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STATE OF HOTEL COMMERCIAL TALENT REPORT

2025 - 2026 | SPECIAL REPORT

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Introduction

The forces shaping talent in hospitality — particularly in sales, marketing, and revenue optimization — are evolving at unprecedented speed. Many of the themes remain consistent year over year, yet powerful new shifts are emerging that will redefine the future of work in our industry. At the center of this transformation is artificial intelligence — an epochal change with sweeping implications. The speed of its advancement is far beyond what anyone anticipated, and its impact on the commercial disciplines of hospitality will be profound. AI offers extraordinary potential to enhance creativity, automate administrative tasks, and deliver personalization at scale. At the same time, it has the disruptive power to reshape job descriptions, displace traditional roles, and alter career pathways across sales, marketing, and revenue management.

Alongside this technological transformation, hospitality is facing a structural challenge: a shrinking employment base and intensifying competition for skilled professionals. Talent is no longer abundant; it is scarce. In this environment, talent is the ultimate differentiator. The companies that win will be those that place talent strategy at the top of their priorities, making deliberate decisions about what to insource, what to outsource, and how to build centers of excellence that anchor growth, profitability, and long-term competitiveness.

Beyond AI and talent scarcity, several interrelated trends demand leadership attention:

- **Demographic shifts** — An aging workforce and the rise of Gen Z are changing perspectives on work and leadership.
- **Workforce models** — Gig and fractional staffing are reshaping traditional structures.
- **Workplace expectations** — Flexibility in hybrid and return-to-office policies have become non-negotiable.
- **Culture and values** — Employees expect inclusive leadership and workplaces where corporate values align with personal ones.
- **Upskilling and adaptability** — Cross-training, collaboration, and continuous learning are now essential for resilience and growth.

In this environment, success requires an integrated approach: people strategy, revenue growth strategy, margin improvement strategy, and clearly defined centers of excellence. Each must work in concert to ensure both commercial performance and organizational health.

The HSMAI Foundation exists to advance commercial talent in hospitality. This signature Talent Report is its flagship contribution — a resource designed to help leaders understand the forces reshaping the workforce, anticipate the disruptions ahead, and apply best practices from HSMAI's exemplary partners. It is both a reflection of where we stand and a roadmap for where we must go, offering insights to help organizations sharpen their strategies, strengthen their cultures, and build the next generation of commercial excellence.

What is clear is this: the next five years in AI and talent strategy will define the next fifty for our industry. Those who act with foresight will shape the future. Those who delay will be left behind. The following nine trends are ranked by priority to guide decision makers.

Methodology

This report highlights current and emerging trends and how current HSMAI members are addressing these evolving issues.

The sources of this report:

1. Literature review of current media, studies, and viewpoints
2. HSMAI Meetings and Conferences
3. Interviews and engagement with industry professionals worldwide
4. Case Studies

While this report provides an overview of the significant trends impacting our industry and offers references for a comprehensive analysis of each trend, the objective is to highlight these trends and, when possible, offer practical examples and guidance on managing these changes effectively.

About The Author

Dorothy Dowling, (ISHC) is a seasoned management consultant and growth advisor, and is currently a Managing Director, with Horwath HTL. She has over 40 years of experience in the global hospitality industry. As the former Global Chief Marketing Officer and SVP of Sales at Best Western, she excelled at shaping marketing and commercial strategies. Dowling actively contributes to HSMAI and is a special advisor to the HSMAI Foundation Board. Her industry leadership earned her prestigious Lifetime Achievement awards from HSMAI, the NYU Investment Conference, and GBTA. She holds an Honours BA and MA from the University of Waterloo, completed executive programs at Harvard and MIT, and holds postgraduate certifications in D&I and ESG from Cornell. Dowling is also a public trustee at CubeSmart (NYSE:CUBE), the third largest Storage REIT, and is Director-certified by the National Association of Corporate Directors.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

HSMAI Foundation's Nine Talent Trends - 2025 Priority Rankings for Hospitality Leaders

The HSMAI Foundation's comprehensive analysis of nine key talent trends reveals a dramatically transformed workplace landscape in 2025, driven primarily by artificial intelligence adoption, demographic shifts, and post-pandemic workplace evolution. This summary presents these trends ranked by current importance for hospitality industry leaders, providing clear guidance for strategic planning and resource allocation.

Trend Rankings:

1. The Rise of Artificial Intelligence

(Critical - Transformational)

Why: AI has evolved from an emerging trend to the most transformational force reshaping the hospitality workplace, since computerization.

Impact for Leaders: Organizations must develop comprehensive AI strategies immediately or risk obsolescence. This includes workforce transition planning, ethical AI governance, and systematic integration across all business processes.

2. Retention Through Upskilling, Reskilling and Upward Mobility

(Critical - Highest)

Why: The urgency for continuous learning is now a business survival imperative, driven primarily by AI and technological change.

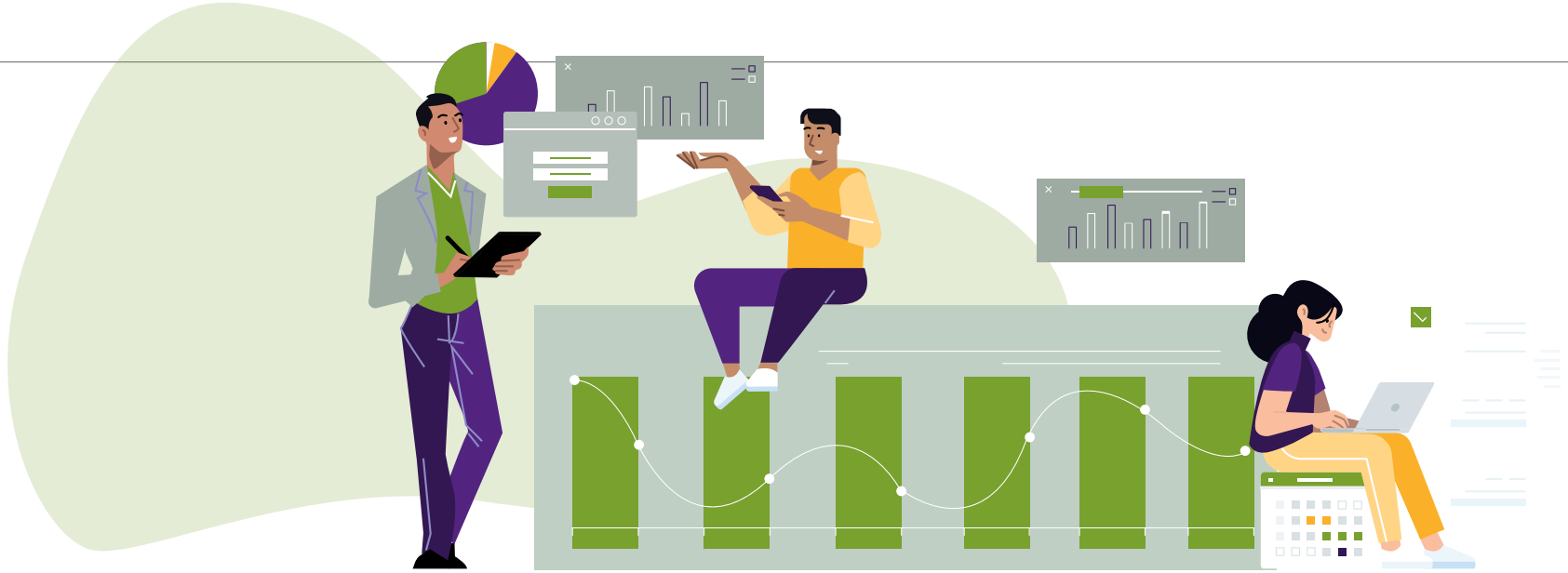
Impact for Leaders: Investment in comprehensive learning ecosystems is essential, including partnerships with associations and educational institutions, internal mentorship programs, and technology-enabled learning platforms.

3. Meeting the Needs of Multigenerational Workforces

(Critical - Highest)

Why: Five generations are working simultaneously, creating unprecedented complexity that cannot be ignored.

Impact for Leaders: Organizations must develop sophisticated engagement strategies accommodating diverse generational preferences while maintaining operational efficiency. This requires investment in flexible work arrangements, diverse communication platforms, and generationally sensitive leadership development.



4. Leadership Defines Culture and Organizational Purpose

(Critical - Highest)

Why: Leadership's role has become more critical as organizations navigate these changes, requiring leaders to serve as both cultural architects and technological change agents.

Impact for Leaders: Leaders must develop AI literacy while creating psychologically safe environments for experimentation and learning. This requires investment in leadership development programs combining traditional management skills with technological fluency.

5. Prioritizing Emotional Wellness

(High - Essential)

Why: Workplace wellness has evolved into a strategic business priority with measurable ROI and direct impact on organizational performance.

Impact for Leaders: Modern wellness strategies must address mental health, work-life integration, and stress management as core business functions.

6. Return to Office and Hybrid Work Models

(High - Stabilizing)

Why: The return-to-office debate has stabilized with clear emerging patterns, requiring strategic workforce models that balance operational needs with employee satisfaction.

Impact for Leaders: Organizations must develop sophisticated hybrid frameworks prioritizing results over location while maintaining collaborative culture. This requires investment in technology infrastructure, redesigned physical spaces, and hybrid team leadership training.

7. The Rise of the Gig Economy and Fractional Staffing Models

(High - Growing)

Why: The gig economy's influence has accelerated beyond projections, fundamentally altering traditional employment models through digital platform revolution.

Impact for Leaders: Organizations should develop hybrid employment models combining traditional full-time positions with gig-based supplementation, providing operational resilience while addressing work flexibility.

8. Transforming Employee Engagement

(High - Evolving)

Why: Employee engagement has evolved from participation metrics to emphasizing meaningful connection and authentic workplace experiences.

Impact for Leaders: Modern engagement strategies require hyper-personalization, real-time feedback systems, and AI-driven insights. Organizations must move beyond annual surveys to continuous, data-driven engagement optimization.

9. Cross-Functional Teamwork and the Evolution of Commercial

(Moderate - Strategic)

Why: While demonstrating measurable impact on organizational performance, this trend maintains consistent rather than escalating importance.

Impact for Leaders: Success requires formal cross-functional capability development, digital collaboration platforms, and structured frameworks breaking down organizational silos. Investment in collaboration technologies and cross-functional leadership training is strategic but not urgent.

Strategic Recommendations by Priority Level

- Immediate Action Required (Trends 1-4):
- Develop comprehensive AI adoption strategies with workforce transition planning
- Accelerate upskilling initiatives with measurable career progression pathways
- Build multigenerational workforce competencies and communication strategies
- Enhance leadership development for digital transformation guidance

Strategic Investment Needed (Trends 5-7):

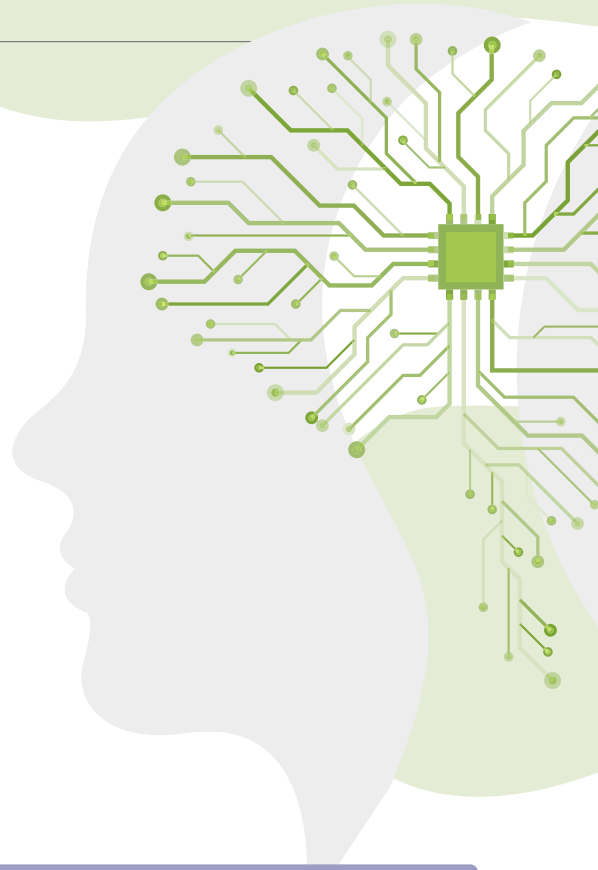
- Expand wellness programs beyond traditional benefits to comprehensive well-being
- Implement sustainable hybrid work models with result-focused frameworks
- Develop gig economy integration for operational flexibility

Operational Evolution (Trends 8-9):

- Transform engagement from episodic to continuous, data-driven strategies
- Formalize cross-functional collaboration processes and digital platforms

TREND 1:

Artificial Intelligence: The Industry Disruptor



Artificial intelligence (AI) has shifted from promise to practice. The global AI market in hospitality and tourism is projected to surge from $15.69 billion in 2024 to $20.39 billion in 2025, representing a compound annual growth rate of nearly 30% [1] [2]. This growth is fueled by labor shortages, rising guest expectations, and clear evidence that AI adoption drives ROI.

Industry experts estimate that up to 25% of all hospitality jobs will be impacted by automation, with back-of-house and data-intensive roles facing the most exposure. Yet the narrative is not one of wholesale displacement. AI is increasingly a collaborator, automating routine work, scaling personalization, and freeing professionals to focus on strategic, guest-facing, and owner-facing decisions. We'll look at how AI is influencing each of the commercial disciplines.

AI in Revenue Management: Machine Precision Meets Strategic Oversight

Revenue management has undergone the deepest AI infusion. Hotels leveraging AI-driven Revenue Management Systems (RMS) have reported total revenue improvements of 20–30% [3] and RevPAR gains of up to 10% alongside cost reductions of up to 15% [4] . Studies of commercial RMS tools confirm measurable ROI, faster decision-making, and improved portfolio-wide optimization [5].

AI in Distribution: The Shelf Gets Smarter

Distribution is no longer a back-office function; it is the digital shelf where hospitality products live. With AI-driven schemas powering discovery on OTAs, TMC systems, and generative search, how hotels appear and at what cost has changed fundamentally. AI-driven merchandising can lift conversion rates by 15–25% [6]. Distribution leaders now manage not just rate parity, but the total economics of contribution margin, transaction flows, and profitability.

AI in Sales: Augmenting Human Relationships

AI in sales amplifies, rather than replaces, human talent. By automating routine tasks, AI allows sales professionals to focus on relationship building and strategic account management. Sales teams using AI-powered lead scoring, proposal generation, and predictive analytics report 15–25% higher conversion rates [7].

AI in Marketing: Personalization at Scale

No commercial function has been more reshaped by AI than marketing. AI enables personalization, omnichannel consistency, and content creation at scale. Hyper-personalized campaigns deliver 10–30% higher ROI, while AI-driven content generation accelerates production speed by 50–70% [8] [9]. Semrush reports a 300% increase in site referrals from ChatGPT interactions — demonstrating how generative AI is already transforming discovery [10].

Workforce Implications:

Risks and New Roles

AI adoption creates both vulnerability and opportunity. Experts project that up to 25% of roles will be reshaped, but new roles such as AI System Managers, Data Scientists, Prompt Engineers, and Human-AI Collaboration Specialists are emerging [1] [2]. The enduring differentiators remain human skills: creativity, empathy, negotiation, and critical thinking. Leaders cannot treat AI adoption as purely technical. Ethical and organizational risks like algorithmic bias, data privacy, and enterprise risk management are front and center. AI applications must enhance efficiency without eroding hospitality's human essence [11].

Key Takeaways

1. AI is embedded across revenue, sales, marketing, and distribution platforms [2].
2. Hotels using AI-based RMS report 10–17% revenue gains and 8–10% occupancy lifts [3] [4].
3. Distribution and marketing leaders must master AI to manage total economics and personalization [6] [8].
4. Up to 25% of jobs will be reshaped, but new hybrid roles are emerging [1] [2].
5. Human skills remain the differentiator; trust, creativity, and empathy cannot be automated [11].
6. Delay is decay: organizations that stall on AI adoption risk falling behind in competitiveness [10].

EXECUTIVE SPOTLIGHT:

with Matthew Guglielmette, Associate Principal, Sean Moran, Principal and Jen Neely, Manager, ZS

AI-Enabled Coaching: Transforming Sales Leadership

ZS has long been recognized for helping organizations strengthen commercial effectiveness. Now, with the launch of its **AI-enabled Sales Leader Hub**, ZS is pioneering a new approach to coaching, skill development, and frontline performance. Already adopted in industries from healthcare to technology, this solution offers hotel companies an opportunity to modernize how they develop sales leaders and their teams. In this conversation, a ZS executive outlines the philosophy, applications, and potential impact for hospitality.

Q: Could you describe the philosophy and design of your AI-enabled sales coaching solution, and how it's being applied for sales leaders?

ZS Executive: Our philosophy is simple: sales leaders should operate within a connected ecosystem that supports every aspect of their role—business development, people development, and customer development. Too often, leaders are overwhelmed by scattered data and tactical tasks. Our solution is designed to give them all relevant insights in one place while taking on the routine, time-consuming work.

This creates capacity for leaders to focus on what really matters: deploying new strategies and innovations, delivering more personalized coaching—especially to "move the middle" performers—and expanding their client support or team leadership responsibilities.

From a salesperson's perspective, the experience is on-demand, personalized, and action-oriented. Coaching and training are tailored to the individual and their customers; with clear next steps they can practice and apply in live conversations.

The Sales Leader Hub provides:

- Insights on team performance, skill progression, and call quality
- AI-assisted coaching recommendations and professional development ideas
- Tracking of coaching quality and coverage over time
- Drill-downs into virtual practice results, live call summaries, and skill gaps

Q: How does the platform support new salespeople versus more experienced salespeople?

ZS Executive: Customization is critical. New salespeople need fundamentals, while experienced reps often need refinement and scaling. We've designed the Hub to address both.

- Virtual practice can be configured for different levels—basic scenarios for new reps, nuanced customer profiles for veterans.
- Coaching insights are tailored by experience level, ensuring leaders provide feedback and follow-up appropriate to each rep.
- Coaching practice allows leaders to rehearse coaching conversations with AI-generated personas that mirror the varied needs of their team members.

The result is personalized development across the spectrum—from those just starting to seasoned performers who need to evolve their approach.

Q: What are some specific ways companies are using this product to strengthen sales execution and improve frontline productivity?

ZS Executive: We're seeing four main applications:

1. **Onboarding & Strategy Changes** – Virtual practice helps new reps gain confidence before meeting customers and allows experienced teams to practice new messaging or strategies.
2. **Call Quality Improvement** – Always-on data and consistent quality definitions improve coaching precision. Reps using virtual practice are 27% more likely to make President's Club, book 40% more meetings with decision makers, and increase wins and quota attainment.
3. **Coaching Consistency & Quality** – AI enables personalized evaluation of each leader's coaching. Companies report a 50% improvement in consistency and a 75% time reduction in preparation. Stronger coaches drive stronger reps.
4. **Consistent Skill Evaluation** – The Hub provides unbiased, AI-driven baselines for competencies. Leaders can track individual and team progress, prioritize coaching focus, and target those with the greatest need.

Q: Can you share some success stories from clients?

ZS Executive: Two examples stand out:

- **Case Study 1**: A client implemented virtual training aligned to their selling model. They realized $1M in savings and more than 1,000 hours in time saved annually compared to traditional role-play training.
- **Case Study 2**: Another client used AI to evaluate the quality of coaching forms. The result was a 50% improvement in coaching consistency and a 75% time reduction in leader preparation—without sacrificing accuracy.

Closing Reflection

AI is no longer an abstract concept—it is a practical tool to help leaders work smarter and deliver stronger business outcomes. For sales leaders, the real challenge has always been balancing two demanding responsibilities: advancing account development while also providing effective team leadership. Too often, the tactical demands of reporting, coaching forms, and fragmented data leave leaders stretched too thin to excel at either.

AI-enabled platforms like ZS's Sales Leader Hub change that equation. By consolidating insights and automating tactical tasks, they give leaders the capacity to focus on the work that matters most—deepening client relationships and delivering personalized coaching that drives team performance.

As outlined in the broader AI section of this report, the next five years will define how commercial leaders use AI to be more effective, efficient, and outcome-focused. Tools like the Sales Leader Hub show what's possible: more consistent coaching, faster upskilling and reskilling, stronger sales execution, and measurable gains in productivity and revenue.

In short, AI doesn't replace leadership—it amplifies it. Hotel companies piloting solutions like this can set a new standard for commercial excellence in an AI-driven era.

TREND 2:

Reskilling, Upskilling, and Career Growth in Hospitality

The hospitality industry has always thrived on change. New distribution platforms, loyalty programs, and digital marketing innovations have repeatedly reshaped the commercial landscape. But today's disruption is unprecedented in both speed and scope.

Artificial intelligence, automation, and digital ecosystems are transforming how work is performed. At the same time, owners and asset managers are sharpening their focus on profitability, debt service coverage, and asset value. For sales, marketing, and revenue management professionals, the traditional markers of career progression — titles, tenure, and functional expertise — are no longer enough.

Adaptability is now the core competency. Professionals who embrace continuous reskilling and upskilling will remain relevant, while those who stand still risk being left behind. Career resilience depends not only on learning digital tools, but also on understanding the economics of the hotel business, the platforms where demand is sourced, and the strategic thinking required to bring solutions rather than just information [1] [2] [3] [4] [5].

Category Knowledge: Speaking the Language of Owners

One of the biggest gaps in commercial leadership today is category fluency. Many professionals enter hospitality from other industries such as tech, consumer goods, or finance. They bring valuable capabilities, but without grounding in the fundamentals of the hotel business, they struggle to earn credibility with owners and asset managers [6] [7].

Category knowledge includes understanding:

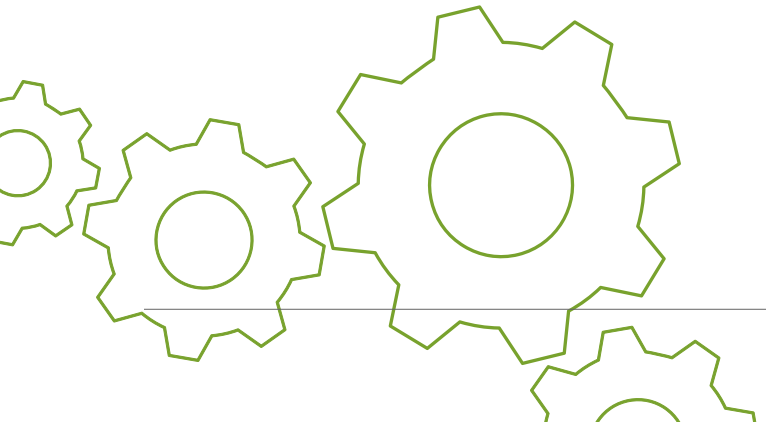
- **Asset classes**: luxury, upscale, midscale, economy, extended stay and how their economics differ.
- **Franchise and management agreements**: how contracts shape priorities for brands, owners, and operators.
- **Owner KPIs**: gross operating profit (GOP), net operating income (NOI), flow-through.
- **Debt Service Coverage Ratio (DSCR)**: the measure of a hotel's ability to cover debt obligations from operating income. Asset managers

and lenders view DSCR as the single most important metric of long-term financial health. Commercial leaders who can connect sales, marketing, and revenue strategies to DSCR and cash flow win the trust of owners.

- **Asset valuation lens**: how topline growth translates into profitability, debt coverage, and ultimately the value of the real estate.

For individuals: Make learning the business a priority. Sit with operators, review P&Ls, and ask asset managers to explain DSCR and owner dashboards. This knowledge is the currency of credibility.

For organizations: Incorporate hotel economics and real estate basics into onboarding and leadership development programs. A marketer who understands flow-through, or a salesperson who knows DSCR thresholds, is far more effective in owner conversations.



Closing the B2B Marketing Gap

While hospitality has made great strides in B2C engagement — loyalty campaigns, digital advertising, social media storytelling — the real blind spot is B2B marketing. Corporate buyers, travel management companies (TMCs), intermediaries, and consortia remain the lifeblood of managed demand, yet many commercial professionals lack the skills to engage effectively [8] [9] [10] [11] [12].

Why this matters:

- Corporate and group demand can drive 40–60% of hotel revenue.
- Platforms like Cvent, SAP Concur TMC's, and distribution exchanges are where buyers make sourcing decisions.
- Advanced schemas in generative AI platforms are beginning to evaluate properties not on relationships alone, but on structured content, pricing, and merchandising quality.

Skills required:

- Understanding how B2B platforms work, and how hotels can optimize their visibility and ranking.

- Learning to merchandise hotels effectively in buyer environments, from competitive positioning to content accuracy.
- Measuring ROI on both above-property campaigns and on-property sales activations.

For individuals:
Build fluency in B2B platforms and buyer environments. Learn how sourcing platforms (e.g., Cvent, Concur, and others) evaluate properties and how structured content, merchandising, and data accuracy influence visibility. Invest in developing skills in positioning, ROI measurement, and multi-stakeholder communication. Shadow account managers, participate in RFP reviews, and practice articulating your hotel's value through the lens of corporate buyers and TMCs.

- Complete Cvent Supplier Network training or similar platform certifications.
- Participate in corporate account reviews and observe RFP scoring processes.
- Build a personal playbook for merchandising your property across different B2B platforms.

For organizations:
Treat B2B marketing as a core commercial discipline, not an afterthought to B2C. Invest in training programs that teach teams how to merchandise effectively in corporate and group channels, evaluate campaign ROI, and align sales activations with above-property marketing. Establish clear ownership of B2B content quality across platforms and hold teams accountable for accuracy, timeliness, and competitiveness.

- Develop a B2B marketing playbook aligned with sales and distribution strategy.
- Require teams to complete platform certifications (Cvent, Concur and others).
- Establish regular audits of B2B content accuracy, pricing integrity, and competitiveness.
- Integrate B2B ROI measurement into sales and marketing performance dashboards.

Without B2B fluency, sales and marketing professionals risk missing the channels where demand is generated.

Distribution and Sourcing

Distribution is too often viewed as a back-office function, but is central to commercial performance [13] [14] [15] [16].

Why this matters:

- Distribution strategy determines visibility, contribution margin, and profitability.
- It is no longer just about ARI (availability, rates, inventory). Today's distribution requires merchandising content, images, reviews, and offers that influence buyer decisions.
- Advanced schemas are changing how AI-driven platforms display properties. The rules of discovery are evolving quickly.
- Payments and transaction flows carry real costs. Commission structures and virtual card acceptance impact owner profitability.

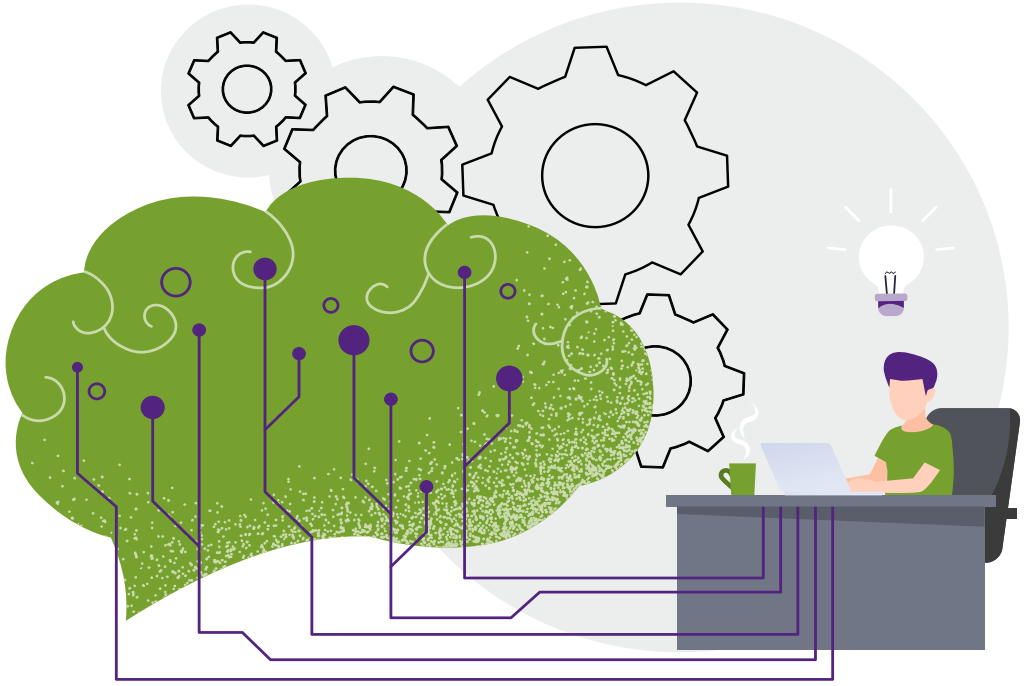
Skills required:

- Understanding distribution economics: contribution margins, transaction fees, commission structures.
- Learning how merchandising drives conversion in both B2B and B2C platforms.
- Staying current on schema changes and generative AI's impact on discovery.

For individuals:

Distribution literacy is no longer optional. It is part of the commercial core, alongside sales, marketing, and revenue. Professionals who understand how distribution economics and merchandising influence profitability will have a clear edge in career growth.

- Complete OTA Academy or GDS training modules (e.g., Amadeus, Sabre, Travelport) to understand platform mechanics.
- Review property-level P&Ls to see the impact of commission structures, transaction fees, and payment costs on profitability.
- Shadow revenue managers or distribution teams to gain exposure to rate loading, channel audits, and merchandising workflows.
- Build a personal playbook for optimizing content and imagery across OTAs, GDSs, and brand.com.



- Stay current on schema.org updates and experiment with generative AI tools to understand how structured content influences search and discovery.
- Participate in cross-functional meetings where distribution strategy is discussed to strengthen commercial literacy.

For organizations:
Elevate distribution from a tactical back-office function to a strategic pillar of commercial performance. Build organization-wide fluency in distribution economics and merchandising, and ensure accountability for how channels drive visibility, contribution margin, and profitability.

- Establish a distribution strategy council that includes sales, marketing, revenue, finance, and IT to ensure cross-functional alignment.
- Invest in ongoing training so teams at both property and above-property levels understand contribution margins, commission structures, and transaction costs.
- Implement regular audits of content quality, imagery, reviews, and schema compliance across major OTAs, GDSs, and metasearch platforms.
- Negotiate proactively with OTAs, wholesalers, and GDS partners to manage costs, optimize visibility, and protect rate integrity.
- Integrate distribution KPIs (e.g., net ADR, contribution margin, cost of payment) into executive dashboards and link them to performance reviews.
- Pilot AI-driven merchandising initiatives and structured data projects to stay ahead of evolving algorithms that determine property visibility.
- Create knowledge-sharing sessions between revenue, marketing, and distribution teams so that insights from one area (e.g., channel conversion data) inform decision-making in others.

Revenue Management: From Tactics to Strategy

Revenue management is evolving faster than any commercial function. AI-powered systems now handle millions of pricing decisions annually, delivering double-digit revenue lifts [17] [18] [19].

Role evolution:

- From manual rate adjustments to strategic interpretation of system output.
- From room revenue to **Total Revenue Optimization (TRevPAR)** across all revenue streams.
- From tactical analyst to strategic consultant, trusted by owners and asset managers.

Reskilling priorities:

- AI fluency: knowing how to stress-test and interpret system recommendations.
- Financial literacy: connecting pricing decisions to profitability and DSCR.
- Portfolio perspective: managing multiple properties and asset types.

For individuals:

Revenue leaders must move beyond tactical tasks and become strategic advisors. That means strengthening both technical and financial fluency to connect system output with owner priorities.

- Complete certifications in AI-driven revenue management platforms (e.g., IDeaS,&Duetto) to deepen system fluency.
- Practice “shadow stress-testing” by running scenarios against AI recommendations to strengthen judgment and build owner confidence.
- Build financial literacy by connecting revenue management decisions to NOI, DSCR, and cash flow in real P&Ls.
- Develop multi-asset perspective by volunteering for cluster or regional projects that involve different property types and demand drivers.
- Expand influence skills by learning to present revenue strategies in owner and asset manager meetings, translating pricing into profitability and valuation terms.

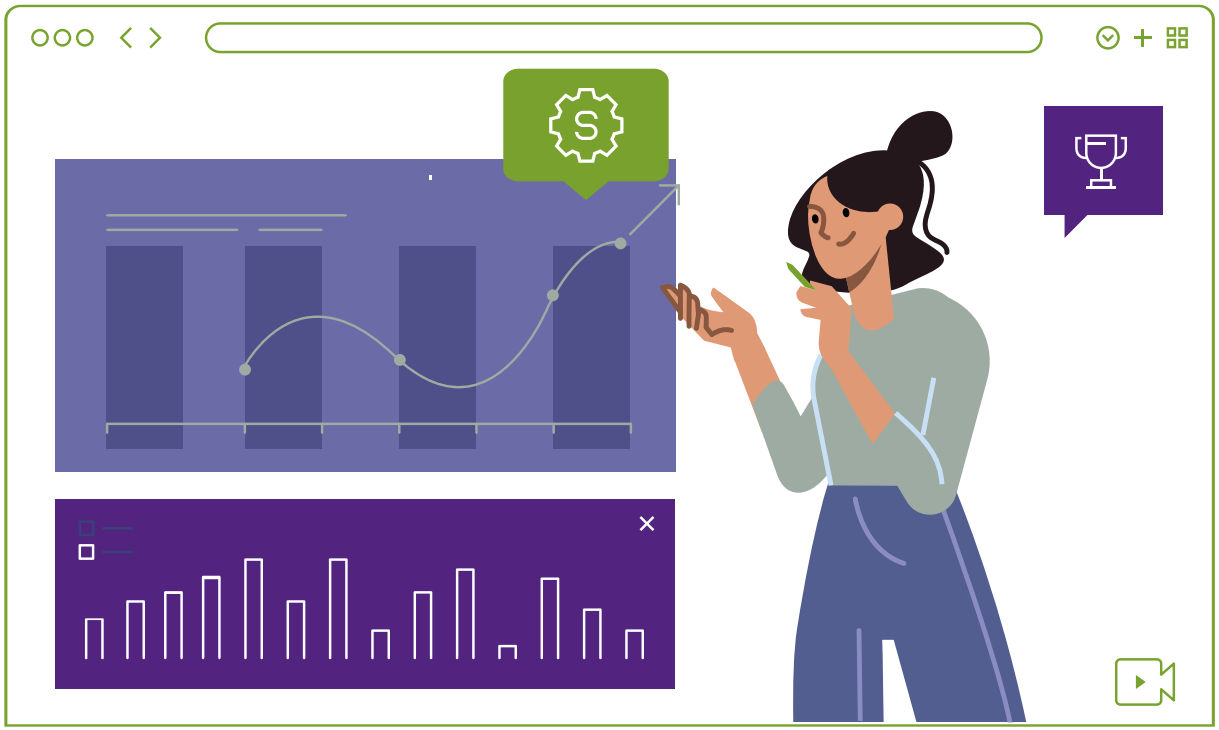
For organizations:

Revenue management must be positioned as a strategic capability that protects and grows asset value. Organizations that invest in systems, training, and governance will build credibility with owners and outperform peers.

- Provide structured training on financial metrics (NOI, GOP flow-through, DSCR) to all revenue leaders.
- Invest in advanced RMS platforms and ensure staff are trained to interpret, not override, system output.
- Create formal “Revenue Councils” where sales, marketing, finance, and revenue leaders review performance together and align on strategy.
- Incorporate TRevPAR and profit-based KPIs into performance reviews and bonus structures.
- Establish mentoring programs that pair tactical analysts with senior leaders to accelerate the shift toward strategic consultancy.
- Communicate revenue strategies to owners with standardized dashboards that clearly link pricing, profitability, and asset value

Sales: From Transactions to Trusted Partnerships

Sales has always been relationship-driven, but technology has redefined its value proposition. CRM automation, lead scoring, and proposal generation have taken over routine tasks. What remains and what matters most is trust-based, consultative selling [20] [21] [22] [23].



Role evolution:

- From “selling rooms” to solving client business challenges.
- From transactional account management to strategic guidance on traveler satisfaction, cost efficiency, and compliance.
- From working in isolation to collaborating with marketing and revenue on integrated solutions.

Reskilling priorities:

- Platform literacy: understanding B2B sourcing tools and corporate booking platforms.
- Complex negotiation skills that build value beyond rate.
- Cross-functional fluency in revenue and marketing.

For individuals:

Sales professionals must evolve from transactional sellers to trusted advisors who solve client business challenges. Success now depends on consultative selling skills, cross-functional fluency, and platform literacy.

- Complete training in consultative/ value-based selling methodologies
- Develop literacy in B2B sourcing tools and corporate booking platforms (Cvent, &SAP Concur, and ADS partners like DerbySoft)

- Strengthen negotiation skills to frame value beyond rate — incorporating traveler satisfaction, compliance, and cost efficiency.
- Shadow revenue managers and marketers to understand how pricing, demand generation, and storytelling align with sales outcomes.
- Build credibility by presenting proposals in “owner language,” connecting deals to profitability and asset performance.
- Expand networks with procurement managers and TMCs to understand evolving buyer needs and expectations.

For organizations:
Organizations must enable sales teams to thrive in a consultative, trust-based environment. That means equipping them with the tools, training, and integrated structures required to deliver commercial solutions rather than rates.

- Develop a unified sales playbook that emphasizes consultative selling, solution-based proposals, and owner-aligned messaging.
- Provide continuous training in negotiation, multi-stakeholder engagement, and buyer-centric communication.
- Align sales KPIs with profitability, share of wallet, and account longevity, not just room nights or top-line revenue.
- Create integrated account teams that bring together sales, marketing, and revenue leaders to manage strategic accounts collaboratively.
- Invest in CRM systems that integrate seamlessly with revenue and marketing platforms to provide a single source of truth on customer accounts.
- Establish regular joint reviews with owners and asset managers to showcase how sales strategies contribute to profitability and long-term asset value.
- Reward and recognize sales behaviors that build trust, deepen relationships, and strengthen partnerships — not just those that close immediate deals

Marketing: From Execution to Growth Strategy

Marketing has become the fastest-growing commercial function, particularly in digital and social. But executional work — ad copywriting, SEO optimization, content scheduling — is increasingly automated [24] [25] [26] [27].

Role evolution:

- From campaign executor to brand strategist and storyteller.
- From managing channels in isolation to orchestrating omnichannel guest journeys.
- From measuring impressions and clicks to proving contribution to profitability and asset value.

Reskilling priorities:

- Data literacy to connect campaigns to revenue and owner outcomes.
- Omnichannel strategy to ensure consistent guest experiences.
- Storytelling skills to differentiate in crowded markets.

5 Ways to Build Skills

1. **Annual skills audits that cover both hard and soft skills** [28] [29] [30]:
   - **Hard skills**: analytics, AI tools, digital marketing, distribution economics, financial literacy.
   - **Soft skills**: empathy, communication, negotiation, adaptability, critical thinking.
     Pair self-assessment with 360 feedback to create a balanced growth roadmap.

2. **Stretch Assignments**
   Upskilling is best achieved through practice. Assignments that push professionals outside their core function build resilience and agility: [31] [32] [33]
   - Marketers leading owner reviews.
   - Salespeople designing digital campaigns.
   - Revenue managers co-developing brand narratives.

3. **Tiger Teams**
   Cross-functional tiger teams solve urgent challenges while building leadership visibility and cross-disciplinary fluency. Examples include new distribution partnerships, SMB activation, and extended-stay positioning. [34] [35] [36]

4. **Bridging Lived Experience**
   Leaders should not only share their stories but translate them into frameworks. Explaining the "why" behind decisions helps emerging talent build judgment and confidence [37] [38] [39].

5. **Critical and Strategic Thinking: The Irreplaceable Skills**
   Technology can generate information. What it cannot replace is human judgment. Critical and strategic thinking remain the highest-value career skills. [40] [41] [42] [43]
   - **Critical thinking**: Evaluating evidence, challenging assumptions, and separating signal from noise.
   - **Strategic thinking**: Seeing patterns, anticipating market shifts, and connecting today's actions to tomorrow's outcomes.

Practical methods include:

- Scenario planning to test foresight.
- Case study analysis to learn from successes and failures.
- Reverse mentoring to surface new generational perspectives.
- In an era of automation, thinking is the new currency.

For individuals:
Marketers must move beyond tactical execution to become strategists and storytellers who connect demand generation to profitability. The career edge comes from building fluency in data, omnichannel orchestration, and storytelling — and pairing those with critical thinking and cross-functional agility.

- Complete certifications in digital marketing, analytics, or AI tools (e.g., HSMAI's CHDM, Google Analytics 4, HubSpot Academy, or AI prompt engineering for marketers).
- Practice connecting marketing metrics (clicks, impressions, engagement) to owner outcomes such as RevPAR, TRevPAR, NOI, and flow-through.
- Build an omnichannel playbook that maps the guest journey across paid, owned, and earned media.
- Volunteer for stretch assignments outside marketing, such as leading owner reviews or co-developing commercial strategies with sales and revenue colleagues.

- Strengthen storytelling skills by presenting case studies internally and externally, framing campaigns in terms of impact on profitability and asset value.
- Participate in scenario planning and case study analysis to hone critical and strategic thinking.
- Expand professional networks with brand, distribution, and agency partners to stay ahead of trends and best practices.

For organizations:
Organizations must elevate marketing from an executional support function to a commercial growth engine. That requires investment in data, talent, and cross-functional structures that connect marketing directly to owner outcomes.

- Institutionalize annual skills audits that assess both hard (analytics, AI, financial literacy) and soft (communication, adaptability, strategic thinking) skills, and pair them with 360 feedback.
- Provide structured upskilling through cross-functional "tiger teams" tasked with solving real commercial challenges (e.g., SMB activation, new distribution partnerships).
- Invest in marketing technology platforms that integrate with CRM, RMS, and distribution systems to unify data and improve ROI measurement.
- Redefine marketing KPIs to include contribution to revenue, profitability, and asset value — not just impressions and engagement.
- Create leadership pathways that rotate marketers into sales, revenue, or distribution projects to build commercial breadth.
- Encourage senior leaders to translate their lived experiences into frameworks that emerging talent can apply — embedding judgment and strategic thinking into the culture.
- Establish regular forums where marketing, sales, and revenue leaders jointly present commercial strategies to owners, reinforcing marketing's role as a driver of growth.
- Pilot AI-driven personalization and schema optimization projects to stay ahead of evolving discovery and demand generation algorithms.

Key Takeaways

For Employers: Building Future-Ready Teams

1. Institutionalize skill audits.
2. Prioritize category fluency.
3. Close the B2B marketing gap.
4. Elevate distribution literacy.
5. Design stretch roles and tiger teams.
6. Create a culture of applied learning.
7. Develop critical and strategic thinking.
8. Support balanced growth.

For Individuals: Managing Your Career Currency

1. Conduct personal skill audits.
2. Learn hotel economics.
3. Get fluent in B2B marketing
4. Master distribution literacy.
5. Volunteer for stretch projects.
6. Join tiger teams.
7. Translate lived experiences.
8. Become a solution provider.
9. Sharpen thinking skills.
10. Balance your toolkit.

Bottom line:

Employers and individuals share responsibility for reskilling and upskilling. Organizations that make development central to culture and professionals who treat skills as their career currency will future proof the hospitality workforce. Those who understand not only RevPAR and flow-through, but also DSCR, B2B platforms, and distribution economics will become the trusted commercial leaders shaping hospitality's next era of growth.

CASE STUDY:

Driftwood Hospitality Management Builds Commercial Bench Strength from Within

As the hospitality industry faces increasing complexity across sales, revenue, and marketing functions, Driftwood Hospitality Management (DHM) has emerged as a model for developing commercial talent from within. By investing in internal mobility, structured learning, and a collaborative commercial culture, DHM is redefining what it means to grow high-performing teams across disciplines.

This case study explores how DHM is advancing commercial leadership by integrating upskilling and reskilling into the fabric of its operations and creating a talent pipeline that's not only agile and capable but deeply loyal and invested in the company's success.

A Culture of Development and Promotion

Driftwood's approach is rooted in early identification, ongoing mentorship, and a belief that great leaders can and should come from within.

- A large majority of the above-property revenue teams were promoted internally.
- Over half of above-property sales leaders, as well as marketing and e-commerce team members, have grown into their roles at DHM.
- Promotions and success stories are showcased across internal newsletters, social platforms, and leadership events creating visible pathways for others to aspire to.

"We look inside before we look outside," one executive shared. "That's only possible because we mentor, coach, and prepare people long before a role opens."

In a competitive labor market, this culture is also a powerful magnet, drawing in high-potential talent who prioritize learning and development when choosing their next employer.

Integrated Commercial Teamwork at the Property Level

DHM holds weekly commercial meetings that include the General Manager, Sales, Revenue Management, and above-property leaders.

- Meetings open with month to date (MTD) financials and key operational updates.
- Sales highlights, productivity reports, hot leads, STR reviews, and segmentation strategy are shared openly.
- Decisions on forecast and rate strategy are made in real-time with full alignment across teams.

The result? Reduced meeting load, better decisions, and greater buy-in. As one executive put it, "Everyone is in the room. Everyone has a voice. And everyone walks out on the same page."

Mentorship from the Top

Above-property leaders are hands-on player-coaches who support and stretch their teams.

- Weekly calls, structured one-on-ones, and property visits are standard.
- Coaching isn't reserved for top performers—it's part of everyone's development.
- Performance challenges are met early with plans that include LMS support, peer mentoring, and executive involvement.

Carol Davies, SVP of Commercial Strategy, emphasizes that evaluating talent isn't just about metrics: "Honestly, it is a combination of results, attitude, and quite frankly, my gut," she says. "Results are tangible; teams perform or don't. But top talent tends to be self-motivated, goal-oriented, and invested in the company's success. When someone shows pride in their work and volunteers for special projects, that's a signal they want more responsibility."

She adds that resilience is equally critical: "Can they learn from setbacks? Can they stay positive through criticism and do the work to get better?" These questions guide her decisions around promotions and mentoring.

Tools That Enable Learning and Growth

Driftwood pairs tech-enabled learning with human guidance to create a robust development engine:

- SalesBoost is embedded in onboarding, training, and performance support, with self-paced modules and quarterly rewards.
- Lighthouse is used across sales and revenue to drive insights, strategy, and skill-building backed by structured internal training.
- Learning happens during work hours ensuring that training is accessible, prioritized, and built into the rhythm of the job.

Career Pathways, Stretch Assignments, and Self-Advocacy

- Sales leaders move into revenue and marketing; revenue managers explore e-commerce.
- GMs have become Regional DOSMs. Regional sales leaders have moved into COO roles.
- Over 70% of cross-functional moves start with a team member raising their hand.

Development plans are equally personalized. "We talk through what someone does well and where we both see room to grow," says Davies. "Then we co-create a plan that includes structured training and mentorship from an experienced leader. We set a realistic timeline—and we don't rush it. I'd rather slow-play someone's growth and set them up for long-term success."

Industry Engagement & Certification Support

DHM actively supports team involvement in HSMAI, PCMA, GBTA, and MPI.

- Memberships, certifications, and conference attendance are financially supported.
- Learning is encouraged at all levels—with resources, budget, and time allocated.

Measuring Impact

- Growth in RevPAR and RPI is the foundation for advancement.
- Leaders are evaluated on initiative, continuous learning, and cross-training.
- Intangibles—like collaboration, project participation, and team mentorship—are also recognized.

In the war for commercial talent, emerging leaders are choosing employers that invest in their growth. DHM is winning that war by demonstrating that a culture of education, exposure, and empowerment not only fuels retention but drives performance.

Carol Davies, SVP of Commercial Strategy, embodies this philosophy and has made mentorship a cornerstone of her leadership style. “My first mentor … taught me that I was good, but I could be great if I just learned to control my emotions, think before I spoke, and, most importantly, listen,” she shares. “She made sure to teach me all that she knew and to do the same for someone else one day.” That commitment to paying it forward now permeates Driftwood’s commercial team—from structured training to personalized coaching to opportunities for stretch and advancement.

By breaking down silos and betting on their people, DHM has built a commercial bench that is both deep and dynamic, ready for what’s now and what’s next. Their model is a blueprint for the future of hospitality leadership.

Key Takeaways

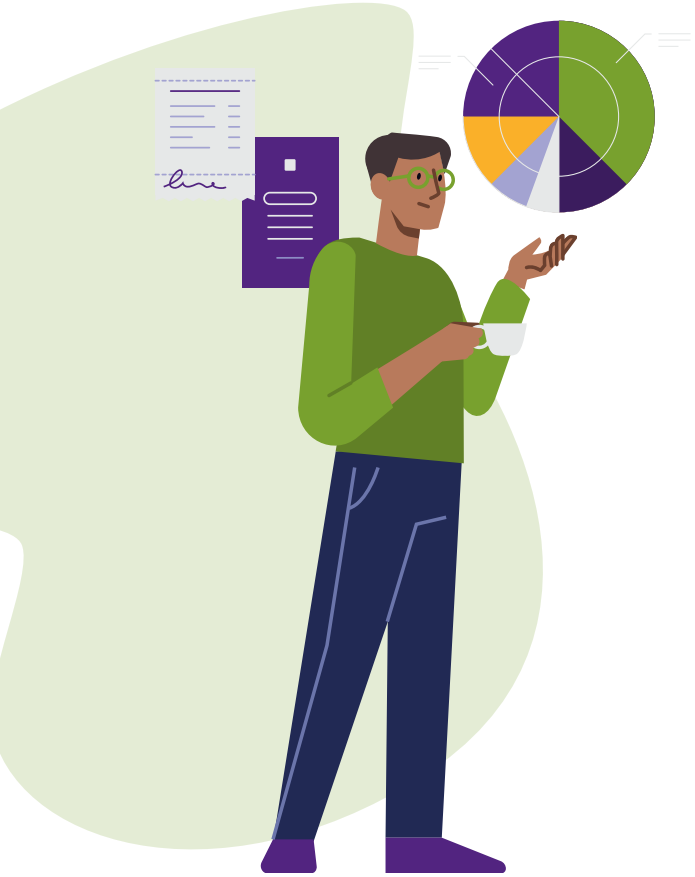
For Employers:
Driftwood’s success offers a clear roadmap for hospitality organizations looking to build stronger commercial teams from within:

- Invest in Internal Talent: Identify potential early and promote visible success stories.
- Integrate Commercial Functions: Weekly meetings with unified forecasting and decision-making improve alignment and trust.
- Coach at All Levels: Make mentorship and development a daily discipline, not an annual event.
- Embed Training in the Workday: Prioritize platforms like SalesBoost and Lighthouse—and give employees time to use them.
- Support Lateral Moves: Encourage exploration across commercial functions to build strategic fluency.
- Back Industry Engagement: Budget for certifications, conferences, and association involvement.
- Recognize the Intangibles: Look beyond revenue performance to assess potential and leadership capacity.

TREND 3:

Hospitality Workforce Transformation: Demographics, Engagement, and Multigenerational Strategy

The hospitality industry in 2025 faces seismic shifts unlike any in its recent history. Talent shortages, changing demographics, technological disruption, and a growing demand for purpose and flexibility have reshaped how organizations attract, engage, and retain a multigenerational workforce. The sector's challenge and opportunity is to build workplaces that nurture every generation while driving hospitality excellence and sustainable commercial performance.



Demographic Shifts and the New Workforce Mosaic

Hospitality employment has rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, yet the composition of the workforce has changed dramatically. Workers under 30 now represent 39% of the workforce, those aged 30–54 account for 48%, and those 55+ comprise 13% a rise driven by delayed retirements and new late-career entrants seeking flexible or phased opportunities. [1]

This shift masks a looming demographic cliff: with Baby Boomers retiring, the industry faces a narrowing pipeline of experienced leaders, while younger generations enter with new expectations for mobility, flexibility, and purpose. [2] [3] [4]

At the same time:

- Immigrants hold 27% to 31% of sector jobs, underscoring hospitality's reliance on global labor flows. [5]
- Part-time roles exceed 34%, highlighting demand for flexible arrangements [6].
- Vacancy rates average 5.8% but spike far higher during seasonal peaks [7] [8].

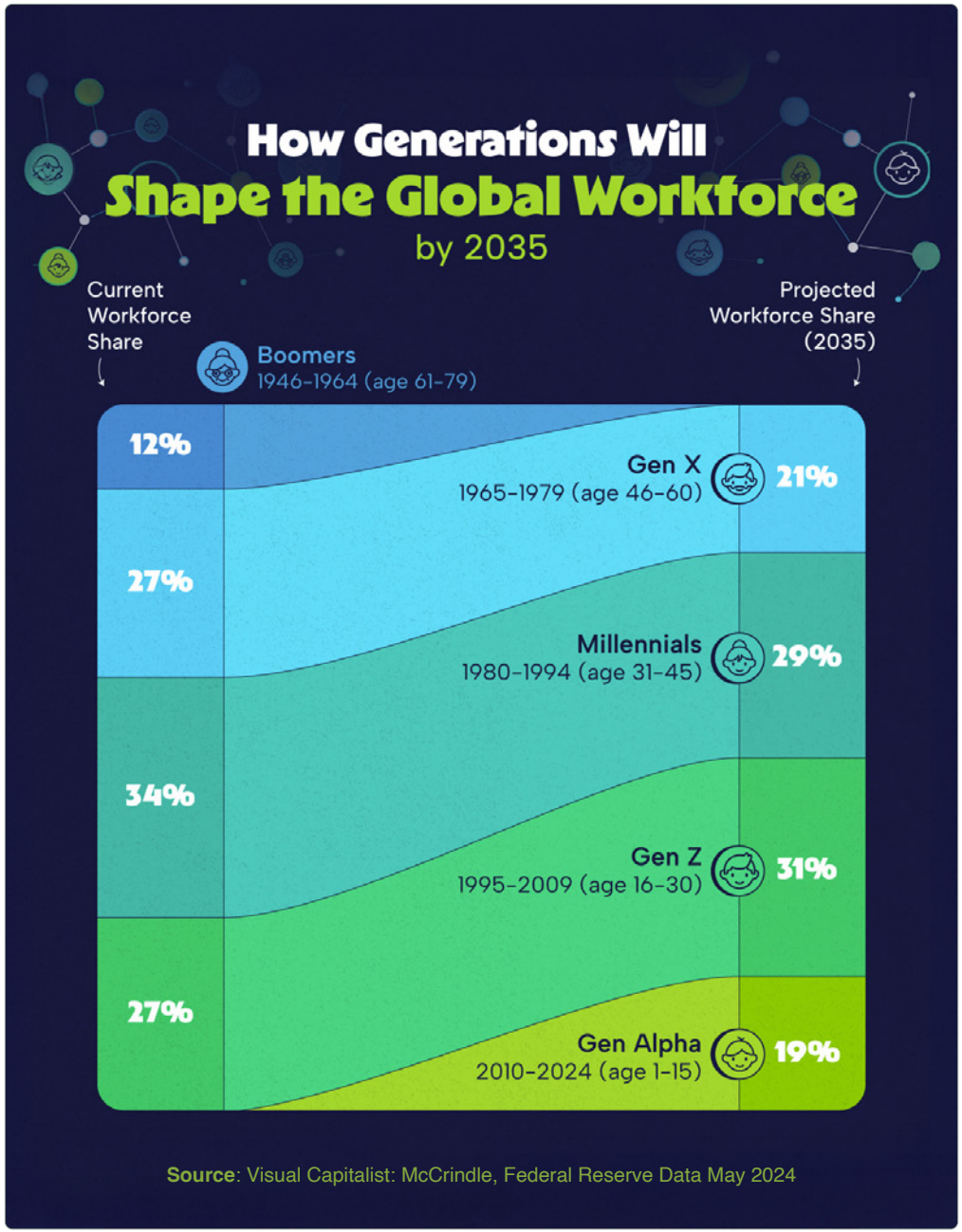
Older workers, whom Chip Conley has aptly named "wisdom workers," bring reliability, service depth, and mentorship. They are essential in stabilizing new builds, guiding acquisitions, and preparing

the next generation of leaders. Younger cohorts offer cultural fluency and digital creativity. Success depends on weaving these together matching the resilience of mature talent with the innovation of younger professionals [9] [10] [11].

The Multigenerational Mosaic: Strengths and Gaps

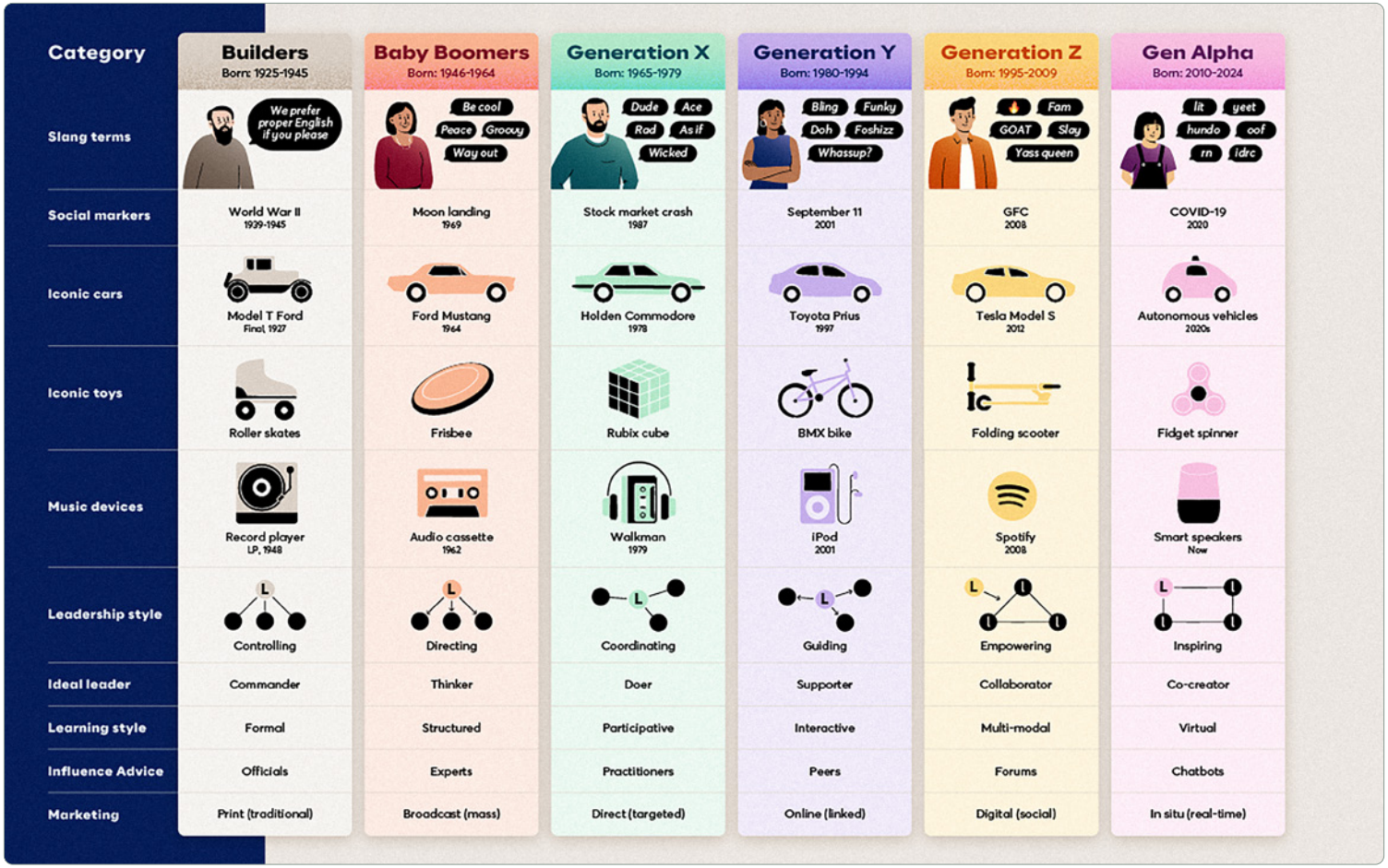
Five generations now work side by side [12]. Each contributes distinct strengths:

- **Baby Boomers**: loyalty, client relationships, leadership depth.
- **Gen X**: pragmatism, independence, operational-commercial bridge.
- **Millennials**: collaboration, digital marketing and analytics, global mindset.
- **Gen Z**: entrepreneurial, socially conscious, native to social commerce and AI.
- **Gen Alpha** (emerging): the first fully AI-native workforce.



Generational Characteristics

Source: https://mccrindle.com.au/article/topic/demographics/the-generations-defined/



The opportunity lies in bridging the differences in communication style, feedback preferences, and technology adoption. Left unmanaged, these differences widen silos. When blended intentionally, they create stronger teams capable of balancing commercial rigor with creative disruption [13] [14].

"Underemployment remains a reality for Gen Z talent entering the workforce, while later-career professionals seek phased roles that respect their expertise. Our future competitiveness depends on making space for both—fast-track pathways for emerging leaders and dignified roles for those extending their careers."

– HSMAI Foundation Board Member

Workforce Engagement: The Critical Gap

Gallup reports that global engagement in hospitality remains below 62% [15]. High engagement correlates directly with commercial performance: engaged staff sell more effectively, enroll more guests in loyalty programs, and drive higher RevPAR.

Key levers include:

- Recognition and respect that transcend hierarchy.
- Channels for input into pricing, campaign design, and sales strategies.
- Flexible scheduling and wellness programs to combat burnout.

Making Hospitality Careers Attractive Across Generations

Employer value propositions must be multi-tiered:

- For emerging talent: visible advancement, mentorship, and skills-based job movement into commercial functions.
- For wisdom workers: flexible or phased roles, respect for expertise, and meaningful opportunities to mentor.
- For all: purpose, belonging, and authenticity.

Research shows Gen Z and Millennials value visible purpose and inclusivity, while Gen X and Boomers seek stability and respect for contributions. Designing workplaces to balance both is the core retention challenge [16] [17] [18].

> *"Engagement isn't a soft metric, it's a commercial one. Hotels with engaged teams outperform in sales conversion, marketing adoption, and distribution alignment. Inspired people deliver results."*
>
> – HSMAI Foundation Board Member

Key Takeaways

- Demographic shifts are reshaping the workforce; wisdom workers and rising talent must be intentionally connected to prevent knowledge loss.
- Underemployment, phased retirements, and flexible roles create both risks and opportunities for talent pipelines.
- Engagement is not a soft issue but a commercial driver that directly impacts bookings, loyalty, and RevPAR.
- Commercial leaders must build new capabilities: critical thinking, financial literacy, and the ability to connect recommendations to owner profitability.
- HSMAI and the HSMAI Foundation equip the industry with frameworks, learning pathways, and communities that prepare leaders—both wisdom workers and rising talent—to thrive across generations and deliver bottom-line impact.

CASE STUDY:

SearchWide Global Navigating Demographic Shifts in Hospitality Recruitment

Mike Gamble, CEO of SearchWide Global and a board member of HSMAI Americas and the HSMAI Foundation has experience alleviating the demographic cliff. Gamble stresses that the industry must see this transition as both a challenge and an opportunity. “We can’t afford to think of age as a liability. The real competitive edge comes from designing structures where both groups thrive together,” he explains.

SearchWide’s work reflects this philosophy. The firm has increasingly placed later-career professionals into fractional, advisory, or project-based roles. These arrangements honor the expertise of seasoned leaders while creating intentional opportunities for mentorship and knowledge transfer. This aligns closely with the findings in this report that wisdom workers are critical to organizational resilience, not only for the stability and depth they provide but also for their ability to nurture the next generation.

Best Practices for a Multigenerational Workforce

Gamble notes that the most forward-thinking organizations are intentional about blending generations rather than managing them in silos. Effective practices include:

- Pairing seasoned executives with rising leaders through reverse mentoring and structured knowledge-transfer programs.
- Designing roles with clear accountability and impact, so employees of all ages see how

their work connects to commercial outcomes.

- Modernizing job descriptions with age-neutral language and a focus on adaptability and continuous learning.
- Embedding culture and values into recruitment processes, ensuring engagement begins from the first candidate interaction.

As Gamble puts it, “Demographic change isn’t a threat if you manage it with intention. The companies that will win are those that create leadership pipelines across generations, modernize their role design, and connect every hire back to commercial outcomes.”

This work reflects why Gamble has been a long-time volunteer leader with HSMAI. “There are many associations in hospitality, but HSMAI is the one dedicated to commercial leadership. It’s where senior commercial executives can sharpen their skills, share real-world lessons, and connect with the next generation of talent. HSMAI has always been at the forefront of helping leaders prepare for what’s next and that’s why I’ve committed so much of my time as a volunteer,” he notes.

Implications for Hospitality Leaders

SearchWide’s perspective amplifies the research findings in this report:

- Guard against knowledge loss as Baby Boomers exit by institutionalizing mentorship, rotational leadership, and HSMAI-supported training and certifications.
- Expand candidate access through skills-first hiring practices, especially in commercial leadership roles.
- Make multigenerational strategies central to talent and succession planning.

Leadership Lesson

Gamble’s insights underscore that the hospitality workforce mosaic is only as strong as the intentional strategies companies adopt. By engaging in communities like HSMAI, organizations can ensure their leaders are not only prepared for demographic change but are also part of a broader effort to shape the industry’s future. Recruiting practices that balance adaptability, skills, and values supported by industry associations that foster growth and knowledge transfer will define the next generation of commercial leadership.

TREND 4:

Leadership as the Capstone: Defining Culture, Purpose, and Change

The Leadership Mandate

Leadership has always been the differentiator in hospitality. Last year, HSMAI emphasized that leaders define culture and organizational purpose. In 2025, this truth holds stronger than ever, but with a sharper edge: the complexity of today's environment has raised the stakes for leadership. Leaders are being called upon not only to inspire teams and shape culture, but also to guide organizations through converging forces—rapid AI adoption, demographic and generational shifts, rising employee mental health needs, and the unrelenting demand for continuous learning and adaptation. The throughline is clear: leadership is the multiplier. Human skills anchor culture, but leadership actions determine whether organizations can successfully integrate technology, support people, and sustain long-term growth.

Human Skills at the Forefront of Leadership

The starting point is human connection. Research across industries confirms that soft skills—emotional intelligence, empathy, adaptability, communication, creativity, and ethical leadership—now surpass technical skills as the most in-demand leadership competencies [1]. In hospitality, where every business outcome is delivered through people, these skills are not optional; they are the bedrock of effective leadership. Leaders with high emotional intelligence and empathy create psychological safety [2] . Leaders who model adaptability turn uncertainty into opportunity. Leaders who communicate with clarity and integrity inspire trust and alignment.

From Skills to Systems: Leading Organizational Change

While human skills remain the anchor, they must now scale into systemic leadership actions that address the pressing challenges organizations face. Effective leaders are not only empathetic communicators—they are strategic change agents.

Leading AI and Digital Transformation

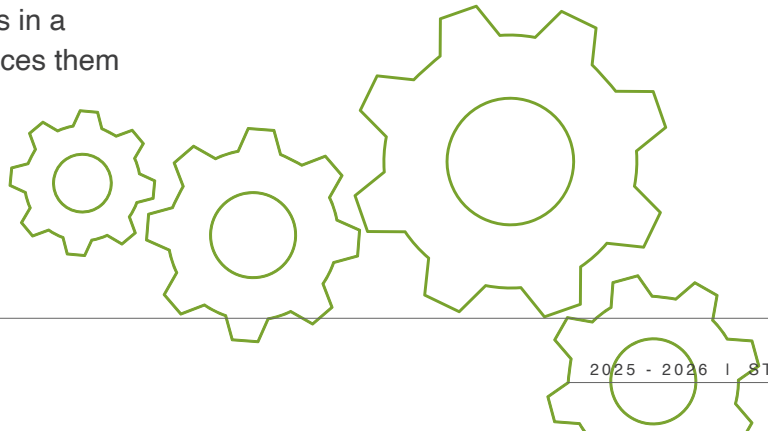
AI is no longer theoretical. In hospitality, it is reshaping guest engagement, workforce scheduling, marketing personalization, and distribution optimization [3]. Yet, AI adoption is not merely a tech challenge, it is a leadership challenge. Leaders must develop AI-first capabilities, establish clear governance, and foster digital culture. Hospitality leaders are increasingly challenged to integrate AI strategies in a way that supports people, not replaces them [4] [5].

Managing Demographic and Generational Shifts

Millennials and Gen Z continue to dominate hospitality's talent pool—with distinct expectations around flexibility, purpose, and digital fluency. Leaders must adapt career planning, embrace generational diversity, and encourage lifelong learning. In practice, many hospitality operators are responding with wage adjustments and more flexible scheduling policies [6].

Prioritizing Employee Mental Health and Well-Being

Mental health remains a critical concern: a majority of organizations now recognize it as a top priority, connected to both employee resilience and retention [7] [8]. Leadership that visibly supports well-being—through programs, policies, and culture—makes a distinct difference in workplace morale and sustainability.



Driving Skills-Based Hiring, Reskilling, and Retention

Rapid change demands continuous learning. Leaders must embrace skills-based hiring, reskilling as a cultural norm, and deploy AI-enabled learning tools. Lifelong development is emerging as both a retention and performance strategy [9] [10].

Embedding Adaptive Leadership Frameworks

Adaptive leadership—using frameworks that unify head, heart, and hands—helps organizations pivot in complex environments. These approaches promote clarity of intent, emotional resilience, and distributed leadership [11]] [12].

Hospitality-Specific Applications

The hospitality industry offers compelling examples of leadership-driven outcomes: AI-enabled operations are reducing friction and turnover, wellness programming is deepening cultural engagement, and digital transformations now command strategic priority in many organizations [5] [6] [13].

Measuring Leadership Impact

Leadership must be measured beyond profit—through employee engagement, collaboration effectiveness, adaptability, and well-being. Organizations that lead with empathy and foresight report better performance across these dimensions [14].

Leadership as the Multiplier

Leadership has always defined culture and purpose. In 2025, it also determines whether organizations can adapt to disruption and sustain growth. The most successful leaders balance human skills with strategic foresight, integrate AI while keeping people at the center, prioritize well-being, and build adaptive organizations. For hospitality, this is the ultimate differentiator—guest experience, employee loyalty, and resilience all flow from leadership.

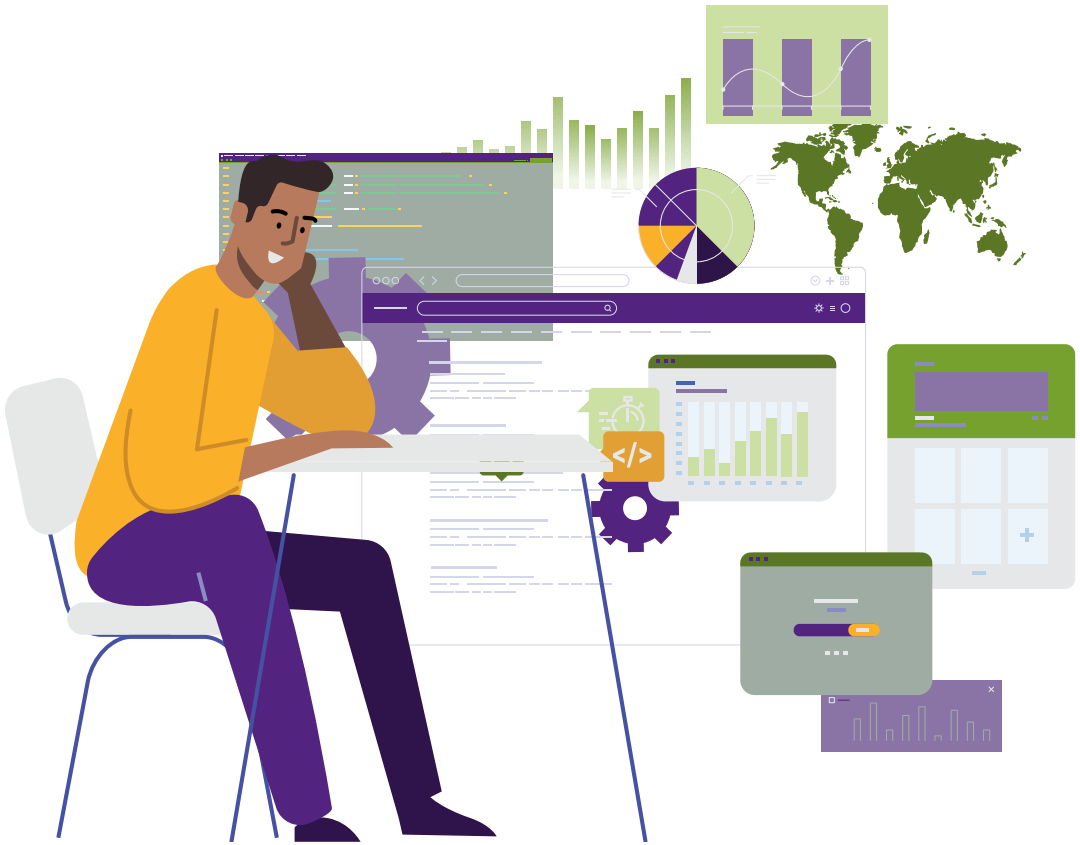
Key Takeaways

- Leadership multiplies impact: Soft skills underpin culture; leadership makes adaptability real.
- AI is a leadership issue: Success hinges on clear governance, human-centered integration, and trust.
- Generational shifts demand agility: Leaders must tailor pathways to evolving career expectations.
- Well-being is non-negotiable: Leaders who prioritize mental health foster stronger cultures.
- Reskilling advances retention: Learning investments affirm purpose and future-readiness.
- Adaptive leadership excels: Frameworks that integrate emotional and strategic dimensions drive resilience.
- Hospitality proves the case: Real-world programs and AI initiatives show measurable leadership impact.

CASE STUDY:

Milestone: Leadership Defines Culture and Organizational Purpose

When Anil and Benu Aggarwal founded Milestone, their goal extended beyond building a successful business: they aimed to create a culture where people could thrive both professionally and personally. From the outset, they viewed leadership practices as the central lever for shaping organizational culture.



The Milestone Culture: Seven Core Values

- Truly Care about those we touch - listen, empathize and act
- Concern Ourselves with what we can control and improve
- Grow and Adapt discover, learn, share
- Define the Need and create the solution
- Solve Problems that matter- great solutions drive reward
- Find the Positive and convert challenges to opportunities
- Communicate- be clear, honest and impactful

These values have fostered long careers, encouraged returning “boomerang” employees, and built a reputation for customer focus, high performance, and innovation in hospitality technology.

Fostering Global Connection and Shared Purpose

With operations across the U.S., Mexico, Canada, Colombia, and India, Milestone strategically brings globally distributed teams together to create shared vision and purpose. These initiatives reduce the risk of siloed mindsets and create alignment across geographies.

Customer-Centricity Woven into the Fabric

Customer-first is not a slogan at Milestone—it is a structural and cultural imperative. Each quarterly all-hands closes with a reminder that "companies exist because customers buy products."

The company backs this up with practices:

- Real-time customer sentiments are shared with all customer-facing employees.
- Cross-functional Teams come together to resolve these friction points quickly.
- Biannual NPS surveys are tied to bonus compensation.
- Customer feedback loops are built into every stage of engagement.

This constant reinforcement ensures that responsiveness and innovation are embedded into product development and business strategy.

Career Pathing Reinforcing Core Values and Soft Skills

Milestone's approach to leadership extends beyond executives - it shapes how every employee sees their own growth. A structured career pathing framework with three core principles for all roles, including customer delight, high-performance culture, and staying ahead.

- Career pathing enables employees to take curated bold steps and develop soft and hard skills.
- Employees develop critical skills such as working across global talent through hands-on problem solving, cross-functional projects, and ownership of key initiatives. This follows a 70% experiential learning model, complemented by structured training programs.

Leaders are evaluated on both business outcomes and talent development, ensuring growth is tied to performance and cultural contribution.

Embedding Innovation and AI

Innovation has always been central to Milestone's success, and AI is now embedded into its core strategy:

- AI-infused workflows redesigned through 8-step AI transformation framework.
- AI enablement via an internal platform for AI-powered applications.
- AI upskilling with a mandatory AI curriculum that equips employees for an AI-first organization.

Investing in Internal and External Connection

Externally, Milestone frequently hosts partner events to gather feedback and align its innovation engine with real customer needs. Internally, team-building events, leadership exchanges, and conventions reinforce connection, shared purpose, celebrate wins, and addressing gaps and collaborating on solutions.

Sustaining Growth Through Culture

Looking ahead, Milestone sees innovation and customer-first culture as the twin imperatives for sustaining growth. But leadership behaviors and the foundational pillars—Managing Me, Managing the Organization, and Curating the Future—remaining at the core.

Key Takeaways

Leadership and Culture

1. Leaders must live the culture daily.
2. Inspire through purpose, not pressure.
3. Build a clear leadership pipeline.
4. Hold leaders accountable for developing talent.
5. Celebrate both personal and professional milestones.

Talent Development

6. Prioritize experiential learning for growth.
7. Use transparent career pathing to retain talent.

Customer-Centricity

8. Tie customer satisfaction to accountability.
9. Listen systematically to customers and partners.

Innovation and AI

10. Make AI adoption a requirement across all departments.

TREND 5:

The Mental Health Crisis in Hospitality: Implications for the Commercial Workforce

General Employment Trends in Mental Health

The global workforce is facing a profound and escalating mental health crisis. What was once considered a “well-being issue” has now become both an operational challenge and a financial imperative for employers. Across industries, the pressures of modern work reveal just how intertwined mental health is with productivity, retention, and business continuity.

Research shows that one in five workers experience a diagnosable mental health condition such as depression or anxiety each year [1]. Burnout has become endemic, with more than 60% of employees reporting regular symptoms that affect their performance and engagement [2] [3]. Younger workers, particularly Gen Z, carry the heaviest burden. Nearly 70% of them expect their employers to take an active role in supporting mental health and reducing workplace stress [4].

The implications are staggering. Untreated mental health conditions are estimated to cost U.S. employers more than $200 billion annually in absenteeism, turnover, and lost productivity [5] [6]. As a result, organizations are shifting their perspective. Mental health support is no longer viewed as a discretionary benefit, but rather as a core business continuity investment [7] [8].

This shift is also transforming leadership expectations. “Soft skills” such as empathy, active listening, communication, and the ability to recognize and respond to emotional well-being have evolved into “human skills”. These skills are now recognized as essential competencies for managing multigenerational teams and ensuring organizational resilience. [9] [10] [11]

Mental Health in the Hospitality Workforce

While mental health challenges are widespread, the hospitality sector faces an even sharper reality. Few industries combine such volatile demand cycles, irregular hours, constant guest-facing pressures, and financial instability. Hotel professionals often navigate conditions that leave them vulnerable to chronic stress and exhaustion.

The data is sobering. Eighty-five percent of hospitality professionals report experiencing poor mental health within the last year. More than half say they struggle with mental health while on the job, and nearly half have contemplated self-harm or suicide. Sixty-four percent of hotel managers report that burnout has directly caused resignations within their teams. [12] [13] [14] [15]

This is not only a human crisis but an organizational and economic one. High turnover, absenteeism, and declining service quality are all downstream effects of untreated mental health struggles. In an industry where guest experience and staff performance are inseparable, the consequences ripple across operations, reputation, and financial results.

Stressors Unique to the Hotel Sector

A combination of systemic stressors amplifies the mental health crisis in hotels. Economic pressures are a major factor, with wages lagging inflation and toxic workplace cultures also play a role. Inadequate management support, workplace harassment, and unrealistic service expectations can deepen the sense of isolation. Some researchers describe this as a “silent epidemic” within the sector. [17] [18]

Generational Dimensions of Mental Health

The crisis plays out differently across generations in the hotel workforce, and these differences matter for how leaders design support programs.

Gen Z is the most vulnerable. More than 60% are at high mental health risk, facing financial instability, uncertain career trajectories, and blurred boundaries between work and personal life. This generation is also more open about discussing mental health and expects transparent employer support, but they often collide with traditional management practices that prioritize guest satisfaction above employee care. [17] [21]

Millennials carry a different set of pressures. Often referred to as the “unluckiest generation,” they came of age during 9/11, the Great Recession, and now inflationary pressures. Nearly half report frequent stress and anxiety, shaped by student debt, housing costs, and the demands of balancing both children and aging parents. Flexible scheduling, family-centered benefits, and financial wellness resources are central to their expectations of employers. [22] [23] [24]

Gen X and Baby Boomers tend to report fewer diagnosed conditions, but many have internalized a “push through” mentality that suppresses acknowledgment of mental health struggles. These communication differences create friction in multi-generational teams. Younger colleagues may seek openness while older colleagues prefer privacy, leading to misunderstandings and cultural tensions. [25] [26]

What is shared across generations, however, is a sense of concern. Surveys show that 75% of hotel employees worry that their peers may be accessing harmful

mental health content while at work. The crisis is not isolated to one demographic, it cuts across the workforce [13] [12] [27] [28] [29] [30].

Pressures in Commercial Disciplines

While the entire hotel workforce feels the weight of this crisis, commercial disciplines, face unique stress dynamics because of their dual role. These professionals stand at the intersection of guest expectations and business performance, creating stress that blends service pressure with financial accountability.

For sales teams, the volatility of commission-based pay structures creates ongoing financial anxiety. Relationship management adds another layer: personal worth often becomes tied to client satisfaction, and rejection cycles can erode confidence. Travel demands, entertainment expectations, and irregular schedules only compound the challenge. [31] [32] [33] [34] [35]

Revenue managers carry the psychological burden of constant optimization. Every decision affects key performance indicators like RevPAR, ADR, and occupancy. With the rise of AI-driven tools, expectations for flawless results have only intensified. Many report “decision fatigue syndrome,” analysis paralysis, and perfectionist tendencies that lead to extended working hours and burnout. [36] [37] [38] [39]

Marketing professionals live under the dual weight of creativity and accountability. Tight campaign timelines, seasonal pressures, and the need to respond instantly to competitive or reputational challenges drive constant stress. The tension between creative freedom and ROI measurement creates impostor syndrome, particularly among younger professionals tasked with producing results under the scrutiny of digital platforms. [40] [41] [42] [43]

Distribution professionals often serve as intermediaries between guest-facing teams and corporate objectives. The constant balancing act—ensuring revenue optimization without eroding guest satisfaction—creates unique cross-functional tension. The rapid pace of technology adoption, from CRMs to AI-driven distribution platforms, adds an additional layer of pressure [44] [45] [46] [47].

Solutions

Addressing these challenges requires both universal and role-specific interventions. Across the board, hotel companies must normalize open dialogue about mental health, invest in manager training, and ensure access to 24/7 crisis intervention systems. Redesigning work to address burnout, workload equity, and scheduling predictability should be a strategic priority.

Sales teams benefit from financial wellness programs and clearer boundaries around travel and client entertainment. Revenue managers need training in data-boundary setting and coping strategies for decision fatigue. Marketing professionals require creative resilience programs that balance performance expectations with innovation. Distribution professionals need consistent technology training and realistic adoption timelines to reduce stress.

Industry-wide models already exist. Initiatives like The Burnt Chef Project and Mind the Bar Foundation provide sector-specific Employee Assistance Programs tailored to the realities of hospitality. Organizations like HSMAI can play a vital role in sharing these best practices

and embedding mental health as a core leadership competency across the industry.

Mental health in hospitality is a structural crisis that threatens workforce sustainability, business continuity, and, in many cases, lives. For commercial disciplines, where the pressures of financial accountability, creativity, and guest service collide, the risks are even more acute.

The industry faces a choice. Without intervention, turnover, service decline, and preventable tragedies will continue. With targeted, role-specific, and generationally sensitive solutions, hospitality can not only alleviate the crisis but also lead the way in workforce well-being, building healthier, more resilient, and more commercially successful organizations.

Key Takeaways

- Position mental health as a strategic business priority, not just an HR concern.
- Provide predictable scheduling windows and protect focus time during high-stress operational cycles.
- Train managers in Mental Health First Aid and equip them with clear playbooks for conversations and crisis response.
- Tailor mental health supports specific commercial roles: financial wellness for sales, decision fatigue training for revenue managers, creative resilience for marketers, and tech training for distribution teams.
- Leverage industry-specific resources like HSMAI programs, the Burnt Chef Project, and Mind the Bar Foundation to accelerate adoption.
- Build cross-generational support systems, blending digital-first tools for younger employees with traditional support valued by older colleagues.
- Foster a culture where mental health conversations are normalized, stigma is removed, and employee well-being is linked directly to organizational success.

EXECUTIVE SPOTLIGHT:

Louis Zameryka Co-Founder of Alively and Former HSMAI Board Member

Wellness as the Foundation for Agile, Resilient Workforces

Louis Zameryka has long been a passionate voice for health and well-being. After a successful leadership career at Booking, he is now shaping his next chapter as a change agent and thought leader in employee wellness. Lou believes wellness is not just a personal pursuit, it is a key driver of career success and organizational resilience. Through his work and his ongoing commitment to HSMAI and travel wellness initiatives, Lou continues to guide our community on its journey of self-development and leadership growth.

Q: Lou, how should organizations think differently about health and wellness?

Louis Zameryka: Too often, companies equate wellness with health benefits, fitness stipends, gym memberships, or a monthly newsletter. These are reactive supports, not transformative ones. Health benefits address issues once they've already happened.

Wellness is something different. It's about cultivating daily habits that prevent burnout, sustain resilience, and help people bring their best selves to work. Leaders need to stop thinking only in terms of programs and start thinking about habit transformation.

Q: What's in it for companies to create a culture of wellness?

Louis Zameryka: Yes, there are HR metrics—employee engagement, absenteeism, cost of claims. But the deeper payoff is a more agile, resilient workforce. Employees who know how to sustain energy, manage stress, and build healthy habits are more adaptable in times of change. That leads not only to higher engagement and stronger retention, but also to teams that perform consistently, even in disruptive environments. Companies can encourage this shift through education, coaching, or technology. Platforms like Alively are one example, giving employees practical ways to build new habits and measure progress. But what matters most is mindset: treating wellness as foundational, not optional.

Q: How do leaders themselves shape the wellness culture inside their organizations?

Louis Zameryka: Leaders set the tone. That's why I talk about Vitalience—a blend of vitality and resilience. Too often, executives get caught in grind culture, sacrificing their own health for performance. But if leaders don't care for themselves, they can't sustainably care for their teams. It's the oxygen mask analogy: you have to put yours on first. Leaders who invest in their own wellness show up with more energy and clarity and that example multiplies across their teams.

Q: For organizations just starting out, what's the first step?

Louis Zameryka: Employees today are already aware of wellness and motivated to make positive changes. The real barrier is the "how." With so many possible solutions—apps, diets, fitness plans—it can feel overwhelming. That's where company support matters most.

Start by helping employees take small, manageable steps and guiding them through the habit-forming process. Teach them about habit stacking, layering one small action onto another until it becomes second nature. When organizations create the structure for incremental progress, employees gain confidence and momentum.

Over time, those small steps compound into meaningful change: healthier, more engaged employees and a workforce better equipped to navigate disruption. The message is simple: wellness is built one step at a time, but leaders must provide the tools and support to begin the journey.

Lou reminds us that wellness is a critical enabler of leadership and career development. His service to the HSMAI community has been a steady reminder that leaders who look after themselves are better prepared to support others.

For today's commercial leaders, the takeaway is clear: if we want to build the next generation of agile, resilient talent, we must also prioritize their wellness journey. Platforms and practices like Alively can help, but the true shift is cultural. Wellness, when embraced, becomes both a driver of performance and a foundation for long-term success

TREND 6:

Return to Office (RTO) and Hybrid Work Models: Adapting to New Ways of Working

The conversation around return to office (RTO) has entered yet another phase. While headlines often suggest a wholesale shift back to office life, Gallup's latest data paints a more nuanced picture: hybrid work has stabilized as the dominant model for remote-capable employees, and despite employer pressure, the movement toward "back to the office" has been modest at best. [1]

Gallup's Q2 2025 research highlights that the percentage of U.S. remote-capable employees working hybrid declined slightly from 55% to 51% in recent quarters, while both fully on-site and fully remote arrangements inched up by just two points each. This is hardly a sweeping win for back-to-office advocates. In fact, since 2022, work location trends have remained largely steady, suggesting hybrid has cemented itself as the durable middle ground. [1]

That said, important shifts in structure and sentiment are taking place:

- Hybrid employees now average 2.3 days in the office per week, up from 2.1 in 2022. However, all of that increase occurred in 2023; there has been no movement in the past year. [2]
- Even fully on-site employees are often working with distributed teams with both onsite and remote direct report teammates— up from 13% in 2023 to 27% in 2025 — highlighting that "being in the office" no longer guarantees everyone is physically together. [2]
- Control is evolving, fewer workers say they determine their own hybrid schedule (34% in 2025 vs. 37% in 2024). Instead, more decisions are being made by teams (35%) or managers (31%). Importantly, Gallup found employees view team-determined schedules as just as fair as self-determined ones and significantly less likely to create burnout. [2]

Impact on Midweek Business Patterns

The hospitality industry is experiencing the effects of these shifts firsthand. CoStar data confirms that Wednesday occupancies remain approximately 7% below 2019 levels, showing midweek demand has yet to fully rebound. [3] Office attendance patterns increasingly mirror these hotel demand curves: strong midweek presence but a softer Monday and Friday.

This alignment underscores a clear linkage: RTO policies directly influence the recovery of midweek business travel. As more companies formalize in-office requirements, hospitality leaders can anticipate gradual improvement. Still, a return to pre-pandemic baselines may be years away, meaning revenue management leaders must account for new demand curves in their forecasting models. [3]

Changing Rules of Engagement in Business Development

For commercial leaders, RTO is reshaping how client relationships are cultivated. With fewer executives in the office, traditional sales calls are far less effective. Instead, sales teams are leaning heavily on orchestrated engagement strategies:

- Trade shows and industry conferences, where multiple decision-makers can be reached in one setting
- Executive roundtables and curated client events, offering depth and thought leadership.
- Destination immersion trips and hospitality-hosted experiences, designed to build emotional connection and trust.

This "new engagement economy" requires sellers to be equally skilled in digital outreach and live event engagement, blending virtual touchpoints with in-person relationship building. Talent development strategies must prioritize adaptability, digital fluency, and consultative skills across channels.

Internal Meetings and Group Travel

One of the most sustained byproducts of hybrid work is the rise of intentional internal gatherings. Organizations continue to invest in bringing their own teams together through strategy offsites, leadership meetings, and training events. This has created a steady stream of group business for hotels, particularly those with versatile meeting space and environments conducive to collaboration.

Properties positioned as "collaboration hubs" are benefiting most, capturing demand for gatherings that replace the informal office interactions lost in hybrid models. This trend underscores the continued importance of group travel as a backbone of commercial recovery. [4]

Equity, Trust, and Opportunity in a Hybrid World

Hybrid work offers flexibility, but it also magnifies the importance of trust, fairness, and visibility. Gallup research underscores that trust is the Achilles' heel of remote and hybrid arrangements: only 54% of managers strongly agree they trust their remote employees to be productive, and just 57% of employees say they feel trusted when working remotely. [2]

Four simple management practices improve trust by nearly 30 points[2]:

- Providing timely, consistent communication regardless of work location.
- Building a strong sense of team community across locations.
- Holding employees accountable to clear performance expectations.
- Ensuring equal access to feedback and development opportunities.

For hospitality organizations, the takeaway is direct: time in the office must feel valuable. Employees are more likely to accept RTO mandates when they perceive fairness, transparency, and developmental opportunity. Conversely, when mandates lack clarity or equity, disengagement grows.

Equity concerns also extend to career advancement. Employees spending more time in-office often enjoy greater access to leadership, informal feedback, and mentorship opportunities creating

advantages that are difficult to replicate remotely. Marketing and commercial executives in industries like advertising and hospitality note this “visibility premium” is shaping the career trajectories of high-potential talent. Leaders must remain intentional about ensuring remote and hybrid employees are not disadvantaged in terms of exposure, development, and growth opportunities.

Looking Ahead

The long-term equilibrium of RTO remains unsettled, but several trends are clear:

- Hybrid is here to stay. Most companies are converging on three to four in-office days per week as the standard. [5]
- Midweek demand will remain structurally altered. Hospitality leaders must adapt revenue strategies to flatter curves until office and travel demand fully normalize. [3]
- Sales and marketing engagement has been permanently redefined. Orchestrated events and multi-channel outreach are now critical for maintaining client visibility and loyalty.
- Internal meetings will sustain group travel. Hotels that position themselves as destinations for collaboration will continue to capture this business.
- Trust is the differentiator. Leaders who pair in-office expectations with intentional efforts to build communication, accountability, and fairness will win both talent loyalty and business results.

Key Takeaways

For Sales & Business Development Leader

- Traditional office visits are no longer a reliable strategy; trade shows, curated client events, and digital engagement are essential.
- Talent must be trained to deliver relationship-building across multiple platforms and formats.

For Revenue Management Leaders

- Midweek occupancies remain ~7% below 2019, requiring new forecasting assumptions. [3]
- Flexible promotions and distribution strategies will help offset demand volatility until patterns stabilize.

For Marketing Leaders

- Hybrid work remains a valued benefit, making fairness and trust critical in employer branding. [2]
- Marketing must amplify brand presence in industry forums, client events, and social storytelling where engagement now concentrates.

Across Commercial Disciplines

- RTO is not simply a workplace issue — it is reshaping the commercial ecosystem.
- Sales, marketing, and revenue management leaders must collaborate to align talent strategies with shifting patterns of work and travel.
- Hotel owners depend on this alignment to protect asset value and capture growth in a fundamentally redefined market.

By the Numbers: RTO & Hybrid Work (2025)

- 51% of remote-capable U.S. employees are hybrid (down from 55%) [1]
- 46% of hybrid employees' workweek is spent in the office (2.3 days) — unchanged since 2023 [2]
- 27% of fully on-site employees say their team is distributed across locations (up from 13% in 2023)
- 34% of employees say they set their own hybrid schedule (down from 37%) [2]
- 91% of employees view team-determined schedules as fair (vs. 73% when employer mandates it) [2]
- 7% gap in Wednesday hotel occupancies compared to 2019 levels (CoStar, 2025) [3]
- 54% of managers strongly agree they trust remote employees to be productive [2][4]
- 57% of employees feel trusted by their manager when working remotely [2]

Hybrid is here to stay - but trust and fairness will define its success.

While work patterns have stabilized since 2022, the real differentiator isn't where employees work, but whether they feel trusted, supported, and treated fairly. For commercial leaders, the challenge is clear: align sales, marketing, and revenue strategies with shifting work patterns while building a culture of equity and accountability that unlocks both talent loyalty and business growth.

CASE STUDY:

Rebuilding Culture Through Return-to-Office at Preferred Travel Group

Context

Michelle Woodley, President of Preferred Travel Group and past chair of the HSMAI Foundation Board of Directors, has taken a deeply personal and intentional approach to shaping her company's Return-to-Office (RTO) strategy. At a time when many organizations have treated RTO as a compliance issue, Woodley has emphasized culture, trust, and development — aligning directly with the themes of equity and engagement outlined in this report. This is now viewed as the company's "In Office Philosophy" vs. a return to the past.

Approach

Woodley recognized that simply mandating days in the office would not rebuild culture or unlock employee potential. Instead, she framed Preferred Travel Group's in Office Philosophy around three guiding principles:

- **Purposeful Presence**: Every in-office day has a clear value proposition. Employees come together for collaboration, cross-functional learning, and relationship-building that cannot be replicated on Zoom.
- **Fairness and Flexibility**: While expectations are consistent, Woodley and her leadership team worked to balance organizational needs with personal circumstances, reinforcing fairness as a cultural cornerstone.
- **Leadership Visibility**: Recognizing the "visibility premium" highlighted in Gallup's research, she and her senior team made deliberate efforts to be present, accessible, and engaged on in-office days. As Woodley puts it, "As leaders, we can't ask people to show up if we're not showing up ourselves. Visibility matters, and it has to start at the top."

Impact

The results mirror the broader findings of this report:

- Employees at Preferred Travel Group view RTO as an opportunity to strengthen their careers, not just a compliance requirement.
- Cross-team collaboration has improved, enhancing problem-solving and innovation.
- The company has seen a steady increase in employee trust scores, reflecting the link between fairness, communication, and productivity.

Link to Hospitality Commercial Leadership

Preferred Travel Group's experience illustrates how intentional RTO planning can become a lever for commercial performance. By creating collaboration hubs in the office, the company has mirrored the very same patterns driving group travel recovery across the hospitality sector. Just as hotels benefit from intentional team gatherings, Preferred has benefited from structured in-person engagement that builds both culture and capability.

Leadership Lesson

Woodley's example underscores a central takeaway: RTO success is less about counting days in the office and more about creating meaningful experiences when teams are together. As she explains, "RTO is not about going back to the way things were — it's about creating a workplace that supports collaboration, growth, and long-term success as an ongoing philosophy." Her personal, thoughtful approach demonstrates the role of leaders in modeling fairness, investing in visibility, and aligning workplace design with commercial outcomes.

CASE STUDY:

Sojern: Redefining Remote-First Work for a Global Commercial Workforce

When the world shifted in 2020, many companies scrambled to adopt remote work. For Sojern, a travel marketing platform with teams and clients spread across the globe, the change became an opportunity to permanently rethink how work happens. What began as a pandemic response has evolved into a defining element of the company's culture: Sojernista First.

This philosophy is grounded in flexibility, inclusivity, and genuine connection—recognizing that employee needs vary by role, team, and location. With more than 70% of employees working remotely or in hybrid setups, Sojern has built a framework that balances performance accountability with culture, belonging, and career growth.

Building the Sojernista First Workplace

The Sojernista First philosophy rests on five values:

- Provide Flexibility and Accessibility
- Celebrate Differences & Embrace Inclusion
- Activate Global Collaboration
- Enable Continuous Learning & Development
- Create Work-Life Harmony

From the start, leadership focused on embedding these values into daily practices. Investment in tools (Asana, Slack, Small Improvements), programs (SoJourney Mentorship, Culture Club, Bonus.ly recognition), and global offsites ensures that remote employees are not just connected but deeply engaged.

This investment has paid off: Sojern boasts a 4.4 Glassdoor rating, 91% CEO approval, and retention rates significantly stronger than the tech-industry average.

> *"Remote-first is not just about where we work--it's about how we work together, stay connected, and ensure every Sojernista feels seen, valued, and empowered to grow."*
>
> – Noreen Henry, Chief Revenue Officer, Sojern

Aligning Goals and Accountability in a Virtual Environment

Sojern uses a holistic performance framework where quarterly goals cascade from leadership down to every employee. Alignment happens through the Small Improvements platform, which provides:

- Clear connection between personal goals and company priorities
- Visibility across teams for transparency and accountability
- Quarterly scoring and structured feedback loops
- One-on-one meeting management tools for alignment over time

Leadership reinforces this framework through quarterly reviews, skip-level meetings, and transparent scoring of their own goals. This modeling cascades accountability across the organization.

Driving Collaboration Without Micromanagement

Sojern balances empowerment with oversight:

- Cross-Functional Teams use project charters, shared Asana boards, and Slack channels to own initiatives.
- Executive Sponsors provide guidance without daily interference, stepping in only when needed.
- Weekly Updates and Leadership Reviews ensure visibility into progress, blockers, and resource needs.

This approach ensures global collaboration thrives without slowing down innovation

Communication as a Strategic Asset

Remote-first companies risk misalignment and information silos. Sojern counters this through a disciplined communication strategy:

- Virtual Kick-Offs each year align the company on vision, strategy, and financial priorities.
- Weekly Leadership Reviews track business and technology team performance.
- Bi-Quarterly All Hands combine performance updates with open Q&A.
- Weekly Newsletters spotlight updates from different business areas, reinforcing cross-team accountability.
- Sojern Hub serves as a searchable intranet for knowledge sharing

In 2023, Sojern introduced Project Kondo—a guide to “tidying up” meetings. Inspired by Marie Kondo, it asks whether each meeting brings value. Employees are guided on when to use Slack, email, or live discussions, improving efficiency across time zones and functions.

Investing in Leaders at All Levels

Recognizing the different needs of emerging and established leaders, Sojern built tailored programs:

- Emerging Leaders benefit from leadership essentials training, succession coaching, mentorship via SoJourney, and access to Easy Llama’s compliance and learning library.
- Established Leaders participate in executive coaching focused on strategy and advanced leadership skills.
- All Leaders are expected to model Sojern’s values—embracing inclusion, accountability, and celebrating wins.

This dual focus ensures a strong pipeline of future leaders while continuing to elevate senior leadership.

Metrics that Matter

Sojern measures the success of its remote-first approach across culture, productivity, and retention:

- **Culture & Satisfaction**: Employee engagement scores consistently exceed industry benchmarks.
- **Retention**: Average tenure of 4 years, with 31% of employees staying 5+ years. Attrition rates remain below industry averages.
- **Productivity**: +10% YoY increase in SMB accounts per Client Success Manager, +15% YoY enterprise accounts per seller, +8% YoY new SMB wins per seller.
- **Recognition**: Sojern named a Best Place to Work (Built In 2024, 2025).

Culture & Connection in a Remote World

Sojern builds belonging through intentional culture initiatives:

- Culture Club & Social Committees organize global and local events.
- S-Groups (ERGs) support women (SoEmpowered), caregivers (SoCare), young professionals (SoConnected), LGBTQIA+ employees (SoProud), wellness (SoWell), and community service (Sojern Gives Back).
- Recognition Programs like Bonus.ly reward peer-to-peer contributions.
- Leadership Engagement includes office visits, team offsites, Q&As, and conference dinners.

The result: employees feel connected, supported, and empowered, no matter where they work.

Top 10 Learnings for Hospitality Companies

1. **Make flexibility a philosophy, not a policy** – adapt to roles, locations, and individual needs.
2. **Embed values into tools and daily practices** – values must live beyond posters.
3. **Align goals through transparent frameworks** – cascade priorities and share leadership scores.
4. **Empower cross-functional teams** – combine autonomy with light-touch executive sponsorship.
5. **Codify communication** – define when to use Slack, email, or meetings to avoid overload.
6. **Invest differently in emerging vs. established leaders** – design programs for both.
7. **Celebrate culture actively** – use ERGs, recognition tools, and social committees to build connections.
8. **Track meaningful metrics** – measure culture, productivity, and retention, not just output.
9. **Model accountability at the top** – leaders must be transparent about their own performance.
10. **Foster human connection** – intentional offsites, skip-levels, and mentoring offset remote isolation.

TREND 7:

An Update on Gig and Fractional Employment in Hospitality

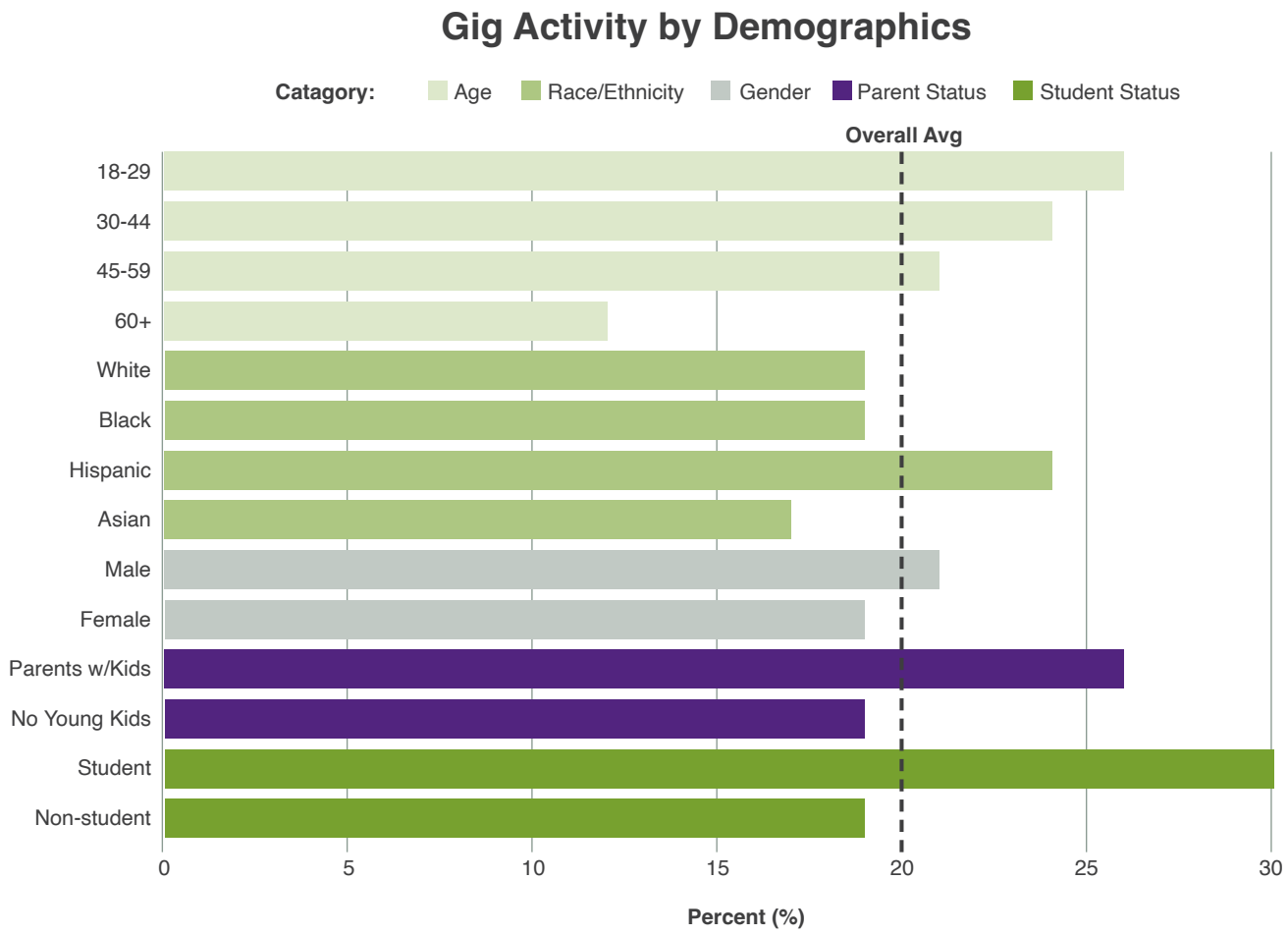
Gig and fractional employment are now strategic imperatives in hospitality. Rather than reactive solutions, they now represent core talent strategies, especially within commercial functions like revenue management, distribution, sales, and marketing. The industry's need for agility, expertise, and cost control particularly for middle-of-the-P&L roles has intensified, spurring the shift toward flexible, specialized workforce models for on property sales and revenue management support [1].

Macro Labor Trends: From Flexibility to Strategic Advantage

In 2025, nearly 36% of U.S. workers participate in gig or freelance roles, with projections continuing to climb. Hospitality has integrated fractional talent in response to persistent labor shortages, rising skill requirements, and a workforce seeking autonomy, diversity, and purpose. The gig economy's maturation means hotels, management companies, and travel brands no longer see temporary or project-based work as a stopgap, but as a foundation for operational resilience and competitive advantage [2].

- **Agility and Access**: Fractional hiring lets operators scale expertise for seasonal surges, new property launches, or strategic pivots—quickly onboarding specialized consultants, sales leaders, and revenue managers as business needs dictate [3].
- **Retention and Well-being**: Operators focused on flexibility, learning opportunities, and supportive cultures retain more talent, while gig and fractional roles attract professionals valuing autonomy and balanced work-life arrangements [2].
- **Innovation in Sourcing**: Recruitment now mirrors marketing, with digital platforms, social media, and flexible benefits—such as remote and hybrid engagement—central to attracting top talent [4].

Demographics of the Gig Worker



Source: Data from The Federal Reserve: https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2024-report-economic-well-being-us-households-202505.pdf

Hospitality's Embrace of Gig and Fractional Employment

Operators have shifted from fighting talent shortages with short-term fixes to embedding fractional models deeply into their workforce strategies.

- **Role Evolution**: Hospitality organizations increasingly use fractional executives and team members (e.g., revenue managers, sales specialists, digital marketers) for multiple properties or projects, delivering targeted expertise without permanent overheads [5].
- **Stop-Gap and Strategic Choice**: Fractional roles now provide both immediate fill-ins and long-term commercial solutions, enabling hotels to remain competitive even during periods of transition or recruiting cycles [6].
- **Cost Optimization Without Charts**: Owners and operators prioritize controlling costs related to client acquisition, sales enablement, and distribution. Fractional leaders in these commercial areas deliver high ROI through expert execution at often one-third the investment of full-time hires. Business process outsourcing extends this model, offering scalable, market-ready solutions for commercial tasks [5].

Employee Experience and Development

- **Personalized Talent Marketing**: Just as guest marketing has become more sophisticated, so has talent marketing. Operators now "market" roles for seasoned experts, leveraging culture, training, and remote work as differentiators [2].
- **Mentorship and Upskilling**: Fractional experts provide critical support and role modeling for developing internal teams, enhancing career growth and organizational loyalty [3].

The Strategic Role of Fractional Talent in the Commercial Sector

These commercial functions stand at the forefront of fractionalization:

- Revenue Management: Properties optimize inventory, pricing, and distribution strategy by engaging fractional revenue managers who work across several properties and brands, bringing market insights without permanent overhead [7].
- Sales and Marketing: Gig and fractional sales leaders drive go-to-market campaigns, repositioning, and active selling initiatives for new or transitioning properties. They facilitate high performance, delivering results while allowing operators to remain flexible on cost and execution timelines [5].
- Distribution and Digital Strategy: Remote-enabled fractional teams support cross-channel distribution, analytics, and marketing performance, leveraging technology to streamline execution and reporting, and boosting employee engagement and retention [8].

Outsourcing and BPO: Enabling the Gig and Fractional Model

Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) in hospitality has expanded from traditional back-office functions to center-stage commercial roles:

- **24/7 Support and Tech Innovation**: TMCs, OTAs, hotels, and airlines outsource guest experience, reservations, loyalty, and finance—leveraging BPO partners for global multilingual support, analytics, crisis management, and technology implementation [9].
- **Market Impact**: BPO adoption is forecast to double through 2030 within hospitality, enabling properties to focus internal teams on strategic growth and guest experience—even as the external workforce model delivers cost savings and scalability [10].
- **Specialized Hubs**: Talent marketplaces and global sourcing platforms optimize recruitment of fractional and gig professionals, reducing friction and time-to-hire for operators seeking just-in-time expertise across commercial domains [11].

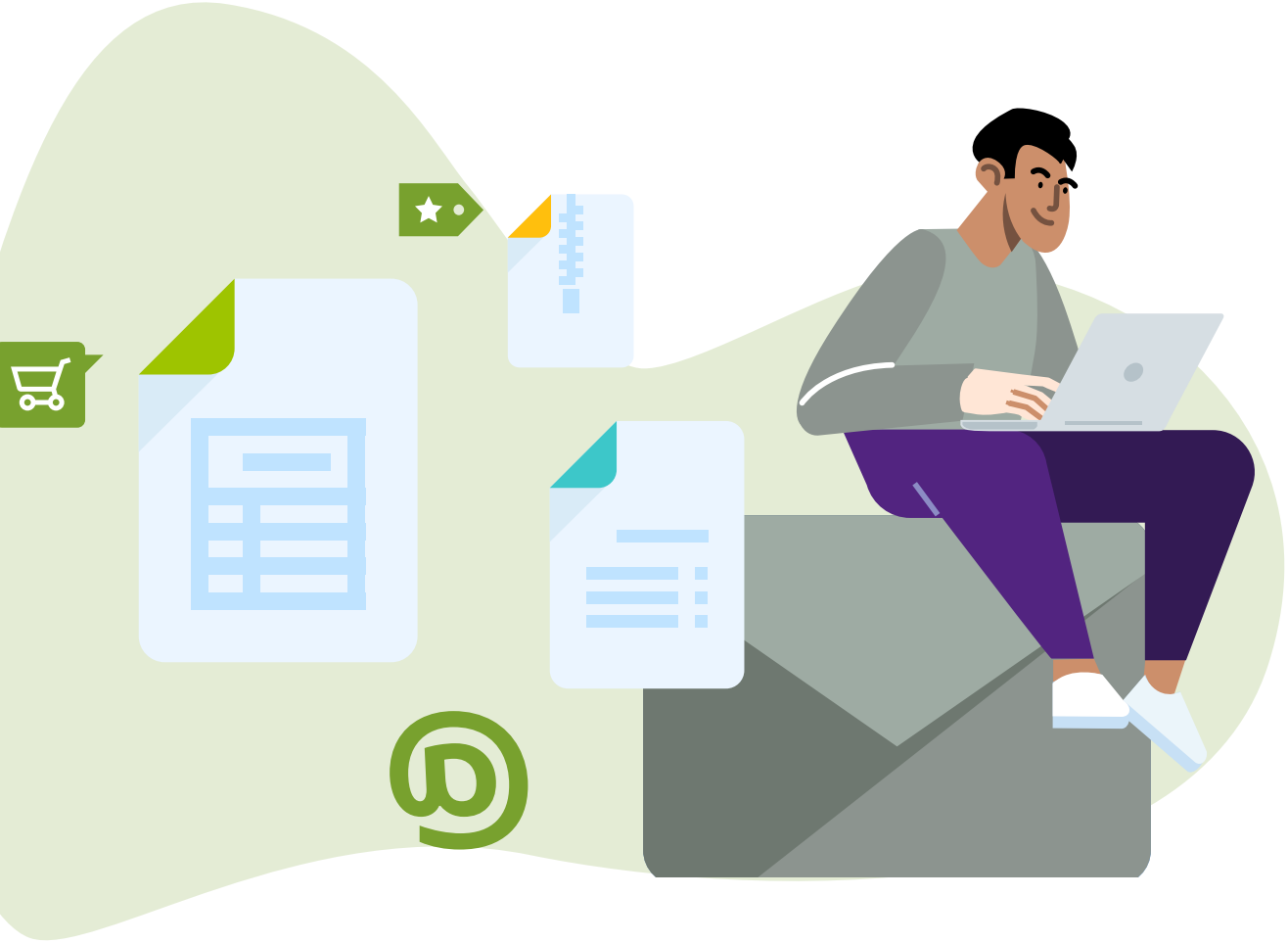
Strategic Imperatives: 2025 and Beyond

Looking to the future, gig and fractional talent will drive ongoing industry transformation:

- **Employer Branding**: Flexible, autonomous, and project-driven opportunities are central to attracting and retaining commercial talent [2].
- **Digital Enablement**: Technology will continue to enable efficient, borderless collaboration, with AI-driven tools supporting project management, analytics, onboarding, and team integration for both internal and external talent [7].
- **Collaboration and Innovation**: Cross-functional teams—comprised of full-time, part-time, fractional, and freelance contributors—will be orchestrated for maximum innovation and business sustainability [6].
- **Cost and Quality Focus**: The gig and fractional model will remain key to balancing cost optimization and access to best-in-class expertise, particularly for roles in revenue management, sales, distribution, and marketing [7].

EXECUTIVE INTERVIEW:

The Rise of Gig Talent in Hospitality Commercial Functions, A Conversation Across Marketing, Sales, and Revenue Management



As the hospitality industry reshapes itself in the wake of workforce disruptions, gig and flexible work models have taken root, no longer just for housekeeping or catering teams, but in high-value commercial roles. In marketing, sales, and revenue management, forward-thinking leaders are redefining the employer-employee relationship to better align with the shifting values of today's professionals: flexibility, autonomy, impact, and purpose.

To understand how this model works in practice, HSMAI spoke with three executives at the forefront of this shift:

- Kimberly Erwin, Principal, Lotus Marketing, sharing perspectives from a marketing lens
- Tammy Gillis, CEO & Founder, Gillis Consulting and Training, offering a sales team perspective
- Caryl Helsel, Founder & CEO, Dragonfly Strategists, bringing insights from revenue and advisory services

In addition to their leadership roles, all three executives are long-standing, active contributors to HSMAI. Through years of service, ongoing partnership, and a shared commitment to elevating the commercial profession, they have supported HSMAI's mission as speakers, mentors, and advocates for commercial excellence. Their dedication to the HSMAI community and its events reflects not only their belief in continuous learning, but also their passion for investing in the next generation of commercial talent.

1. Why Gig Talent Is on the Rise

Gig talent is gaining traction not only as a solution to labor gaps, but as a deliberate strategy for high-performance commercial outcomes. For employers, fractional models create access to senior-level talent—often with brand, owner, and investor experience—at a fraction of the cost of full-time headcount. This is especially compelling for ownership groups and operators looking to scale efficiently or build new capabilities without the overhead of permanent roles.

Just as importantly, these firms are led by seasoned industry leaders who don't just deploy talent—they develop it. Ongoing training, structured development plans, and hands-on mentorship ensure that teammates aren't just executing—they're evolving.

"This isn't just flexible labor, it's strategic leadership," says Caryl Helsel. "We bring in high performers and surround them with the systems, values, and coaching they need to thrive. That benefits the client today and builds a stronger commercial bench for tomorrow."

There's also a growing truth that today's employees hire their boss. Talented commercial professionals are actively seeking out leaders they admire—leaders who are respected in the industry, empathetic in their approach, and committed to talent development. Working with firms like Lotus, Dragonfly, and Gillis means aligning with trusted brands and visionary leaders who elevate individual growth.

"We've built a culture of trust, excellence, and belonging," says Kimberly Erwin. "That's what attracts top-tier hotel marketers who are seeking meaningful, balanced careers."

2. Culture, Connection & Leadership from Anywhere

All three organizations emphasized that gig work doesn't mean disconnected work. Each has invested in systems and rituals that fuel culture, cohesion, and a sense of belonging.

At Gillis Consulting and Training, Tammy Gillis implemented a POD model where each team member is part of a tightly knit group led by a Director of Sales. "We built in rhythms of weekly meetings, ongoing coaching, and real-time collaboration, so even in a flexible model, the accountability and camaraderie are strong."

Caryl Helsel adds, "We live our core values. They guide hiring, performance reviews, and everyday decisions. Empathy is at the center. In remote work, culture isn't a perk, it's the infrastructure."

"We are deeply committed to helping the hospitality industry evolve, and that includes supporting organizations like HSMAI that share that mission," says Kimberly Erwin. "Contributing to HSMAI is part of how we lead, learn, and give back to the commercial community."

3. Recruiting & Retaining Top Commercial Talent

These leaders are selective and highly effective in hiring. None rely solely on job postings; instead, they nurture pipelines of aligned professionals long before a role opens.

“We manage our talent pipeline like we manage our sales funnel,” noted Tammy Gillis. “Our people come to us through referrals and culture-first recruiting. Once they’re here, we surround them with growth, recognition, and real support.”

Retention, they agreed, is earned by delivering superior experience, not just superior compensation. At Dragonfly, that includes generous benefits (even for part-timers), flexible work from anywhere, and clear career paths with room to grow.

4. Technology as the Enabler of Gig Success

All three leaders attribute their ability to scale gig-based teams to thoughtful technology choices. Tools like Microsoft Teams, SharePoint, Salesforce, and Workstory create transparent workflows, real-time performance feedback, and connection across time zones.

At Dragonfly Strategists, the team uses Rippling for HR, benefits, and training, and tracks billable hours and role competencies across 45+ hospitality systems. They regularly meet with technology partners to stay current with updates and system capabilities, ensuring team readiness and client value.

At Gillis, Salesforce drives CRM and performance oversight, while POD structures and templates support efficient knowledge transfer and collaboration.

At Lotus, platforms like Accelo and Workstory support performance tracking, accountability, and visibility. Microsoft Teams anchors communication and connection, while curated training tools and development plans support growth at every level.

“We’re high-tech and high-touch,” said Kimberly Erwin. “Technology helps us bridge distances and deepen performance. But what matters most is how we use it to empower, support, and develop our people.”

A Roadmap for Employers

Gig talent is becoming a cornerstone of commercial strategy in hospitality. For employers, the model delivers agility, affordability, and access to high-impact talent. For team members, it offers flexibility, personal growth, and the opportunity to work with some of the most respected leaders in the industry.

What unites these organizations is not just operational excellence but human-centered leadership. In a world where performance, purpose, and flexibility must coexist, Kimberly, Caryl, and Tammy are showing the industry what’s possible when you build teams for the future.

“These are the leaders of today and tomorrow,” says Tammy Gillis. “They lead with vision, values, and empathy and that’s what inspires exceptional performance, no matter the model.”

Their continued engagement with HSMAI, their generous contributions of time, and their ongoing sponsorship of programs that foster commercial leadership exemplify the type of future-ready leadership the industry needs now more than ever.

Practical Advice for Employers

To attract and retain top-tier commercial talent in today's environment, traditional employers must reframe their approach. Here are key recommendations from these leaders:

- **Reframe the Employer Value Proposition**: Today's talent is motivated by purpose, growth, and flexibility. Define how your organization supports these values.
- **Invest in Systems and Tools**: Implement platforms that support communication (e.g., Microsoft Teams), CRM and performance tracking (e.g., Salesforce, Accelo), and real-time feedback (e.g., Workstory). Use platforms like Rippling for onboarding and continuous training.
- **Support Learning and Upskilling**: Offer micro-learning sessions, professional coaching, access to topic-specific modules, and consistent engagement with new system capabilities through vendor partnerships.
- **Define Success Clearly**: Ensure roles have transparent KPIs and success metrics. Align performance measurement with meaningful outcomes—not just activity.
- **Coach, Don't Just Manage**: Develop leadership teams that inspire and grow talent, not just oversee work. Promote mentorship, internal mobility, and recognition.
- **Make Flexibility Intentional**: Provide structure through rhythms and routines but allow people to work when and where they do their best work.
- **Embed Empathy in Culture**: Recognize contributions, celebrate milestones, and create space for connection. Use practices like team challenges, buddy systems, and virtual coffee chats to humanize distributed work.
- **Focus on Fit and Alignment**: Hire based on values as much as skills. A well-aligned hire performs better and stays longer.

In short, hospitality companies who bring the heart of hospitality inward, treating team members with the same intentionality and care as they do their guests, won't just win the talent war. They'll redefine what great commercial leadership looks like.

TREND 8:

Employee Engagement: A Critical Barometer for Talent Retention and Business Success

In hospitality, we've long measured success through revenue performance and guest satisfaction. Yet, as leaders continue to acknowledge that people—not just product or place—ultimately deliver performance, employee engagement has become the true barometer of organizational health.

The challenge is stark. According to Gallup's 2024 State of the Global Workplace, employee engagement has fallen to historic lows, with only about one in five employees globally reporting that they are engaged in their work [1]. Even more concerning is the erosion of employee trust in their leaders and organizations [1]. In North America, this downward trend represents a significant business risk.

Traditional tools such as annual engagement surveys, later replaced by more frequent pulse surveys, have helped track sentiment. Yet they often fall short in today's dynamic environment [2]. In many hospitality companies, culture health is still not systematically measured—even though trust in leadership and culture strength have become the most powerful levers [3].

For boards and senior leaders, employee engagement is now recognized as mission-critical. The data is clear: engaged employees bring discretionary commitment to the willingness to go beyond baseline requirements to deliver superior guest experiences [4]. But trust is the foundation. When employees believe their leaders act with integrity and care about their well-being, engagement is sustained [4] [3].

Lessons for Employers

- Reframe engagement as a trust-driven business metric [1].
- Invest in frontline leaders: equipping managers with tools to foster confidence, trust, and recognition [1] [5].
- Close the "say/do gap": demonstrate that feedback leads to visible action [2].
- Prioritize belonging and well-being [6].
- Measure culture continuously with real-time sentiment systems [7].

Trust as the New Currency of Engagement

- Trust is the foundation [1].
- Engagement follows trust — employees who trust leaders are 4x more likely to be engaged [4].
- The “say/do gap” matters [2].
- Frontline leaders carry the weight [1] [5].
- For hospitality, trust = growth [3] [6].

Key Insight:

Trust is no longer a soft concept — it is a measurable business asset and the most critical driver of engagement today [1] [4] [6].

Key Takeaways

- Gallup data confirms engagement is at an all-time low [1] .
- Engagement is not about perks; it is about trust and discretionary commitment [4].
- Culture health and trust must be measured and managed rigorously [1] [6].
- Engagement is built at the team level [1] [3].
- Organizations that restore trust and link engagement to performance gain lasting advantage [4] [5].

EXECUTIVE SPOTLIGHT:

Rick Garlick on Building Engagement That Lasts

Rick Garlick, Ph.D., has dedicated his career to understanding what drives people to bring their best to work. A former and current board member of the **HSMAI Foundation** and a long-time volunteer leader within the HSMAI community, Rick has been a trusted voice on talent and engagement for decades. His research and consulting have helped organizations across industries strengthen culture, improve performance, and retain top talent. In this conversation, Rick shares practical advice for commercial leaders who want to unlock the power of engagement in their teams.

Q: Rick, you've often described engagement as a "three-legged stool." What do you mean by that?

Rick Garlick: Engagement is about balance. It rests on three essential factors:

- **Talent (Nature)**: Hire people who are naturally suited to their roles. Employees are most engaged when they can use their strengths every day.
- **Motivation (Nurture)**: Incentives, recognition, and growth opportunities sustain performance over time.
- **Service Culture (Systems)**: Policies and processes must empower employees rather than create obstacles. Alignment across functions is critical for productivity and customer satisfaction.

> *"Engagement isn't just about happy employees—it's about whether your systems, incentives, and hiring decisions set people up to succeed."*
>
> – Rick Garlick

Q: Annual surveys have long been the standard tool for measuring engagement. Do you see a shift happening?

Rick Garlick: Absolutely. Traditional surveys give snapshots, but they miss the daily rhythm of culture. New platforms, like Dr. Pelè Ugboajah's Sageful.AI, use real-time sentiment tracking and AI-enabled coaching. This gives leaders continuous visibility into organizational health and allows them to act before small issues become major problems.

Q: What advice do you have for leaders when it comes to listening to employees?

Rick Garlick: Never ask for feedback if you're not prepared to act on it. Too many companies collect data and then sit on it—that erodes trust. Share results quickly, act visibly, and only ask questions you can realistically address. Otherwise, you risk disengaging employees instead of engaging them.

Q: How do you connect engagement to tangible business outcomes?

Rick Garlick: Engagement drivers aren't "one size fits all." You need to design your surveys and strategies around the outcomes you most want:

- **Retention**: Values alignment, growth opportunities, and recognition.
- **Customer Satisfaction**: Management support, service culture, and empowerment.
- **Productivity**: Talent fit, clarity of expectations, and collaboration.

Q: Commercial leaders—sales, marketing, distribution, revenue—often face unique pressures. How should organizations think about their engagement?

Rick Garlick: Their work directly impacts top-line growth, so engagement here is mission-critical. Leaders should:

- Hire for natural strengths with validated tools.
- Set realistic goals to prevent burnout.
- Use non-cash incentives like incentive travel, which often motivates them more effectively than cash alone.

Q: One of your more provocative insights is about relationships at work. Why do you see them as so important?

Rick Garlick: Because the data is clear—people are more productive when they like and trust the people around them. At Hyatt, for example, high-performing teams stood out not because they were smarter, but because they cross-trained, supported one another, and built camaraderie. Positive relationships are the secret sauce.

> *"Are people more productive with colleagues they like and trust, or with those they don't? The answer is obvious."* – Rick Garlick

Q: If you had to leave leaders with a few practical lessons, what would they be?

Rick Garlick:

- Hire for strengths and build engagement from day one.
- Explore real-time tools for continuous culture measurement.
- Share results quickly and act visibly.
- Align survey design to the outcomes that matter most.
- Design thoughtful incentives to sustain motivation.
- Encourage positive relationships, fun and camaraderie are not distractions; they drive performance.

Closing Reflection

Sustainable engagement doesn't come from quick fixes. It requires leaders to think holistically—hiring for strengths, building systems that empower rather than hinder, and fostering relationships that make work rewarding. The lesson is clear: when leaders create an environment where people can succeed, motivation and performance follow naturally

CASE STUDY:

MGM Resorts Elevates Employer Brand Through the Voice of the Employee

At MGM Resorts International, the employee experience is the foundation of the company's employer brand. Leaders recognized early that in a service-driven industry, the voice of the employee must be as central as the voice of the guest. That commitment has become especially powerful for the sales, marketing, and revenue management teams that drive MGM's commercial success: when employees feel heard, trusted, and supported, they bring more energy, creativity, and alignment to the marketplace.

Turning Feedback into Action

MGM's approach began with a clear realization: listening only matters if it leads to visible change. Annual engagement surveys, quarterly roundtables, and anonymous digital apps give employees space to share candid feedback. Leaders then turn insights into action plans — "You Said, We Did It" updates close the loop and prove that feedback fuels decisions.

For commercial teams, this creates clarity and agility: sales managers can raise challenges around incentives, marketers can share gaps in communication tools, and revenue leaders can shape policies that make data-sharing easier. When employees see their input translated into action, they're more invested in delivering outcomes for customers and the business.

Amanda Voss, VP of Sales at MGM Resorts and Vice Chair of the HSMAI Foundation, explains:

> *"The guest experience begins with the employee experience. At MGM Resorts, we know the demands on our sales, marketing, and revenue teams are unique — from late nights entertaining clients to early mornings on the convention floor. By listening to our people and creating balance through wellness, flexibility, and meaningful connection, we've built a culture where employees feel supported and inspired to deliver their best. That sense of trust doesn't just strengthen our employer brand — it drives our commercial success."*

Transparency and Recognition

Commercial teams thrive on data, and MGM extends the same principle internally. Monthly scorecards on promotions, resignations, and engagement indicators provide visibility at the department level, empowering leaders to respond quickly to trends.

Recognition programs like Showstopper cards and daily gratitude rituals build pride and belonging essential for sales teams under pressure, marketing teams working at pace, and revenue managers balancing constant shifts. Beyond these day-to-day moments, MGM has woven tenure recognition into its retention strategy: "Years of Service" are celebrated quarterly in manager meetings with awards, highlighted monthly in team updates, and customized by department leaders through local events. These celebrations of milestones reinforce loyalty and signal that long-term contributions are valued.

By combining data transparency with consistent recognition — from the first daily thank-you to a milestone anniversary — MGM ensures employees don't just chase targets but feel connected to shared values and invested in a long-term career with the company.

Wellness and Balance in a High-Demand Market

In the world of hospitality sales, especially in Las Vegas, the demands can be relentless. Sales leaders are expected to be highly visible — attending client dinners, hosting at marquee events, and managing back-to-back citywides, conventions, and cultural celebrations like Chinese New Year. The pace is exhilarating but also exhausting, and without intentional balance, burnout becomes a real risk.

MGM has designed its wellness strategy with this reality in mind. On-site Zen Dens and recharge spaces give leaders a place to pause between client meetings. Health coaches and pulse checks help employees build routines that sustain energy over the long haul. Multilingual and family-inclusive options extend care beyond the office, recognizing that when sales leaders are on-property late into the night, the impact ripples across home life too.

By acknowledging the "day in the life" challenges unique to commercial teams — from navigating client entertainment schedules to being ever-present during high-volume events — MGM reinforces a message of care: wellness is not one-size-fits-all. It's flexible, responsive, and tailored to the rhythm of the hospitality business.

Flexibility, RTO, and Team Connectivity

Flexibility is one of the most pressing workforce issues in hospitality today, and MGM has made it a strength. Hybrid work remains in place where possible, shaped by employee input and without negative impact on productivity. But MGM also recognizes that for sales leaders, "return-to-office" often isn't a desk — it's the convention floor, the client suite, or the gala dinner.

That's why MGM treats formal in-office days as opportunities for collaboration and connection, not as an additional burden layered onto already full schedules. Commercial teams use these moments to regroup, align, and share insights across functions. Leaders intentionally design team meetings as working sessions, where sales, marketing, and revenue colleagues tackle

live challenges together. Recognition rituals are often woven in, so that the time feels energizing rather than transactional.

For a sales leader who may spend one night hosting a client at a headline concert and the next morning walking a trade show floor, this balance is critical. In-person time with colleagues becomes restorative rather than draining — a chance to reconnect, recalibrate, and strengthen the cross-functional collaboration that drives results.

Career Growth and Internal Mobility

MGM ensures employees see a future for themselves inside the company. Individual Development Plans in Workday, paired with monthly coaching, mentorship, and job shadowing, give commercial talent the tools to grow. A marketer can shadow revenue managers to understand pricing levers; a revenue analyst can rotate into sales to learn negotiation dynamics; a sales executive can step into marketing to see how campaigns drive demand. These pathways echo HSMAI's call for cross-functional development and position MGM's commercial leaders as integrators who understand the entire ecosystem.

Lessons for the Industry

MGM's story offers a clear lesson for the broader hospitality sector: an employer brand rooted in the voice of the employee strengthens both culture and commercial performance. Sales, marketing, and revenue teams — often the most visible drivers of growth — perform at their best when they feel valued, supported, and connected to purpose. By making feedback actionable, wellness personal, recognition consistent, and RTO intentional, MGM has built a blueprint that other hospitality organizations can follow to attract and retain the commercial talent they need for long-term success.

Key Takeaway

MGM Resorts demonstrates that when employees are heard and supported, they bring their best to the work that drives hospitality forward. For sales, marketing, and revenue leaders, the lesson is clear: investing in the voice of the employee is not just about culture — it is a commercial strategy that strengthens results, builds loyalty, and ensures talent stays to fuel future growth.

TREND 9:

Cross-Functional Teamwork and the Evolution of Commercial Leadership

Cross-functional collaboration has shifted from being a tactical practice to a defining feature of how modern hospitality organizations create value. While strong leadership continues to provide the foundation for culture and purpose, the day-to-day reality of commercial success now rests on how effectively marketing, sales, revenue management, digital, and operations teams work together.

The maturation of cross-functional teamwork requires more than coordination on projects; it requires a shared operating rhythm and fluency across disciplines. Leaders are increasingly expected to ensure that diverse teams not only align objectives but also build trust, navigate different technical languages, and balance sometimes competing priorities. The most effective organizations are creating structured forums where insights flow across silos, from demand generation and channel strategy to on-property execution so that commercial decisions are integrated, not isolated.

Building Commercial Centers of Excellence

A growing number of hospitality companies are turning to commercial centers of excellence (COEs) to institutionalize cross-functional collaboration. These COEs function as hubs where best practices, data, and tools are centralized, allowing properties and regions to draw from a common playbook. By standardizing processes around revenue management, distribution, digital marketing, and analytics, COEs elevate the sophistication of commercial strategy and allow leaders to focus on execution and innovation. At the same time, they create opportunities for talent development, offering employees exposure to multiple disciplines and encouraging a mindset of continuous learning [1].

Global Workforce Perspectives: Commercial Roles in Transformation

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 projects that nearly 40% of core job skills will shift by 2030. For hospitality's commercial leaders (sales, marketing, revenue management, and distribution) the shift is not abstract. It is already redefining roles, expectations, and the capabilities that organizations must build [19].

Revenue Management: From Data to Decisions

- Learning priorities: Understanding AI decisions, ethical pricing, scenario planning, commercial storytelling.
- Commercial impact: driving top-line growth and influencing middle-of-P&L levers (channel profitability, distribution costs, and owner returns).

Sales: From Relationships to Advisory Value

- Learning priorities: financial literacy, digital prospecting, consultative selling.
- Commercial impact: providing recommendations that drive client and owner value.

Marketing: From Brand to Commerce Engine

- Learning priorities: martech fluency, personalization, commerce attribution.
- Commercial impact: proving direct ROI, tying spend to bookings, upsell, and loyalty contribution.

Distribution: From Channels to Ecosystems

- Learning priorities: API fluency, contract economics, fintech-enabled distribution.
- Commercial impact: positioning distribution as a strategic lever for profitability.

Commercial Skills Evolution Framework (Traditional → Emerging → Future Needs)

Commercial Function	Traditional Focus	Emerging Skills	Future Needs (2025-2030)
Revenue Management	Forecasting & Yield	AI Forecasting, Scenario Planning	Critical Thinking, Commercial Storytelling, P&L Alignment
Sales	Relationship Management	Digital Prospecting, Consultative Selling	Financial Acumen, SMB Solutions, AI-Driven Sales
Marketing	Brand Awareness Campaigns	Martech, Personalization, Attribution	Commerce-Oriented Marketing, ROI Accountability, GenAI Creativity
Distribution	Channel Management	API Integration, Contract Economics	Ecosystem Strategy, Fintech Distribution Models, Profitability by Channel

The New Commercial Learning Agenda

Three imperatives define the next stage of commercial leadership:

1. **Critical Thinking as Currency**
   Leaders must go beyond dashboards to deliver actionable recommendations that drive measurable business results.
2. **Profitability Mindset**
   Understanding real estate economics and P&L pressure points is essential. Commercial leaders must link sales, marketing, and distribution strategies to both top-line and bottom-line outcomes.
3. **Technology-Human Synergy**
   Automation will scale operations, but human leadership will remain critical to inject ethics, creativity, and brand differentiation.

Distribution: Being on Every Shelf

Cross-functional teamwork also sharpens organizational focus on distribution. In today's travel ecosystem, distribution is the equivalent of shelf space in retail. To succeed, hotel companies must ensure they are represented on every "shelf" where consumers and buyers are

shopping and booking from OTAs and alternate distribution systems (ADS) to global distribution systems (GDS), direct digital channels, travel management companies (TMCs), and emerging AI-driven platforms. Understanding how generative AI is influencing discovery and booking pathways is critical, as algorithms increasingly decide what shelf a property sits on [2] [3]. Effective commercial leaders are rethinking distribution not just as a channel strategy but as an integrated demand-prioritization exercise that blends visibility, conversion, and profitability.

Dynamic Pricing, COS, and Profitability Analysis

As distribution expands, so does the complexity of managing profitability. Cross-functional teams need to work together to understand dynamic pricing models and the true cost of sale (COS) by channel. This includes factoring in commissions, media spend, payment processing costs, and sourcing structures. By building a clear picture of profitability at the channel and customer level, organizations can prioritize demand streams that deliver the strongest margins. This level of analysis requires close collaboration between revenue management, finance, sales, and digital teams—no single function can optimize in isolation [4] [5] [6].

Payments and Sourcing Structures

Payments, often overlooked in traditional commercial strategy, have emerged as another area requiring cross-functional collaboration. With the rise of virtual credit cards, alternative payments, and cross-border booking flows, the cost and structure of payments directly affect profitability. Teams must evaluate sourcing strategies, negotiate with intermediaries, and align on policies that balance guest convenience with cost efficiency. This requires a holistic view that integrates finance, distribution, and operations into commercial decision-making [7].

The Evolving Digital Landscape

Digital marketing continues to evolve at breakneck speed, reshaping how hospitality companies attract and convert demand. Search, social, programmatic, and metasearch are now joined by AI-driven personalization, predictive analytics, and new content formats that influence customer choice. Cross-functional collaboration ensures that digital strategies are not pursued in isolation but are fully integrated with revenue management forecasts, distribution priorities, and brand storytelling. The pace of change requires constant upskilling and an openness to experimentation, with cross-functional teams serving as the testing ground for new approaches that can be scaled across the enterprise [8] [9].

Preparing the Next Generation of Leaders

The evolution of cross-functional teamwork has significant implications for talent development. Cross-functional assignments are becoming a proving ground for rising leaders, exposing them to the full commercial ecosystem—from pricing levers and distribution economics to the digital marketing funnel and payment structures. These experiences build resilience, broaden problem-solving capabilities, and encourage a deeper understanding of the economics of hospitality. They also prepare leaders to manage not only top-line revenue but also the profitability drivers that sit across the middle of the P&L [1] [10].

Key Takeaways

- Commercial Centers of Excellence (COEs) are becoming critical hubs for best practices, standardization, and talent development across revenue management, distribution, and digital marketing [1].
- Distribution is today's shelf space and hotels must ensure representation across OTAs, ADS, GDS, direct digital channels, TMCs, and AI-driven booking pathways [2] [3].
- Dynamic pricing and profitability analysis require cross-functional input to understand true cost of sale (COS), factoring in commissions, media spend, and payment structures [4] [5] [6]
- Payments and sourcing strategies are now central to commercial outcomes, with virtual cards, alternative payments, and cross-border flows reshaping cost efficiency [7].
- The digital landscape continues to evolve rapidly, requiring integration of AI, predictive analytics, and personalization into holistic commercial strategies that bridge marketing, revenue, and distribution [8] [9].
- Cross-functional assignments are proving grounds for emerging leaders, building commercial fluency, resilience, and an understanding of both revenue growth and middle-of-P&L profitability [1] [10].

CASE STUDY:

PPHG's Perfect 10 Development Program

As hospitality companies seek to develop the next generation of commercial leaders, Pan Pacific Hotels Group (PPHG) has built a model for the industry with its **Perfect 10 training program**. Designed as a progressive, modular pathway for sales and marketing associates, the program develops commercial acumen, cross-functional skills, and leadership readiness across the organization.

Cinn Tan, Chief Commercial & Marketing Officer at PPHG, describes Perfect 10 as "more than a training initiative, it is a business strategy that ensures our people are not just good at their jobs today, but ready to lead the business of tomorrow."

Program Design and Structure

Perfect 10 is a three-tiered development journey tailored to different levels of responsibility and experience. It is mandatory for all sales and catering associates and extends to high-potential leaders across the organization. Each tier culminates in certification, ensuring rigor and mastery before progression.

- Level 1: Elementary (for entry- to mid-level associates) covers core sales skills, negotiation, and account management.
- Level 2: Intermediate introduces revenue management, distribution, and marketing fundamentals.
- Level 3: Advanced develops leadership skills, strategic business planning, and a capstone Hotel Business Acumen simulation assessed by senior leaders and industry experts.

Tan notes that this gated, certification-driven progression is intentional: "The rigor of certification builds both capability and pride. It signals to our people and to the organization that mastery matters."

Applied Learning and Business Acumen

From the outset, Perfect 10 was designed to emphasize application over instruction. Each level includes field assignments, simulations, and final projects that replicate the complexities of hotel business decisions.

"Applied learning is what drives impact," Tan explains. "Our associates are not just absorbing content, they are practicing the skills that shape revenue, optimize channels, and enhance customer engagement."

Career Pathways and Leadership Development

By embedding the program into career progression, PPHG gives associates a visible pathway to advancement. High-potential leaders are identified early, developed systematically, and prepared for senior commercial roles.

Tan notes the cultural importance of this: "Our people see Perfect 10 as a career passport. It creates opportunities for internal promotion and demonstrates our belief in building leaders from within."

Cross-Commercial Integration

The program also reflects how the role of commercial leaders has evolved. Traditional sales training has been replaced with a cross-functional approach, incorporating revenue management, distribution, and marketing.

> *As Tan observes, "The future belongs to leaders who can think across disciplines, not within silos. Perfect 10 builds that mindset."*

Cultural Impact and Future Outlook

Perfect 10 has already reinforced a culture of continuous development at PPHG. Associates see learning as an expectation, not a choice, which has improved engagement and retention. Looking forward, the program will expand to include modules on digital transformation, AI-enabled distribution, and sustainable commercial practices.

"Perfect 10 is about preparing for the future as much as the present," Tan emphasizes. "We are building leaders who can navigate disruption and seize opportunities in a rapidly changing hospitality landscape."
The lesson from PPHG's Perfect 10 is clear: in a world where commercial strategies change faster than talent can be hired, the organizations that invest in systematically building skills from within will define the next generation of hospitality leadership.

CASE STUDY:

Expedia Group Builds Commercial Leaders Through Cross-Functional Growth

When employees join Expedia Group, they quickly realize they are stepping into more than a travel technology company, they are entering a talent ecosystem designed to help them grow. Over the last several years, Expedia Group has deliberately shifted how it develops its commercial workforce, ensuring that careers are not narrowly defined by titles or job descriptions, but rather by pathways that cut across marketing, sales, and revenue management.

Expedia Group's leadership recognized early that commercial success in today's travel industry requires more than functional expertise. True impact comes when leaders understand how the pieces of the commercial puzzle fit together, how pricing influences demand generation, how digital marketing shapes distribution, and how sales strategies can drive incremental bookings. This realization sparked a long-term investment in building a "commercial discipline." A framework that connects the dots for employees and equips them to drive stronger outcomes across the business.

> *"We knew that building commercial leaders required more than functional expertise. Our goal was to create a culture where people could see pathways across disciplines and build careers that grow with the business."*
>
> — Greg Schulze, Chief Commercial Officer, Expedia Group

The journey began with a simple but powerful step: clarifying what success looks like in commercial roles. Expedia Group introduced commercial job families that laid out expectations for each role and made progression transparent. This consistency created an equitable environment where employees could see their next step, regardless of whether they began in sales, revenue management, or marketing. The job families became career maps, giving people confidence that growth was possible and attainable.

Expedia Group then went a step further. Instead of encouraging people to stay in their lane, the company promoted cross-functional rotations, giving employees opportunities to step into adjacent commercial roles. Revenue managers were invited to spend time in marketing to understand how demand generation impacts pricing decisions. Sales professionals rotated into distribution and learned firsthand how channel strategies influence conversion. Marketing leaders spent time alongside revenue teams to see how their campaigns translated into rate integrity and yield performance. These rotations created leaders with the ability to think holistically, fostering a deeper respect for how interconnected commercial levers are in driving both top-line growth and bottom-line results.

To support this commercial mindset, Expedia Group built a culture of continuous learning. Employees are given access to training platforms, certifications, and mentorship networks that accelerate their development. Internal mobility is not only

encouraged but celebrated, a signal that growth within the company is not limited to one discipline or department. This investment in people reinforces a powerful cultural message: Expedia Group is a place to build a career, not just a job.

The results speak for themselves. Expedia Group's approach has improved retention, with employees choosing to stay because they see clear career pathways. It has strengthened collaboration, as cross-functional exposure reduces silos and builds trust among teams. And it has delivered better business outcomes, equipping leaders with the tools to balance short-term results with long-term strategic growth. More importantly, it has positioned Expedia Group as a company where commercial leaders aren't just functional experts, they are integrators, strategists, and collaborators who can lead the business through complexity and change.

For the broader hospitality sector, Expedia Group demonstrates that the organizations best positioned for the future are those that regard talent as their most strategic asset. Developing commercial leaders requires more than targeted hiring; it necessitates structured pathways, rotational opportunities, and learning cultures that integrate sales, marketing, and revenue management. When employees are provided with clarity, opportunity, and trust, they advance not only in their careers but also into leadership roles that drive organizational transformation.

Key Takeaways

1. Define clear role expectations and transparent job families.
2. Invest in cross-functional rotations to build holistic commercial thinking.
3. Celebrate internal mobility as part of company culture.
4. Balance structured frameworks with flexibility for individual career journeys.
5. Embed mentorship and coaching to support career transitions.
6. Offer continuous learning through certifications and applied experiences.
7. Break down silos early by fostering shared accountability across teams.
8. Measure and communicate the impact of talent programs on retention and performance.
9. Ensure senior leaders model cross-functional commercial thinking.
10. Treat talent development as a strategic business priority, not just an HR function.

HSMAI Certifications to Support Commercial Leaders:

- **CRME** – Certified Revenue Management Executive (Revenue Management)
- **CHDM** – Certified Hospitality Digital Marketer (Digital Marketing)
- **CHBA** – Certified in Hospitality Business Acumen (Business Acumen)
- **CHSE** – Certified Hospitality Sales Executive (Sales)

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Trend 1 - AI

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