900 hotel job openings, ranging from entry level through general manager, at its 18 brands.

According to Guild Education, employees participating in the program are 2.7 times more likely than their peers to remain with their company. In addition, Chipotle found that frontline employees participating in the program were 7.5 times more likely to ascend to a management position.

Gretchen Stroud, Hilton's senior vice president of talent and inclusion, noted that 40% of the company's U.S. employees have been with Hilton for at least 10 years. By offering them educational opportunities, the company will "support our team members in building lifelong, fulfilling careers here at Hilton," she said.

“  
Showing appreciation for your staff and treating them right is really the key to keeping turnover low.”

Next, the supervisor will schedule training sessions and job-shadowing opportunities so the employee can learn from the company's top performers. In just a few months, the front-desk associate should be ready for his new role.

"The learning plan is about making sure our employees feel that we're committed to them by helping them achieve their goals," Saracino said.

Learning plans are for everyone, but the leadership-development program is strictly for "rising stars," she said. To apply, employees must have a bachelor's degree, at least a 3.0 grade-point average, references, and – in most cases – a willingness to relocate.

Once accepted into the program, employees will spend a full year at one of the company's top full-service properties, learning every aspect of the business.

Initially, participants learn about the hotel brand and its overall operations to get an understanding of how each position, department, and division of the company contributes to its success. Then, employees get hands-on experience by spending one month in each of the hotel's departments, including accounting and human resources; the rooms division, consisting of

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the front office, housekeeping and engineering, food and beverage, and sales and catering.

Participants spend the remaining months assigned to one particular department, performing a deep dive into operations that prepares them for managerial positions. Mentors are assigned to participants at the start of the program and meet with them regularly to answer their questions and provide feedback.

Saracino said a night auditor recently was accepted into the program and is aiming to become an assistant general manager.

“This employee is really interested in doing more,” she said. “The program helps us identify people who we think

have really strong potential so we can keep them motivated and engaged with us. That’s an investment on our part because we’re actually dedicating somebody to their growth.”

### GET ENGAGED

At hihotels, regional managers frequently give supervisors tips for training employees and keeping them engaged, including the gift-card test. If housekeepers aren’t consistently checking each room’s drawers after guests check out, for example, managers may leave a few small gift cards in random drawers. If the housekeepers find them, then they’re rewarded for doing things the right way, and if they don’t find them, it’s a teachable moment, Gobin said.

Most workers understand that the labor shortage is straining companies of all types, so they’re prepared to endure a bumpy ride as long as they feel valued by their employer, Gobin said. In many cases, a sincere thank you makes a real difference, he added.

“Showing appreciation for your staff and treating them right is really the key to keeping turnover low,” he said. “This situation isn’t ideal. I value training, and I think it’s one of the most important things we can do because your employees feel more confident in their job. But at the end of the day, we still have to keep the business running and turn these rooms over.”

When hotels compress their training programs, it

makes the hiring process all the more important, Gobin said. Hotels should prioritize customer-service skills, professionalism, and a pleasant demeanor when evaluating jobseekers, recognizing that with limited time for training, employees are bound to make some mistakes.

“If you can hire an employee who has great customer-service skills, you can usually recover from just about anything,” Gobin said. “We know that more things are falling through the cracks than usual, so during the interview process, hotels need to get a feel for how that employee would handle customer complaints. I always say, ‘It’s not that you had an issue, it’s how you respond to it.’” ■

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## Solving the workforce

# puzzle

Crack the code to retain your top performers

by ALICIA HOISINGTON

**A**LMOST FOUR IN 10 OF ALL THE JOBS IN THE U.S. lost since February 2020 are in the leisure and hospitality industry, according to the Department of Labor. That figure is triple the number of the next hardest-hit industry. And recovery has been bleak.

As of March 2022, employment in the leisure and hospitality sector is still down by 1.4 million – or 8.5% – from its pre-pandemic level in February 2020, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

It's safe to say hoteliers are having a tough time filling open positions. Talent competition is fierce, especially as wages continue to rise across industries. Wages are up 8.4% in the leisure and hospitality industry, according to Axios. By comparison, total compensation for all workers in the U.S. in the first quarter was up 4.5% from last year, according to the Employment Cost Index.

Although identifying, attracting, retaining, and promoting top hospitality performers has always been essential to success, it's now crucial for survival as hoteliers operate with skeleton staffs.

“At the hotel level, we are spending more time rebuilding our teams. The hospitality industry lost a lot of talent to other industries beginning in 2020, and for many of them leaving wasn't their choice. We now have to reclaim that talent, as well as attract new talent to the hotel industry,” said Steve Woodward,



vice president, quality, training, and development for Red Roof. “At the corporate level we are focusing on developing our current talent. We have watched many individuals seize the opportunities of the past couple of years, which is truly inspiring. As the industry recovers, it’s now our time to invest in these individuals to help them achieve their full potential.”

### IDENTIFYING AND REWARDING TOP PERFORMERS

Identifying top performers, and then rewarding them, is key. There are several ways to identify top performers, according to sources.

“One way is to look for individuals who are growing their skills and knowledge in their respective areas of operation, but more importantly we want to

celebrate leaders,” Woodward said. “We view top performers as those who are innovative, willing to experiment and take risks, and are open to others’ views while inspiring their team, peers, and supervisors. It’s important to create an operations environment where hotel staff can grow into these roles and sharpen their skills.”

Vivian Clarke, senior vice president, people & culture for

Peachtree Hotel Group, said all of the company’s general managers and manager/director-level hotel associates undergo performance reviews that track various metrics such as profit, revenue, guest scores, and culture. “We can monitor performance in real time through these reviews and will incentivize annually and quarterly based on scores achieved,” she said.

That incentivizing is paramount. It’s not enough to simply identify these superstars. Hoteliers must let employees know they are appreciated by showing as much, sources said.

“In this labor market, you must reward your team for retaining them. There is competition for these high performers, so we are aggressive in how we incentivize,” Clarke said.

Woodward agreed. “Hospitality is infamous for training incredible workers and then losing them to other industries. Your hotels’ top performers have to feel rewarded, and they must feel like there is a place for them in hospitality with room to grow,” he said.

In fact, a recent survey by O.C. Tanner studied employee engagement and how managers can tailor their workplaces to promote it. Analysts found employee recognition was most important to 37% of employees. And teams scoring in the top 20% of engagement experience 59% fewer turnovers. Despite this, 65% of employees haven’t received any form of recognition for good work in the last year.

Promotions and monetary rewards are only small pieces

## Sources say there are several ways to retain talent today. Here are four of the most-cited examples:



### COMPENSATION

It should come as no surprise that wage is a top factor to retaining talent, especially when they can go across the street to another hotel offering more money.



### BENEFITS AND INCENTIVES

And Clarke said benefits need to be “aggressive” and at times “creative.” For example, Peachtree provided its hotel general managers a paid week off and \$500 to spend on themselves. For corporate team members, they introduced a vacation-reimbursement plan to ensure and prioritize team members’ well-being. The policy reimburses for vacation-related expenses to incentivize rest and promote personal leisure travel, giving back to the travel industry.



### TRUST AND APPRECIATION

This means hoteliers should trust their teams to do the right thing. When a mistake is made, hoteliers should coach employees.



### CULTURE AND EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

“Ensure your team members feel a connection to the mission and culture of the organization. We all have jobs to do, but our job satisfaction is broader than simply being able to perform the duties assigned to us. I think we all want to know that we are part of a meaningful team,” said Sara Masterson, president of Olympia Hotel Management.

of retaining top performers, however. Woodward said it's important to identify what motivates each individual.

"Each generation is different, and sometimes an elevated title provides a milestone for success that is capable of retaining great talent. However, for other generations having a societal impact is more important than title," he said. "In the past, when the brand owned hotels directly, there was more of a traditional structure for upward mobility. Today management companies and individual hoteliers have to create a career path for their employees. Often this means training someone beyond the scope of their current position."

For example, a hotel may not have a sales department, but a front-desk employee can be trained to look for and find local sales opportunities for a few hours each week. This builds a strong base of experience outside of their core competencies while testing to see what interests and challenges these employees most.

"In addition to allowing for improvement across the organization, promotion for top performers is a powerful retention tool. These team members usually have runway, and they want to know that there is growth available for them," said Sara Masterson, president of Olympia Hotel Management.

#### **RETAINING EMPLOYEES**

But still, retaining employees is one of the hospitality industry's biggest challenges today. The average employee turnover rate across industries is 12 to 15% per year, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. However, the hotel industry reports experiencing a turnover rate upward of 80% annually. The COVID-19

pandemic hasn't made the issue any easier.

"Adapting to the industry after COVID has been a challenge for everyone, from operators to guests. On the operations side, hotels – like many other businesses – are perceived negatively because it seems as if individual employees have inherited the workloads of two

or three people, all for the same pay," Woodward said. However, he said the reality is that many organizations worked diligently to streamline processes and identified what was truly important for success today.

"So yes, while there is a persistent labor challenge to overcome, hotels across the industry have become easier

to operate. The good news is this has allowed those who want to learn to grow and take on additional responsibilities within the business," Woodward added.


Employee retention isn't just about keeping your current employees on board. It's also about working to retain your newer team members. For

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instance, studies show 20% of employee turnover typically happens during the first 90 days of employment.

“Make sure they are in the right place to succeed and don’t throw them into the deep end early on. Making sure new hires are on the right shift for their skill level is one of the simplest yet most important parts of the onboarding

process,” Woodward stated. Additionally, he said leaders should check in more frequently than usual early on to make sure the work experience is a positive one and that they are not overwhelmed.

“We believe the first two weeks of employment are the most important in determining the associate’s longevity with our organization,” Masterson said. “The

onboarding process includes an orientation not only to the specific skills related to the job for which a new associate was hired, but also an orientation to our culture and values. Setting the right tone from day one – greeting a new associate, ensuring they know where to place their belongings, where to have lunch, whom they’re working with – all build connections not only

to the work but to the team and organization.”

### INSPIRATION FROM OTHER INDUSTRIES

Hotels are unique in many ways. For instance: “Hotels are unlike retail and restaurants that have set hours and close at night. Hotels don’t have that luxury. We are open 24/7, 365, and we need managers and staff to work. We must offer incentives to stay ahead of the talent competition,” Clarke said.

But hospitality can draw inspiration from other industries. Clarke looks to the retail and fast-food industries, for example. “They are our closest competitors, where we are competing for talent. We do monitor the benefits these industries offer,” she said. “As an example, the next-day pay was started by the fast-food industry, and hoteliers have adopted this benefit. It is an essential benefit for our hourly workers.”

Red Roof is constantly looking for the most current “best in class” across all industries, according to Woodward. “The hospitality industry has been studying the secret sauce of companies to gain a better understanding of how they have so many happy people working for them. We also look to the airline industry to see what they are doing to manage the entire experience.”

Right now, he said the company is focusing on identifying industries that aren’t struggling with staffing to better understand how they are recruiting and retaining their talent.

“The challenge for hoteliers,” Woodward said, “is how to get beyond the wages the big companies are paying and better understand the culture they are driving within their company, and how we can replicate that at each property when there are sometimes fewer opportunities for advancement.” ■

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# Dodging disaster

Getting to “you’re hired!” without a lawsuit

by JOHN A. MAVROS and NELLY PINEDA

**H**IRING CAN BE one of the most daunting steps in the employment process. Not only is it difficult to find hard-working, loyal employees, but there are a host of hiring laws and regulations that hotels may not even know about.

Unfortunately, compliant hiring practices can sometimes be overlooked by hotels rushing to fill vacant positions, but following proper protocol is crucial. These practices not only give applicants confidence they are applying to a well-run business, but they reduce the risks of an unnecessary lawsuit or discrimination claim.

Here are five “need-to-know” requirements to ensure finding your next star employee goes smoothly.



1

## JOB POSTINGS

Job postings can be a helpful tool to attract quality applicants, but many hotels may be surprised to know that postings are governed by legal requirements. For example, employers cannot use job postings to screen people with criminal backgrounds. In fact, the California Department of Fair Employment and Fair Housing (DFEH) actively searches online job advertisements that unlawfully state that applicants with a criminal record should not apply. Hotels should not include language such as “no felons” or “must have a clean record.” Conversely, some states and cities have equal pay laws that require employers to disclose pay information in a job posting. In New York City, employers are required to include salary ranges in all job listings.

2



## EMPLOYMENT APPLICATIONS

Many jurisdictions have “ban the box” or “fair chance” laws that prevent employers from asking about criminal backgrounds until after a conditional offer of employment is made. While it can be counterintuitive, these laws generally don’t permit a job application to ask about arrests or felony convictions. Applications that haven’t been updated should be reviewed for compliance as soon as possible.

3

**INTERVIEWS**

The interview is an opportunity to evaluate an applicant’s potential fit, but it’s also an opportunity for managers to inadvertently ask discriminatory questions. Managers need to steer clear of any questions directed at protected categories, such as an applicant’s age, medical status, or citizenship status.



# Are you asking the wrong questions?

Here are some examples of interview questions that could land you in hot water vs. better versions that will keep you on the right side of the law. Training managers on these important distinctions is key.

**WRONG:**

“Do you have any medical conditions?”

**RIGHT:**

“Can you perform the essential functions of your job?”

**WRONG:**

“Are you an illegal alien?”

**RIGHT:**

“Are you authorized to work in the U.S.?”

**WRONG:**

“What year did you graduate from high school?”

**RIGHT:**

“Do you have a high school degree or equivalent?”

4



**BACKGROUND CHECKS**

If an employer screens applicants with criminal background checks, the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) requires a specific disclosure. The disclosure must be clear and conspicuous, exist as a stand-alone document, and be signed by the applicant. It requires that the disclosure contain specific information and nothing more. Some employers include additional information such as liability waivers, which can lead to significant penalties if not in strict compliance with FCRA.

If a criminal conviction turns up, a conditional offer cannot be rescinded unless very specific steps and procedures are followed. An employer cannot rescind simply because they disapprove of certain past behavior. Rather, the employer must demonstrate a strong link between the conduct that underlies the conviction and the particular risk in the workplace. Employers should consult with their employment attorney before rescinding any offer.

5



**HIRING UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS**

Employers must verify an employee’s work authorization by completing the Employment Eligibility Verification (I-9) Form and reviewing documents that confirm the employee’s identity and employment authorization. Failure to confirm an employee’s work authorization can result in penalties and even criminal prosecution. Of course, if a document appears to be genuine and related to the worker, the employer must accept it. On the other hand, employers are not allowed to request documents beyond what is required by the Form I-9 “List of Acceptable Documents.” Hotels should maintain a clear record to show they followed I-9 procedures to show that any undocumented workers weren’t hired intentionally. ■

*This article provides an overview of the law and is not intended to be, nor should it be construed as legal advice for any particular fact situation. For additional information regarding how this issue may affect your business, please contact the authors, John A. Mavros or Nelly Pineda of Fisher Phillips, LLP, at (949) 851-2424.*

# Riding the on-demand wave for employee payment

## Getting creative with payday flexibility

by FLORENCE HOSANNA

**T**HE CURRENT LABOR SHORTAGE IMPACTING TOP- AND BOTTOM-LINE profitability is challenging many employers to identify and implement benefits that resonate with employees. One such financial wellness benefit that's becoming more popular, known often as on-demand pay, has been implemented by employers like Amazon, Crocs, Dunkin, and countless others across a variety of industries.

### WHAT IT IS

Historically, on-demand pay has been a service typically provided by financial technology firms. It's an employee financial wellness benefit that provides employees access to a portion of wages that has already been earned but not yet paid out. Often, employees can manage and access earned wages via a mobile app and debit card and this benefit has proven to attract labor applicants, improve employees financial wellness, and reduce turnover.

Many of us reading may never have experienced the financial stress of living paycheck to paycheck or asking friends/families/employers to borrow money to bridge expenses to the next payday. And many of us, it is hoped, may never have had to resort to cash checks at 10% fees or borrow money at payday loans at exorbitant rates of 100-300%. Unfortunately, this isn't the case for many American workers. According to an IBISWorld report, the check cashing and payday loan industry is estimated at \$18 billion. Per

the FDIC, a third of the U.S. population – or ~106 million Americans – are underbanked or unbanked. This population has no access to credit, bank accounts, or ability to afford traditional bank fees with high balance requirements. The vast majority of this demographic are hourly workers who work in the hospitality, food services, grocery, and retail industries.

According to a Visa insights report, 75% of American workers live paycheck to paycheck and have less than \$500 of savings, insufficient to absorb unanticipated expenses in between paychecks for medical emergencies, vehicle repairs, etc. According to PwC's Employee Financial Wellness Survey, 47% of American workers are stressed with their financial situation, can't make minimum payments on time, and are spending an average of \$2,400 annually on payday loans. The financial stress of living paycheck to paycheck, now exacerbated by skyrocketing inflation, leads to lower productivity, mental health issues, and employee turnover.

### WHAT IT ISN'T

On-demand pay is not a loan because it's not an advance on future earnings. It's an advance on earnings previously earned, just not yet paid out due to the traditional payroll cycle. There is no interest charged to employees and isn't meant to put users into a cycle of loans but offers a safe alternative to help avoid predatory lending. Data shows on-demand pay is utilized by only 15-20% of employee base and typically is utilized by different

# 5 factors to consider when evaluating a vendor

## 1 tips solution

While all on-demand pay vendors provide access to earned wages, only a select vendors provide employee access to earned tips.

## 2 cross-border money transfer

Only select on-demand pay vendors have capabilities outside the U.S. Cross-border money transfers enable employees to send money to families abroad without the excessive fees charged by other financial institutions.

## 3 digital banking solution

Select vendors offer digital banking to employees, which is helpful for unbanked employees who can't afford the high minimum balance of traditional banking and are subject to monthly penalties or overdraft fees. The banking option offered by on-demand pay can benefit employees as it provides direct deposit and avoids check-cashing fees (up to 10% of pay-check); saves employers the hassle and cost of printing/issuing checks or dealing with lost payroll checks; and encourages employees to save and enables digital banking for employees (free online bill pay, free ATM access, etc.).

## 4 implementation time

As alluded above, some on-demand pay providers can develop algorithms that won't require systems integration, while others require direct integration to time and payroll systems.

## 5 onboarding employees

An on-demand pay provider's active involvement in supporting employee onboarding is the cornerstone to the success of the program. A successful onboarding plan determines employee opt-in rate and thus better improves employee engagement, financial wellness, and retention rates.

In many cases, an employer's decision to implement on-demand pay is championed by an executive who has the vision, heart, and determination to drive the implementation because employees have expressed an interest in the benefit. While it may take a few weeks to integrate systems, the time investment typically is worthwhile in doing good for employees and reducing cost associated with labor shortage and turnover – at zero out-of-pocket cost to employers. ■

employees monthly. A Visa survey indicated employees utilize on-demand pay for essential items such as groceries, utilities, and gas bills.

These programs often can be implemented at zero cost to employers with a small flat fee charged to the employee regardless of the amount drawn. This flat fee is well below the cost of pay day loans that charge 200-300% interest and ensures employees utilize on-demand pay responsibly.



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# Finding **SOLID** ground

Building a culture of safety and security on a firm foundation

by PAUL MOXNESS

**W**AY BACK IN 1987, I worked as a hotel security guard in a large, five-star hotel. This property had a full complement of staff in every department – including security – with all the people and tools anyone could wish for. However, this hotel regularly scored poorly on surveys that asked guests about their “sense of security.”

It might be surprising to learn that smaller hotels, without dedicated security staff, scored the highest on the same survey question. How could that be and what did we learn from it?

## UNDERSTANDING THE BIGGER PICTURE

In large hotels, everyone is a specialist, and not just in security, but in every department. In smaller hotels, responsibilities overlap, and people pitch in where needed. This gives a better understanding of how hotel operations hang together and how their core job contributes to overall operational success. Security “experts” also learned that people in each department are the ones who best understand their workplaces, associated risks, and how incidents could be prevented.

## MAKE IT SIMPLE, AND FUN

At this property, boring, standardized slides were replaced, and staff members became active listeners. Training was gamified. There were competitions to see who could identify the most safety and security features in the workplace. Emergency procedures were simplified into three basic steps:

### 1 Sound the alarm

If something is wrong, tell someone.

### 2 Save lives

Help people leave the area or avoid being harmed.

### 3 Solve the problem

Follow up to ensure a solution is found.

#### MAKE IT PERSONAL

Next, standard safety and security induction training was made relevant specific to the workplace. For example, housekeeper induction was done in guestrooms and guestroom corridors. Associates learned how safety and security equipment – from the doors and locks, to the phones and fire alarms – were in place for their safety. The emergency exits were “their” emergency exits, because in an evacuation, they would be the ones that needed them.

Each training ended with an “evacuation.” People were sent to different locations in the hotel, front and back of house, and instructed to leave the building via the marked exits. Along the way they noted

issues, obstacles, or challenges. Was signage properly lit, easy to follow, and did the route take them all the way to the muster point? Were doors easy to open? Were evacuation routes free of combustible materials and blocked or hard-to-open doors? As awareness grew, that sometimes-scary word “evacuation” came to mean “leave the building.” Each session gave the hotel status updates on the planned evacuation routes, signage, and other equipment.

In one department, absenteeism dropped substantially. Employees were surveyed and said the new training gave them a greater sense of responsibility.

This may sound too good, or too simple, to be true, and to be honest there were some challenges. The two largest obstacles that threatened success were:

- 1. Leaders need to lead by example.** If those at the top, don’t walk the talk, staff buy in will suffer. Job satisfaction will drop, turnover will increase, and incident rates will grow again.
- 2. Fairness and consistency.** No department and no employee can be

overlooked. At this hotel, people actually started volunteering to come to take part in security training because it was easy, personally relevant, and gave them a sense of comfort, confidence, and belonging. Ultimately, the changes discussed above became corporate best practice in the company. It wasn’t about making everyone part of the security team; it was more about everyone becoming more aware of their own workplace.

Everyone in a hotel has a core set of tasks that they specialize in. The more comfortable, confident, safe, and secure they feel, the better they will perform those tasks. ■



Everyone in a hotel has a core set of tasks that they specialize in. The more comfortable, confident, safe, and secure they feel, the better they will perform those tasks.”



Paul is Managing Partner at NorthPoint International, a company specializing in

hospitality security, safety, resilience, and public-private partnerships. He is also a member of the UN Global Network of Experts on Protection of Vulnerable Targets Against Terrorist Attacks. He can be reached at [pmoxness@northpointinternational.com](mailto:pmoxness@northpointinternational.com).

# If you build it, they will come

## Workforce issues and the independent hotelier

by AMIT C. GOVINDJI

**H**AVE YOU EVER HEARD the saying “When one door closes, another one opens”? When it comes to the subject of labor, hoteliers might feel like that door has been closed for too long with no immediate alternatives having opened up in the meantime.

Sure, the hospitality industry has gained some jobs recently, but the shortfall is still very significant. We’ve lost more than we’ve gained, and that pain can be especially sharp for the independent hotelier.

Thanks to their deep pockets and vast resources – as we all know quite well – franchised properties often are able to offer discounts across the brand for workers, while also offering expanded benefits, competitive pay, and more. So, how does an independent hotel attract, let alone retain, the labor when we feel like this often is a David vs. Goliath battle?

### FIND YOUR EDGE

Demonstrating a character trait shared by many in this segment of the industry, independent operators are consistently on the lookout for ways to autonomously extend their personalities, ideas, and culture, while putting their own stamp on their properties. And in today’s economy, especially considering the limited labor pool in which we all operate, it’s perhaps more relevant than ever for independent hoteliers to create that culture at our properties. Surely, we’ve all seen owners becoming ever-more creative when it comes to finding, hiring, and – perhaps

most importantly – retaining reliable, talented, and dedicated workers to staff our properties.

That creativity is the currency we need to help us keep our doors open. However, as independent hoteliers expand their skills when it comes to workforce issues, we must consider the costs associated with any venture. That’s not to say independent properties shouldn’t take on addi-

“

We’ve long had a shared goal of creating a culture and atmosphere at our properties that draw in guests, but we also need to be applying that same level of thinking to attracting potential employees and keeping the ones we have.”

tional costs to remain competitive with the brands regarding hiring, but there needs to be accountability and oversight to determine what’s working, what’s a waste of money, and different avenues that need to be pursued. Don’t let a sense

of desperation cause you to throw everything at the wall to see what sticks.

The good news is that there are numerous solutions available today to address our workforce issues that weren’t possible in years past and won’t add considerable cost without a return on investment. For example, many employees are expressing a desire to be paid more frequently – even daily – for their work, and there now are simple solutions available to accomplish that without adding overhead.

Or, just brainstorming here, we could network with operators in other cities to offer travel perks to employees in the form of free nights at those properties. If you have a property remotely near an airport, for example, you could offer your employees free parking at the hotel and a ride to the airport as a perk.

### WE REAP WHAT WE SOW

We’ve long had a shared goal of creating a culture and atmosphere at our properties that draw in guests, but we also need to be applying that same level of thinking to attracting new employees and keeping the ones we have. The environment we create at our properties defines us in the eyes of guests and workers alike. Remember, these days, candidates are interviewing you probably more than you’re interviewing them. What motivation are you giving them to want to work at your property that the hotel, restaurant, store, or warehouse down the street isn’t offering?

There is no magic lever we can flip to solve our problems, but that’s likely what attracted so many of us to the independent

side of the industry in the first place. We like the challenge of solving problems on our own. But, that doesn't mean we're adrift in an ocean of problems by ourselves. There are resources available for independent hoteliers of all stripes, including the AAHOA Independent Hoteliers Committee, which directly serves this segment of the industry and offers numerous opportunities for problem-solving, networking, and much more.

And if your hotel truly is an enjoyable and rewarding place to work, your hiring woes should dissipate as word gets out. ■

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# Unlocking communication secrets

Digitalizing information to keep teams happy and engaged

by CHRISTY SHAPARD

**A**NY GROWTH-MINDED EXECUTIVE WOULD BE WELL-served to take Rollo May's words to heart every day. In today's new normal, it takes more than just the right balance of culture, service, and technology to grow and manage a strong, multi-branded portfolio. It takes real-time, two-way communication to ensure the employees choosing to remain loyal to the hospitality industry feel valued and appreciated.

North Point Hospitality knows this because its employees said as much.

Upon conducting an annual employee-feedback survey a few years back, NPH's management team learned just how important top-down communications are to employees. Although leadership thought they were doing a good job on the communication front, team comments indicated otherwise. Employees noted they wanted to be heard outside of an annual survey and

wanted their voices to matter to everyone across the enterprise. NPH's management also learned that its employees value being informed timely about things that could impact their employment lives in any way.

Due to the 24/7/365 hospitality environment, two-way communication is challenging. It's nearly impossible for the HR team to reach every employee, across every shift, speaking many different languages. "Normal" business hours are





A company’s willingness to invest in technology speaks volumes about its culture and commitment to taking care of associates.”

subjective, making in-person meetings/announcements a challenge.

Other than hit-or-miss bulletin boards and notices accompanying paychecks, there was little NPH could do to guarantee company messaging was being received and understood. Additionally, in the event of an interruption in operations – weather events, safety issues, etc. – the company felt under-prepared to ensure the safety and well-being of its employees. Management needed a way to share important information in a consistent manner so all employees receive the same message. They also needed to ensure mutual understanding and empower employees with information that will draw them into the community of work. It would take an employee communications platform – one with which employees were willing to engage to keep everyone connected.

Thanks to a third-party vendor, Beekeeper, the company found the solution it was seeking, but there are numerous options out there for similarly minded companies.

Through digital messages, chats, threads, and individual and group streams, the solution connects NPH colleagues across locations and departments in real time using their mobile devices or computers. It ensures everyone receives information in their language of choice and gives each person in the organization a voice to provide public and private feedback. It also gives NPH a way to show its associates that

the company is responsive to their expressed needs.

**THAT WAS THEN. THIS IS NOW**

In the beginning, asking employees to communicate digitally was met with some resistance. Some were eager to try the app, while others were uncomfortable, incorrectly assuming it was just another social media platform. Then COVID-19 hit, and everyone quickly realized that a digital communications platform was an essential tool – not a task – that can do the heavy lifting.

Soon NPH learned that communicating digitally was not an option. Rather, it was an integral part of the company’s culture. Management found that having a culture employees believe in builds retention. The technology is giving employees the voice they requested, and it’s connecting them to the company and its core values.

Here are seven ways that’s happening:



**1 Recruitment.** From the very first interview, NPH tells candidates about its communication platform as part of the employment package. Employee response is always positive, enabling NPH to be seen as an employer that delivers, and it gives them a significant advantage over the competition. During the new-hire process, when prospects are asked to describe the ideal manager, most speak about communications. Employees say they want a manager

who’s accessible, willing to provide training, and welcomes fresh ideas. The NPH employee handbook speaks directly to digital communications.

Additionally, since all NPH employees can see activity at any of its locations, it broadens their vision of potential career paths with the organization. This affords employees opportunities for promotion or transfer, especially as it builds new hotels. Having a view into other locations and departments helps employees understand the access they have to new opportunities.



**Welcome and assimilation.**

On their first day, employees are asked to create a digital profile and introduce themselves so they begin their journey with instant familiarity and welcome from co-workers.



**Daily health surveys.**

During COVID-19, employees were asked at the start of every shift to complete a health survey via the app. It helped NPH get to know how everyone was feeling for their protection and the safety of guests and other associates. The company immediately could see who completed the survey and who didn’t. If someone didn’t respond, management reached out to check in, which kept NPH closely tied to its people, and it let everyone know the company cares about their health and wellness.

#### 4 Ongoing health & wellness.

Via a wellness stream called “Keeping You Pointing North,” NPH is lifting its employees up and demonstrating care for their physical, financial, and mental health, as well as their professional development. Via this stream, management is having open dialogue about changes in 401K providers, the importance of good posture, and why it’s important to drink water during shifts. NPH shares healthy recipes, provides tips for stress relief, answers questions about retirement planning, and identifies new opportunities for advancement within the company. It also offers a financial training course via the platform that helps its associates earn money by completing training courses. Via the digital solution, NPH ensures benefits literacy by explaining commonly used benefits terms and aspects of its plan designs throughout the year. During open enrollment, the company shares information about benefits offerings and how to access them.

#### 5 Training and cross-training.

Being a multi-brand hotel operator, different properties have unique standards. To communicate those standards and provide brand-specific training, NPH uses the digital chat feature to provide links to the appropriate platforms so employees can launch training in seconds. The company uses the chat feature to

check-in with new hires the day of hire, the day after hire, two weeks after hire, and at the 30-day mark. Group chats are used when multiple people are onboarded the same day to give a sense of community and provide a platform for asking questions. And, because at least half of NPH’s employees have responsibilities at more than one property, required cross-training is easily provided.

#### 6 Recognition and rewards.

Within this platform, managers recognize expected behavior and reward efforts that go above and beyond the norm, and employees receive public recognition for jobs well done. Touches like these go a long way toward making everyone feel comfortable and motivate people to rise above.

#### 7 Guest service.

Digital communications enable the entire hotel to learn of VIP arrivals, site tours for potential group business, and an array of other guest needs on a real-time basis. It allows NPH hotels to elevate their level of service to the guest and make a seamless transition from one shift to the next.

Through this digital technology adoption, a company can prioritize employee communication with leadership fully endorsing the solution. And a company’s willingness to invest in technology speaks volumes about its culture and

commitment to taking care of associates. Attracting and retaining employees isn’t as difficult as it could be when companies find ways to connect with employees across properties, departments, and specialties.

Going into – and coming out of – the pandemic, digital communication has been the lifeline among corporate, management and frontline employees, introducing management teams to a new world of engagement. ■



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multi-brand leading hotel development and management company with more than 40 years of award-winning hospitality experience. Based in Atlanta, GA, North Point Hospitality owns and operates 11 hotels in the Southeastern United States with eight hotels under construction or in active development.

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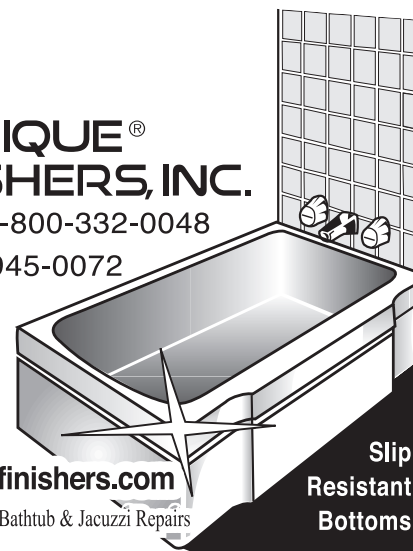
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# Staying On target

How to choose the right resource to arrange hotel financing

by RUSHI SHAH

**E**VERY COMMERCIAL TRANSACTION involves multiple players adding value along the road to closing. These include real estate brokers who manage the buying and selling of the assets, as well as capital brokers who arrange the financing. As in other service industries, the barriers to entry for setting up shop in the loan-brokering business are minimal and the level of skill and expertise can vary widely among those marketing their services. Thanks to today's technology, anyone can launch a website, send a few emails, and call themselves a loan broker. Therefore, as you engage resources for your next deal, it's important to understand the nuances among providers. Armed with this knowledge, you will be able to choose the right person who can deliver the outcome you need. Let's explore the difference between two key types of providers.



# 1

## LOAN BROKERS

Loan brokers are usually salespeople with an iPad and a few bank connections trying to consummate a deal. Because of their limited résumés, most loan brokers focus on transaction types where proprietary expertise isn't required, such as SBA transactions or conventional bank loans. Since these types of loans are commoditized, getting them to closing doesn't require expertise in underwriting, property valuation, or even market knowledge. In fact, since most of these transaction types require full borrower recourse, having asset-level analysis skills isn't even necessary. All that matters is the borrower's or guarantor's net worth, the liquidity of his or her balance sheet, and the asset's global cash flow. With these three data points, almost any loan broker can find an SBA loan from some bank. It's simply an administrative task of pushing paper. However, if an owner needs a bridge loan for a transitional hotel that is being reflagged, has limited cash flow history, or is seeking a permanent loan for an asset that has stabilized cash flow, the typical loan broker is likely to come up short or even fumble mid-transaction. For more complex transactions and non-recourse financing including CMBS, a skilled mortgage banker is the more prudent choice.

# 2

## MORTGAGE BANKERS

Mortgage bankers are professional intermediaries who leverage an established platform and infrastructure for

underwriting, packaging a transaction, and marketing the opportunity to capital markets participants. These tangible assets are combined with deep relationships and a hefty Rolodex of capital sources actively placing debt and equity, as well as dedicated underwriting with approved cash-flow models and closing staff. A successful mortgage banker also will be able to demonstrate a track record of closing transactions with more than one type of capital source, including large banks on Wall Street, life insurance companies, REITs, private-equity funds, hedge funds, bridge funds, and other institutional capital. This broad experience and exposure to larger, more complex financing transactions allows mortgage bankers to offer borrowers more and better choices, including options for pre-payment penalty and fixed vs. floating rates. Advanced skills also make mortgage bankers better at troubleshooting issues, devising creative structures to cure pain points, and designing solutions that are a win-win for both the lender and the borrower.

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT RESOURCE FOR THE JOB

Many loan brokers will try to convince their clients they have what it takes to close a capital markets transaction but don't have the track record, relationships, and professional process to back up their claims. For larger and more complex transactions, including non-recourse financing, borrowers can minimize their risk and maximize results by choosing the most qualified resource for the job – a mortgage banker. As the old adage says, let the plumbers do the plumbing and the electricians do the electrical work. ■



*Rushi Shah is Principal and CEO of the commercial mortgage and real estate investment banking firm and AAHOA Allied Member Mag Mile Capital. As a leader in hospitality financing, Shah specializes in structuring and placing high leverage, nonrecourse bridge and permanent debt with cash out for full- and limited-service hotels nationwide. Since joining the firm's predecessor, Aries Capital, in 2015, Shah has structured and closed hundreds of millions in financing for all property types. Shah has held previous positions at Northern Trust and has an MBA from the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.*

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STAY CONNECTED THROUGH AAHOA

Welcome to a new semi-regular column.

# AAHOA Lifetime Members start a charity to help cancer patients in Georgia

**H**OTELIERS MAKE IT THEIR BUSINESS to prioritize the needs of their hotel guests. AAHOA Lifetime Members Tina and Parimal Patel know that helping people feel special and cared for doesn't start or end with five-star room service. Parimal leads a career in hotel investments, and Tina empowers and supports people through her nursing job. This husband-and-wife team leveraged their expertise in the hospitality and medical fields to start a charity, helping cancer patients and their families.

It all started when Tina was 23 years old. At that time, she worked as a nurse at the Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center of Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, one of the largest pediatric cancer centers in the country. Children from Georgia and across the country come to Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center seeking treatment to fight and beat cancer, which requires medical, financial, and love and emotional support to overcome.

Unfortunately, some parents are unable to travel and stay in Atlanta for the duration of their child's medical care, and Tina saw firsthand how some of her young patients braved cancer treatments alone at the pediatric cancer center. Those heartbreaking situations led Tina, with the support of her husband, Parimal, to start a nonprofit called *Share the Love* in 2018 with the goal of helping ease the financial strain experienced by family members with children at the cancer center. The nonprofit raises money to cover travel expenses, hotel accommodations, meals, financial assistance for patient prescriptions, and social services for cancer patients and their families.

*Share the Love* has garnered significant sponsorship support from businesses and community members, including AAHOA Members from the metro-Atlanta area. ■



AAHOA Lifetime Members  
Tina and Parimal Patel



For more information and to support *Share the Love*, be sure to scan the QR code.

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# AAHOA MEMBERS IN ACTION

## AAHOACON22 RECAP



U.S. Air Force Major Heather Penney speaks to the crowd during the Women Hoteliers Session & Luncheon at AAHOACON22.



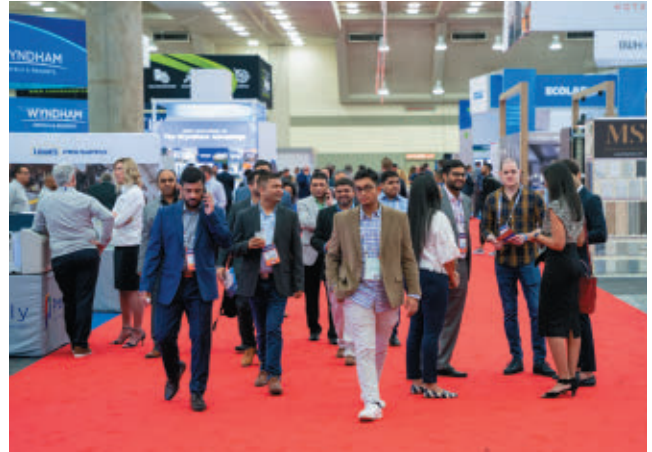
Attendees wrapped up their time at the convention in Baltimore enjoying an excellent performance by playback singer, actor, and television presenter Shaan at the Gala.



Attendees wrap up convention week connecting with peers at the Gala event.



AAHOA Regional Directors and AAHOACON22 attendees at the Welcome Reception. The evening was filled with amazing music, delicious food, and a front-row view of the Baltimore Ravens football stadium.



Attendees connected with more than 500 industry-leading exhibitors at AAHOACON22.



From left to right: AAHOA Treasurer Miraj S. Patel, MBA, CHO, CHIA, Chairman Nishant (Neal) Patel, CHO, CHIA, Past Chair Vinay Patel (2021-2022), and Vice Chairman Bharat Patel, CHO, CHIA speak to attendees during the General Session.



Past Chair Biran Patel, Florida Regional Director Rahul Patel, and industry peers were part of the action at *Power Plant Live!*



From left to right: AAHOA Secretary Kamallesh (KP) Patel, Chairman Nishant (Neal) Patel, CHO, CHIA, Vice Chairman Bharat Patel, CHO, CHIA, and Treasurer Miraj S. Patel, MBA, CHO, CHIA attend the new officers and board members meeting.



Attendees and exhibitors enjoyed a fun evening at *Power Plant Live!*, Baltimore's vibrant dining, entertainment, and innovation district.

To relive all the great memories from AAHOACON22, please visit [AAHOAevents.com/AAHOA2022](https://AAHOAevents.com/AAHOA2022)

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Global Safe Corporation ..... 48 www.hotelsafes.com	
Legendary Capital .....27 legendary.bz/partners2	
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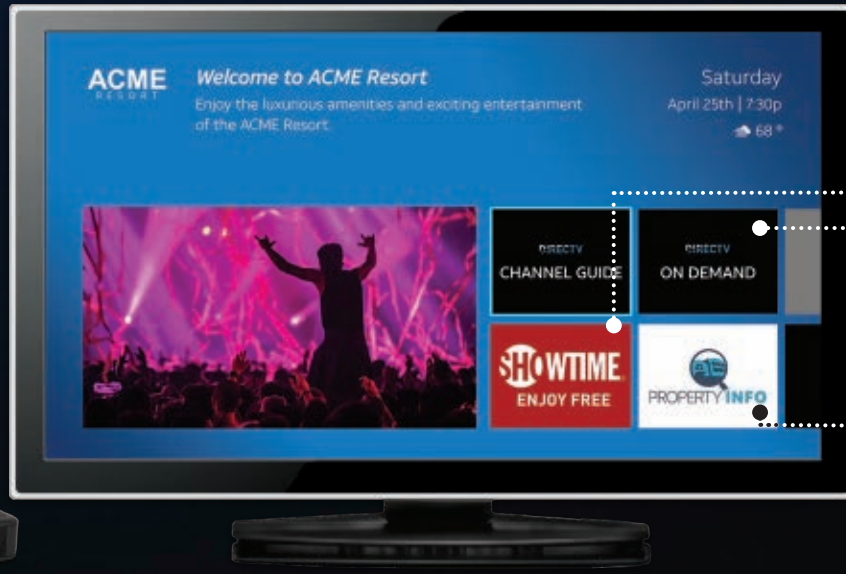
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Example Home Screen pictured for illustrative purposes only.

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**Remotely manageable**  
No PMS integration required



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**Customizable Home Screen** includes a logo, welcome message, background image and more



**Add your own promotional channels** and share information with your customers with local and over-the-air content insertion features



**App-based and On Demand programming** content at no additional cost



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**4K<sup>®</sup> HDR content**



**Customizable Property Information App** included at no extra cost

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\*To access DIRECTV HD service, HD equipment req'd. Number of HD channels varies based on package selection. <sup>2</sup>DIRECTV RESIDENTIAL EXPERIENCE (DRE) OFFER: Offer ends 12/31/22. Offer is available to new or renewing Hospitality and Institutions customers with a 5-year programming agreement. Properties must subscribe to SELECT™ (\$7.10/room/mo.) or above. SELECT™ promotional bundle price includes SELECT™ (\$6.50/room/mo.) and technology fee (\$0.60/room/mo.). Bundled rate will be listed as two separate line items on customer bill. Offer is eligible for an HD Equipment Subsidy of \$80 per room for a DRE System. 15 room minimum is req'd per property. IN THE EVENT YOU FAIL TO MAINTAIN YOUR SUBSCRIPTION TO THE REQUIRED PROGRAMMING PACKAGES, YOU AGREE TO PAY AN EARLY CANCELLATION FEE EQUAL TO THE FULL SUBSIDY AMOUNT YOU RECEIVED PRORATED BY THE NUMBER OF MONTHS YOU PAID FOR THE REQUIRED PROGRAMMING PACKAGES DURING THE COMMITMENT PERIOD. Payment is due within thirty (30) days of receipt of a notice of failure to complete the commitment period. <sup>3</sup>INSTALLATION: Custom installation charges apply, and installation fee is based on property size. Applicable use tax adjustment may apply on retail value of installation. Availability of DIRECTV service may vary by location. In certain markets, programming/pricing may vary. Make and model of system at DIRECTV's sole discretion. Offers void where prohibited or restricted. Programming available separately. Receipt of DIRECTV programming subject to terms of the DIRECTV Terms of Service for Hospitality Establishments and the DIRECTV Terms of Service for Institutions; copy provided with new customer information packet. Taxes not included. DIRECTV programming, hardware, pricing, terms and conditions subject to change at any time. <sup>4</sup>2022 NFL SUNDAY TICKET OFFER: Offer ends 1/8/23. 2022 NFL SUNDAY TICKET will be delivered at no extra cost in all guest rooms for the 2022 season for all new DIRECTV Residential Experience (DRE) customers and COM System customers; customers must subscribe to FAMILY™ (\$3.50/room/mo.) or above, with a 3- or 5-year programming agreement. Other conditions apply. Subscription will automatically continue in the 2nd year at a special renewal rate of \$99 and renew at regular rate thereafter provided that DIRECTV still carries these services at the time of renewal and unless customer calls to cancel prior to start of the season. Subscription cannot be canceled (in part or in whole) after the start of the season and subscription fees cannot be refunded. Commercial locations require an appropriate license agreement. Offer excludes University accounts. NFL, the NFL Shield design and the NFL SUNDAY TICKET name and logo are registered trademarks of the NFL and its affiliates. <sup>5</sup>HBO® AND CINEMAX® PACKAGE (New Customers): Offer ends 6/30/22. Only available to new customers that have not received or subscribed to DIRECTV for 12 months prior to activation. Monthly rate is (\$2.25/room/mo.) and requires a 5-year programming agreement. Customer must also subscribe to SELECT™ (\$6.50/room/mo.) or above (with DRE or COM) or ENTERTAINMENT (\$7.40/room/mo.) or above with the Advanced Entertainment Platform. University accounts excluded. HBO AND CINEMAX PACKAGE (Existing Customers): Available to existing DIRECTV subscribers with a 5-year programming agreement. Monthly charge is (\$2.75/room/mo.). University accounts excluded. IN THE EVENT YOU FAIL TO MAINTAIN YOUR PROGRAMMING AGREEMENT, YOU AGREE THAT DIRECTV MAY CHARGE YOU AN EARLY CANCELLATION FEE. CANCELLATION FEES ARE BASED ON PROGRAMMING PACKAGE SELECTION AND COMMITMENT PERIOD. In certain markets, programming/pricing may vary. Offers void where prohibited or restricted. Hardware and programming available separately. Taxes not included. DIRECTV programming, hardware, pricing, terms and conditions subject to change at any time. HBO® Cinemax® and related channels and service marks are the property of Home Box Office, Inc. <sup>6</sup>SHOWTIME OFFER: Offer ends 12/31/22. The SHOWTIME programming offer (\$0.99/room/mo.) is available only as a 2nd Premium add-on. Offer available to qualifying new or existing Hospitality accounts with a 3- or 5-year programming agreement and must not have received SHOWTIME programming from DIRECTV or any other distributor during the 24 months prior to activation. Offer is available for accounts activated on or before 12/31/22. After the applicable promotional period (3- or 5-years) ends, then-prevailing then-prevailing rate for SHOWTIME applies unless canceled or changed by customer prior to end of promotional period. Offer may not be combined with any other SHOWTIME offer. SHOWTIME and related marks are trademarks of Showtime Networks Inc., a ViacomCBS Company. te Viewing or Lodging & Institution customers. ©2022 DIRECTV, LLC. DIRECTV is a trademark of DIRECTV, LLC. All other marks are the property of their respective owners.