FOODSERVICE CONSULTANTS SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL

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SPECIAL
REPORT

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Reduced labor costs
Smart oven technology enables more consistent and efficient workflows, with fewer kitchen staff

Speed and quality
Smart ovens offer simple-to-use, programmable, and versatile cooking options for operators

SUPPORTED BY OVENTION A HATCO COMPANY

SMART OVEN TECHNOLOGY

THE BEST SOLUTION TO FOODSERVICE STAFFING SHORTAGES

HOW SMART OVEN TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP A WIDE RANGE OF OPERATORS AND MITIGATE AGAINST LABOR SHORTAGES

INTRODUCTION

For a host of reasons, the foodservice sector has been hit hard by the challenge of finding people to work in kitchens. Rising labor costs have made skilled workers expensive, at a time when margins are already wafer-thin in many market segments, and employee turnover is high.

Since the industry had to effectively close its doors during the Covid pandemic and switch to a delivery or pick-up model, skilled workers have been leaving the foodservice sector in droves. Furthermore, it has proven difficult to lure new and inexperienced workers into commercial kitchens since the world returned to its new version of normal.

In 2021, 47 million people in the US voluntarily quit their jobs, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. More than 50 million quit in 2022. This mass exit from the workplace hit the foodservice industry particularly hard. The US leisure and hospitality industry witnessed a 5.1% quit rate in January 2023 – more than twice the average seen in other industry sectors.

"Unfortunately, working in a kitchen is not the best thing to do as a human being," says Alison O'Hearn, associate at US consultancy Cini-Little International, Inc. "You are on your feet all day, the environment is hot and uncomfortable, there are many ways in which you can slip and fall, and you might chop off your hand. It is potentially dangerous, and you are probably going to be working in a stressful environment with other stressed-out people," she adds.

"At the same time, it is important to feed people safely, so you need to keep up with allergens, cook food to the proper temperature and so on," she continues. "As a result, there is a lot of pressure to perform well, and people are not always paid that well in these jobs. Every industry wants people with experience, but where do people get the experience they need?"

There is also a sense in which many people are turning away from a career path in foodservice, as the industry is increasingly viewed as a temporary job to take on while looking for other kinds of employment. At that level, skills are in short supply, and there is less engagement with

KEY TAKEAWAYS

For an industry struggling to recruit kitchen employees, coupled with rising labor costs, investing in smart oven technology can yield significant long-term financial benefits

> "People are shying away from working in kitchens altogether. Many people in the foodservice sector were let go, and they went to find other jobs to pay the rent"

the operation and the team than perhaps might once have been the case.

"Entry-level cooks don't have an easy career path," continues O'Hearn. "People are shying away from working in kitchens altogether. Covid meant fewer people went out to eat, and many business and industry locations were shut down completely. Colleges and universities, for example, had to feed fewer people, so many people in the foodservice sector were let go, and they went to find other jobs to feed their families and pay the rent."

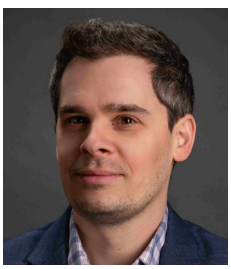
IMPACT ON OPERATIONS

The immediate impact of a shortage of skilled workers can take many forms. Without experienced cooks, food quality may quickly suffer, becoming inconsistent. Service can be slower, as delays in each stage of preparation and cooking mount up. Operational expenses can also rise quickly, either because operators have to pay more to get the right number of staff, or to attract more experienced workers, or because inefficiencies creep in at multiple stages.

"Food quality, service and consistency in branded arenas and restaurants are key, so slower service and inconsistency are real problems," says Amy Hegarty FCSI, principal consultant at US consultancy Foodservice Consultants Studio. "Employees may be unhappy if they are working harder, and that trickles down to customer experience, which is what matters."

If service or food quality are poor, then customers will find another experience. That is harder in environments like schools or hospitals, where people cannot so easily choose an alternative. Yet operators still want to keep doctors, nurses, patients, teachers and students on-site with quality and consistency – for morale if nothing else.

"In K-12 – from kindergarten to 12th grade – there are huge problems," adds Hegarty. "In an elementary school we work with there are two service lines starting at 10.30am and ending at 2.30pm. They really need a new third line, but that requires more people, so it is in a tricky position. Employees want more money or don't want to work in the industry."



Above: Alison O'Hearn; Amy Hegarty FCSI; Ryan Rongo FCSI

In that example, and countless others, there is a need to improve service while maintaining or improving food quality and adding more choices to the menu. A shortage of people – not just skilled labor – makes that difficult.

"Some staff members double up labor and work harder, which can impact working hours," says O'Hearn. "There is no night shift if you can't get enough employees, so some fast-food operators close at 10pm when they would once have been open 24/7. Fewer hours open means less revenue."

"It seems that since the pandemic a lot of the labor force has disappeared," says Chad Rasmussen, sales manager at equipment manufacturer Ovention. "They left restaurants because they had to close, but they did not come back, so operators now have fewer staff. Labor-saving equipment and automation are now big across hospitality, fine dining, QSR – everywhere."

THE ADVENT OF AUTOMATION AND SMART OVEN TECHNOLOGY

The automation and precision-cooking capabilities of smart ovens can mitigate the problem of labor shortages. They are increasingly helping foodservice operators to meet growing customer demands for speed and quality, at a time when there are likely to be fewer people in the kitchen.

The advantages of smart ovens are numerous. They can reduce cooking times, simplify workflows and, crucially, guarantee consistency and quality, even when more menu options are introduced to provide customers with more choice. For these reasons, operators are trying to find as much automation as possible in their cook line.

Technology can fill the labor gap by offering simple-to-use, programmable cooking options that ensure meals are cooked for the required amount of time and at the right temperature – every time. Programs are created centrally by the lead chef, then installed in each smart oven to ensure consistency.

"Tech has been filling that gap for a while," says Hegarty.

"Speed ovens have become more programmable and versatile, and there

"Operators now have fewer staff. Labor-saving equipment and automation are now big across hospitality, fine dining, QSR – everywhere"

Above: Chad Rasmussen, sales manager, Ovention

is now a push for smaller ventless and increasingly automated equipment. Fewer people are making more food – and more diverse food – to a consistent quality. Furthermore, it allows foodservice to be where it has not been before, because ventless ovens can work almost anywhere."

Central programmability is a new way of thinking about how foodservice can be more flexible and of a higher quality. Although traditional cook lines with Type 1 ventilation hoods will remain in many places, ventless conveyor ovens – or new shuttle-type ovens – are the future.

"For years the industry has been trying to work on tech to make everything a little more efficient and easier to use, so less training is needed," says O'Hearn.

"You press a button and know the equipment will do its job, so you can go and do other things. You are putting your trust in the tech."

"Smart tech is not just about the menu. It's also how the oven works and how it interacts with the environment," she adds.

"For example, ventless ovens take away the need to add expensive duct work to reduce the odors and smoke pollution from the kitchen. Ventless technology is less intrusive and expensive and can be smarter and more efficient than traditional ventilation, so it will be a popular choice well into the future."

Smart oven technology automates key aspects of the cooking process, ensuring operational consistency while alleviating workforce pressures. Smart ovens have already proven effective in helping operators streamline workflows and reduce staff intervention.

In the QSR sector, big chains such as Chipotle and McDonald's have the same menu across all of their locations. Recipes are programmed at the corporate level, then operators can simply plug in a USB drive and download the programs to get the same results everywhere. The machine makes up the skills gap. Workers simply prepare the ingredients and the oven takes care of the rest.

In hotel kitchens, smart ovens can have a huge impact on quality and also extend the hours of service. Some smart ovens can be kept running for the late-night menu when the rest of the kitchen has been shut down.

"Outside typical meal service times you could have just one person using the equipment but still get the same consistency and quality, rather than heating up the whole cook line," says Hegarty. "You can get a good hot meal at any time, not just a cold sandwich."

"Hotel menus change more often than in QSR chains, and there are also banqueting options, so you are reheating on plates from chilled, as well as cooking fresh, all thanks to smart tech," adds O'Hearn.

In campus dining, dual-operating conveyor and closed cavity ovens such as Ovention's Shuttle 2000, can similarly offer a wider range of menu options by providing pre-programmed parameters for a variety of dishes

Kitchen staff simply assemble the components of the dish, put it on the conveyor and press the relevant program to ensure it is cooked in the appropriate way, then collect it on the other side.

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Some smart ovens can be kept running for the late-night menu when the rest of the kitchen has been shut down

CASE STUDY: INTUIT DOME

Opened in August 2024, the Intuit Dome – home of the Los Angeles Clippers basketball team – is the centerpiece of a $1.8 billion arena complex in Inglewood, LA County. With a capacity of 18,000, it requires a large-scale catering operation to feed fans on game days, and the food quality must be fitting for a premier sporting outfit such as The Clippers.

The stadium features 32 Ovention Shuttle 2000 ovens. With thousands already installed in QuikTrip convenience stores across the Midwestern, Southern, and Western United States, the oven has proven its efficiency and reliability.

"For sports stadia, the catering options are different for each one," says Ovention's Chad Rasmussen. "Some have volunteers running the concession stands, so people may lack thorough training. Though there will always be a knowledgeable chef on hand, it is useful if the ovens are already programmed. The need for speed is an important factor."

Ryan Rongo of S2O Consultants was involved in the specification of the catering concessions throughout the stadium and helped decide on the Shuttle as a key piece of technology. Ventless, so requiring no hood, it cooks quickly with no microwave assist, and – unlike a traditional conveyor oven – it can cook a variety of dishes one after the other.

"With the Intuit Dome, the client wanted a lot of the same food products distributed evenly throughout the facility," he explains. "We are seeing that more often because people won't travel that far to get a unique item that is on the far side of a stadium, according to our analytics. So, we wanted versatility. Ventless, high-speed technology gives us the speed and variety we need."

"The Shuttle provides us with the ability to program a menu item and then just press a button to create it," he continues. "In sports entertainment, where there is an event once a week for a few hours, there is a high turnover rate in terms of foodservice staff, so we need that flexibility and simplicity."

S2O freqently uses two styles of Ovention ovens: the Shuttle for its versatility with diverse menus and its ability to be both a conveyor oven and a closed cavity oven, and the traditional high-throughput Conveyor oven. "We can put it in more locations and it offers more versatility, though we might use the conveyor if we were only serving pizza," says Rongo. "The Shuttle helps us to change menus, and in our market segment it is hard to get Type 1 ventilation into facilities, so its ventless nature is very important."

With the success of the Shuttle in the Intuit Dome, Rongo sees its use reaching far beyond the sports sector. He believes smart ovens like this will increasingly be used by corporate cafeterias, college student dining facilities, QSR restaurants, and more.

CONCLUSION

Investing in smart oven technology yields significant long-term financial benefits. It reduces labor costs by enabling more consistent and efficient workflows with fewer staff. Its one-button operation means employees can be trained to use it faster, which means there is a greatly reduced impact from high staff turnover. These efficiencies, coupled with more menu flexibility, add up to a quantifiable return on investment.

"The simplicity of the user interface and the ability to program, so someone with limited training can use it to create consistent quality in high volume, are essential," says Ryan Rongo, VP of design at S2O Consultants in Chicago. "These products allow operators to maintain quality and consistency."

"That can be achieved with our Shuttle, which has automatic load and unload functions," says Rasmussen. "You put food on the cooking platform, it automatically goes into the oven, cooks on a set program and then the door opens, and it comes out. It looks like a conveyor oven but with doors on both the entry and exit side. It preserves temperature, saves energy, keeps the kitchen cool, saves on labor, and it cooks the same every time once those golden standards for cooking are programmed in."

Simplicity of operation means that the next line cook coming in will get the same results as the executive chef. Staff turnover, therefore, is no longer an issue. The knowledge gap is removed and human error is minimized, as long as staff are trained to prepare the dish. Consistency and quality are no longer in question.

In the face of labor shortages, smart oven technology is absolutely a game-changing solution.

Smart ovens can help mitigate the labor crisis

OVENTION
A HATCO COMPANY

ABOUT OVENTION

Backed by a legacy of integrity, Ovention was founded in early 2011. In July 2013, Ovention was acquired by customer service award-winning company Hatco®.

A care for customers combined with the reliability of our innovative Precision Impingement® technology, continues to raise the bar in traditional cooking. Today, Today, Ovention has thousands of ovens in the field across all segements, making delicious the right way. From authentic flatbread and roasted vegetables to perfect paninis and gooey brownies, Ovention continues to commit to improving the culinary creativity and bottom line of our customers.

Ovention is a company driven by award-winning innovation, integrity, and an intense desire to solve problems that others walk away from. That spirit of innovation has produced a series of ovens that meet the real-world needs of commercial operators.

For more information visit oventionovens.com

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