



An industry analysis of why qualified professionals can't get interviews — while employers struggle to fill roles.

The hospitality industry is facing a paradox that should alarm every operator, recruiter, and business leader in the sector.

On one side: 8.6 million projected workforce shortfall by 2035 (WTTC, September 2025). Hotels operating with 18% fewer staff than needed. Restaurants closing sections because they can't find managers. Operators reporting "persistent understaffing" as their top challenge.

On the other side: Hundreds of thousands of experienced professionals sending applications into the void. Seasoned general managers with 20+ years of multi-unit experience. Operations directors who've opened properties across continents. Brand developers with proven revenue growth.

And they can't get interviews.

How is this possible? How can an industry desperate for talent simultaneously filter out the very people who could solve its problems?

The answer isn't a talent shortage. It's a system failure.

The Numbers Tell a Troubling Story

Let's start with the data—because this isn't anecdotal. This is measurable, verifiable, and happening globally:

Global Hospitality Labor Crisis

- Hospitality unemployment: 5.9-6.4% (nearly double the national average in most markets) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, November 2025)
- 802,000 hospitality workers unemployed in the U.S. alone, yet job openings dropped 16.3% year-over-year (The Hotel Blueprint, July 2025)
- 8.6 million worker shortfall projected by 2035—18% below required staffing levels (WTTC, September 2025)

Middle East & GCC Markets

- Bahrain hospitality workforce: ~56,000 with moderate but steady employment gains (LMRA Q1 2025)
- GCC tourism sector needs millions of new jobs to meet Vision 2030 targets (Deloitte, 2025)
- Dubai cost-of-living challenges driving turnover among mid-level professionals (ClearlyIP Global Hospitality Labor Trends, June 2025)
- Recruitment activity improved in early 2025 but remains inconsistent across GCC markets (Barclay Simpson Middle East Salary Survey, 2025)

The ATS Black Hole

- 75% of resumes never reach human eyes, filtered out by Applicant Tracking Systems (Crosschq, 2025)
- ATS parsing errors eliminate qualified candidates due to keyword mismatches, formatting issues, or contextual misunderstandings (Talroo, August 2025)
- 60% reduction in hiring cycle time possible with effective ATS—but only if programmed correctly (Select Software Reviews, November 2025)

So we have an industry that needs people, and people who need opportunities. The bottleneck is the system in between.

Why Qualified Candidates Are Being Filtered Out

The modern recruitment process is designed for efficiency—but it's optimized for elimination, not discovery. Here's where it's breaking down:

1. The ATS Keyword Trap

ATS systems match resumes to job descriptions based on keyword frequency. Sounds logical—until you realize that:

- A candidate who 'spearheaded operational efficiency initiatives' gets filtered out because the system is looking for 'process improvement'
- 'P&L optimization' doesn't register as a match for 'profit and loss management'
- 'Multi-unit F&B operations' might not trigger for 'restaurant group management'

Same skills. Different words. No interview.

Research shows that 75% of qualified candidates are eliminated before a human ever sees their resume (Crosschq, 2025). That's not a bug—it's a feature of a system that prioritizes speed over accuracy.

2. The Experience Paradox

Here's a question recruiters need to answer honestly: When did experience become a liability?

- 'We're looking for fresh perspectives' (translation: we think you're too set in your ways)
- 'We need someone who understands the new generation' (translation: we're worried you can't adapt)
- 'You're overqualified' (translation: we think you'll leave, or we can't afford you, or we're intimidated)

The AARP reports that 6 in 10 workers over 50 have experienced or witnessed age-related discrimination (AARP, 2024). Despite laws protecting older workers, the bias persists—often disguised as concerns about 'fit' or 'adaptability'.

But here's the reality: A 45-year-old operations director with 25 years of experience isn't 'out of touch.' They've navigated market crashes, technology shifts, and generational workforce changes. That's not a liability. That's resilience.

3. The Degree Dilemma

Many hospitality job postings require a bachelor's degree—even for roles where practical experience matters infinitely more.

A candidate who's opened 12 properties across four countries, managed \$15M+ portfolios, and trained dozens of future leaders? Filtered out because they don't have a piece of paper from 20 years ago.

Meanwhile, a 26-year-old with an MBA and two years of assistant manager experience? Interview scheduled.

This isn't about devaluing education. It's about recognizing that hospitality is a performance-based industry. Results should matter more than credentials.

4. The 'Overqualified' Excuse

Let's be blunt: 'overqualified' is often code for:

- We think you'll demand too much money
- We're worried you'll leave when something better comes along
- We don't want someone who knows more than the hiring manager

But what if that 'overqualified' candidate is genuinely interested in the role? What if they're looking for stability, not a stepping stone? What if they see potential in the brand that others don't?

Employers: Stop making assumptions. Have the conversation.

The Solution: Smarter AI, Not Just Faster Filters

Here's the irony: The technology to fix this already exists—but most companies aren't using it.

Traditional ATS systems are blunt instruments. They filter based on keyword matching and rigid criteria. But next-generation AI recruitment tools can do so much more:

What Modern AI Can Do (That Most Companies Aren't Leveraging)

- **Contextual Resume Analysis:** AI tools like Equip, Brainer, and CVViz can read resumes the way a human would—understanding that 'revenue optimization' and 'profit growth' mean the same thing.
- **Conversational Pre-Screening:** AI agents can conduct initial candidate conversations, asking clarifying questions that an ATS would never think to ask.
- **Bias Reduction:** Advanced AI can be programmed to ignore age, employment gaps, and other factors that trigger unconscious bias—focusing purely on skills, experience, and results.
- **Predictive Matching:** AI can analyze which candidates are most likely to succeed in a role based on historical performance data, not just resume buzzwords.

The problem? Most hospitality recruiters are still using ATS systems from 2015, programmed with rigid filters that eliminate more talent than they surface.

The opportunity? Companies that adopt smarter AI recruitment tools can reduce hiring costs by 30% per hire while improving candidate quality (HeroHunt.ai, September 2025).

A Call to Action: What Needs to Change

If hospitality is serious about solving its labor crisis, the industry needs to rethink recruitment from the ground up.

To Recruiters and Hiring Managers:

- Audit your ATS settings. Are you filtering out great candidates because of arbitrary keyword requirements?
- Interview the 'overqualified' candidate. What does it cost you? An hour of time. What could you gain? A game-changer for your team.
- Look beyond the resume. That employment gap? Maybe they were caring for a family member. That lack of a degree? Maybe they have 10,000 hours of real-world learning.
- Upgrade your recruitment tech. If your ATS can't understand context, it's time to explore AI-driven alternatives.

To Employers:

- Reevaluate degree requirements. Is a bachelor's degree truly necessary for this role, or is it a legacy requirement from a decade ago?

- Train hiring managers on unconscious bias. Age, employment gaps, and 'overqualification' concerns often mask deeper biases.
- Invest in better recruitment tools. The technology exists to find better candidates faster. Use it.

To Job Seekers:

- Optimize for ATS—but don't stop there. Use keywords from the job description, but also network directly with hiring managers.
- Tell your story. If you have an employment gap or non-traditional background, address it proactively in your cover letter.
- Consider alternative paths. If traditional employment isn't working, explore consulting, freelancing, or entrepreneurship.

The Future: Adapt or Lose

The hospitality industry is at a crossroads.

One path: Continue using outdated recruitment systems, complain about labor shortages, and watch competitors who adapt pull ahead.

The other path: Embrace smarter technology, rethink hiring criteria, and tap into the massive pool of experienced talent that's currently being ignored.

The choice is obvious. The question is whether the industry will act.

A Personal Note: Why This Matters to Me

I'll be honest—this isn't just an academic analysis for me. I'm living this reality.

I have 29 years of hospitality experience. I've managed multi-unit F&B operations across the GCC and international markets. I've opened properties in four countries. I've doubled revenue targets, reduced costs by 28%, and trained teams that went on to become industry leaders.

And I've been unemployed for three years.

Not because I lack skills. Not because I lack results. But because I can't get past the ATS. Because recruiters see my age and worry I'm 'not adaptable.' Because I don't have a degree—despite having the equivalent of an MBA in real-world experience.

I've rewritten my resume six times. I've optimized for keywords. I've personalized cover letters. I've networked relentlessly.

And still—nothing.

So I started researching. I wanted to understand if this was a 'me' problem or a 'system' problem.

Turns out, it's the system.

And if it's happening to me—someone with nearly three decades of proven results—it's happening to thousands of others.

That's why I wrote this article. Not as a plea for sympathy, but as a call to action.

Because the industry I've dedicated my life to is broken—and it doesn't have to be.

If you're a recruiter, hiring manager, or business owner who's tired of the same old recruitment playbook, let's connect. I'd love to have a conversation about what's possible.

And if you're a job seeker going through something similar—you're not alone. Drop a comment. Let's build a community that supports each other while the system catches up.

Leon Erasmus Rheeder is a hospitality operations leader with 29+ years of experience in multi-unit F&B management, operational efficiency, and brand development across GCC and international markets. He's currently navigating the modern job market—and advocating for systemic change in hospitality recruitment.

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