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Local businesses struggle to fill staff openings

By Jennifer Wake



"Help Wanted" signs grace several local businesses in Lafayette. Reve Bistro on Moraga Road has two cook openings. Photo J. Wake

applications. The adult full-time position was more difficult." They used a combination of word-of mouth, social media posting, posting on the Chamber job posting board, and posting on Indeed, the job search engine. "For the full-time position, we got zero responses on Indeed. The one place we got a response, and a successful hire, was from an Instagram post. So it was really about local knowledge and networking to make the right connection," he said.

Colleen and John work every day the store is open to ensure the store is staffed. "We are very happy with our recent hire, but we were committed to keeping our standards very high and we would not compromise on what we wanted for an employee. We would not sacrifice customer service, even if it took a while to fill the position."

Laura Magu, co-owner of Reve Bistro, has been dealing with a cook shortage, even before the pandemic. "It's worse now," she said. "We're not even getting applicants anymore. We have two cook positions open, as well as a food runner position." To try to entice applicants, they have offered employee referral incentives, paid job postings in several locations, and promoted on social media. Magu also reached out to culinary school programs but they are not meeting now so they haven't heard back. "We've also examined ourselves and how we can become better employers and bosses and create a great work environment," Magu said.

One person who had previously worked as a cook decided to "wait until there was more work in solar construction" - he had been laid off two months ago due to lack of work, Magu said. "Two said the BART schedule (lack of p.m. service) kept them from working. Two former employees chose not to come back for fear of health reasons and wanting to try something new. Most people apply, then don't respond to emails or phone calls to schedule interviews."

Magu has been told that the Employment Development Department only requires recipients show they are applying places. "I don't know how true this is," Magu said, but three applicants said they would only work for cash so they could maintain unemployment. "Some cooks are still furloughed from jobs with corporate kitchens (Google) and are waiting until they know if they can go back when San Francisco opens back up."

For now, Magu said they are filling in personally, "working shifts those hourly workers could be working." They are also using Instawork, a temp service for the hospitality industry, and outsourcing positions that can be outsourced such as night cleaning.

Navigating rules for nonprofits that rely on large public fundraising events is also proving to be a frustrating experience. Chamber Executive Director Jay Lifson recently sent a letter to Gov. Gavin Newsom describing his frustration, stating how Contra Costa County is following state guidelines on reopening but is not providing guidance to municipalities and nonprofits about preparing to open festivals and outdoor events after June 15.

"Many of these organizations will go out of business without this important revenue source," Lifson wrote, adding, "We need direction and we need it now."

With luck Lamorinda will soon return to normal. Until then business owners and nonprofits are doing what they can . and are keeping their fingers crossed for a brighter tomorrow.

Reopening businesses following the relaxation of strict COVID-19 regulations isn't always as simple as reopening doors to the establishment - especially for those in the hospitality industry. Local business owners are finding it difficult to fill positions while navigating shifting county and state rules about the pandemic.

The Lafayette Chamber of Commerce recently published a list of 33 Lafayette businesses looking to fill staff openings, including writer positions at this publication.

For John and Colleen McCormick, owners of Lamorinda Music, finding student workers hasn't been an issue - but finding adults to fill full-time positions is proving more problematic.

"Over the last several months, we have had a full-time (adult) position open and a part-time (student) position open," John McCormick said. "We were able to fill the student position fairly quickly and we received numerous

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