

Foie gras, truffles, wine all in a day's training

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For a week in France, they sampled foie gras and black truffles, sipped wine from barrels and analyzed menus and the composition of countless dishes.

This was no vacation for seven management staff and chefs at Baltimore's French-inspired Petit Louis Bistro and Charleston restaurants. Instead, it was hands-on education paid for by Tony Foreman and Cindy Wolf, husband-and-wife restaurateurs, who took their staff on the trip to two French wine regions this month.

"It's one thing to read something in the food and wine business, it's another to taste, smell, hear and look," said Wolf, owner and executive chef of the Charleston Group, the Baltimore enterprise that operates a wine store and three local restaurants. "It's extremely important to experience it."

Such workplace training generally varies across industries. It more often includes computer lessons or professional conferences. But employers are spending more money on training or continuing education for their workers, especially as pressures mount to attract and retain talented workers.

"As it gets harder to find the right people for key jobs, companies are sweetening the recruiting package with assurances that they will provide training," said Patricia A. Galagan, executive editor at the American Society for Training & Development in Alexandria, Va. "A common interview question these days is 'How much will you invest in my development?'"

But even though spending is up, training budgets are often the first to go when money is tight. And some management experts say companies can be the victim of their own investment - losing highly trained employees to competitors.

U.S. companies spent on average \$1,424 per employee in 2005, up from \$1,368 the previous year, according to the American Society for Training & Development. The average number of learning hours per employee also increased year over year: from 35 to 41. (The data come from a sample of Fortune 500 companies and public sector organizations with an average of some 70,000 employees.)

Broad definition

Workplace training includes everything from executive and supervisory development to sales and customer service tactics to new employee orientation and basic skills.

Whether it's keeping up with the latest industry standards or experimenting with new sales or customer service tactics, on-the-job training aims to develop better employees.

Gourmet grocer Wegmans Food Markets Inc., which has a store in Hunt Valley, provides extensive training, even to point of cooking lessons. The grocer, which is expected to open three more stores in Maryland, sends several of its employees to Wisconsin and Switzerland to learn about cheese.

Such training trips "help engage our employees and in turn, engage our customers," said Sharon Lewis, director of training and development at Wegmans.

At Enterprise Rent-A-Car, a majority of new hires start at an entry-level management training program, where they learn every aspect of the business, from finance to marketing to customer service.

Workers also receive development assistance as they move up the ranks. For instance, newly promoted assistant branch managers are trained to delegate authority and how to give feedback. They also are taught how to write performance evaluations and assess job candidates.

"The value we place on training is so important because we're grooming our future leaders," said Pam Webster, a corporate recruiting manager at Enterprise.

Enterprise, like other companies, say workplace learning is becoming more important because younger workers expect professional fulfillment as they enter the work force.

Premium on training

Workers in their 20s are putting a premium on training. "They not only expect or thrive in environments where they're learning and receiving feedback," Webster said. "If they don't feel they're learning, they'll look somewhere else."

Accounting firm KPMG provides training on professional and industry standards, regulatory changes and other topics. Evelyn Rodstein, the firm's chief talent and learning officer, said the company tries to customize professional development as employees progress in their careers.

Donna Flagg, a principal at Krysalis Group, a management and leadership training firm in New York, which creates and provides employee training for clients, said more small and medium-sized businesses are setting aside money for training than in the past because it's harder to find and retain qualified workers.

A consequence of not providing employee development is turnover, she said.

"They don't stay [at their jobs] because of it, but they leave because of it," she said. "They get frustrated, and they're not fulfilled so they start looking for something else."

Nhung Nguyen, assistant professor of management at **Towson University's** College of Business and Economics, said she tells her students that many companies prefer to invest in workers who bring specific skills to the job.

"There is no way they could keep you there once you get trained, therefore, many times, companies want to hire people who already have the skills," Nguyen said.

Petit Louis and the Charleston hire well-trained chefs, some of whom are graduates of the Culinary Institute of America.

Spain, Paris, too

Yet the recent trip to the wine regions of the Rhone Valley and Burgundy was not the first time Foreman and Wolf have taken their staff abroad. Spain and Paris have been on the itinerary in previous years.

This year's group of three chefs, two managers and two head servers visited numerous vineyards and went from bistro to bistro talking to chefs about and ingredients.

James Lewandowski, 28, an executive sous chef at Petit Louis, said there is nothing like dining on French dishes such as foie gras and dissecting recipes while taking in the country's culture and lifestyle.

"Seeing and tasting all the food, it's like reading how to play baseball and then practicing with Major League Baseball," Lewandowski said.

For Wolf and Foreman, the trip was worth the \$25,000 expense because it helps inspire their staff, who in turn make their restaurants better. And such training also helps to retain their kitchen and management staff in an industry known for high turnover.

While there's a risk of losing staff whom they trained to other restaurants, Foreman said "there is no way to achieve excellence without taking those type of risks."

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