

Episode 305: TA Insights Featuring Jamie Starner, Marsha Lacey and Shelly Wilt



Intro: [00:00:00.96] Welcome to the Workology Podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com, as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools and case studies for the business leader, H.R. and recruiting professional who is tired of the status quo. Now, here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:26.64] It's a good time to be in talent acquisition. Right now, there are more recruiting job openings than programmer openings in the U.S. Everyone is hiring and every company needs talent acquisition leaders to recruit candidates, hire and scale quickly. But the market to recruit great talent continues to be a challenge, especially in certain key industries. And that is exactly what we are exploring. The Workology Podcast is sponsored by Upskil HR and Ace the HR Exam. This interview is part of a new series called TA Insights for the Workology Podcast, and it's powered by Heroes Jobs. It's an opportunity for you, the TA leader, to share what's happening in this wacky talent marketplace right now. Think of it as speed networking, where I introduce you to the talent acquisition leaders you need to know. The good news here is there's no travel or awkward handshake or elbow bump while you chat about the weather or how weird it is to be at an event now, face to face. Each episode in the TA Insights series features three 7 to 10 minute interviews with different talent acquisition leaders. In this podcast, we are focused on conversations with hospitality and restaurant TA leaders. Let's get started with this episode, shall we? Our first interview is with Jamie Starner. She is a restaurant recruitment trailblazer and holds a master's in education and human relations and her SHRM-CP certification. She has over 10 years in recruiting and currently serves as the director of talent acquisition at Bartaco. She's a board member for the Arizona Recruiters chapter and a founder and president of the Restaurant Recruitment Roundtable. She is passionate about volunteerism and animal welfare. Hi Jamie, welcome to the Workology Podcast. Can you tell us a little bit about Bartaco and the types of jobs you were trying to fill?

Jamie Starner: [00:02:16.86] Hi, Jessica, thanks for having me. Bartaco is a growing East Coast based company. At this time, we have 21 units and they're inspired by the beach culture of Brazil and Southern California. So it's actually upscaled street food with a coastal vibe and a relaxed environment. And all of our cocktails and majority of our food is scratch kitchen. And so some of the jobs that we're trying to fill at this time, you know, anything from corporate to management to hourly. One thing I like to mention about Bartaco is we did change our service model during covid, and so now it's considered an On-Demand cashless service model. So it's very unique to our concept as well as just reactionary to covid. So we're providing a unique QR code in each table and we've seen a lot of success with that for both the employee and the guest experience.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:03:13.02] The QR code is now purposeful and useful at it because of covid. I love the way that that you are innovating and making a safe experience for employees as well as your customers.

Jamie Starner: [00:03:27.09] We're also providing a QR code for applicants to apply for jobs. So it's kind of resonating across the brand, which makes it great for them to be able to kind of do it from any device anywhere.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:03:40.41] I love that. You know, during covid, my daughter was a Girl Scout and selling cookies and we were selling cookies with QR codes. So I love the multifaceted uses. What's the biggest challenge you are facing when recruiting talent at Bartaco?

Jamie Starner: [00:03:57.42] I think the biggest challenge on the onset with the rollout of this on demand is service model was probably maybe getting the buy in from some of our employees. That was new for all of us. And so we did eliminate that server position. We now have a position called a dragonfly, and so was getting the buy in that they would be cross trained on buzzing and food-running and drink-running. And and for some, it didn't work. And we're hoping they'll come back, you know, in the future. But I think that was initially the onset as we were back selling to that position once kind of covid cleared out, I think just in general with with staffing for the restaurant industry. I'm seeing it across all segments, and speaking to my peers, this is the show rate for interviews as well as after somebody accepts the position that show rate for first day. So we do try to mitigate that. We're following up with text messages. We're sending them home with a card with all the information. But that's probably been the biggest challenge, it's that show rate.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:01.56] I'm reading a lot about that, it's, it's not just Bartaco, it's I think across the board for for restaurant and retail and hospitality for sure. I know that hiring and filling roles in these uncertain times is a challenge. What are some ways that you have flexed and adapted with success?

Jamie Starner: [00:05:21.69] I love this question. I am very new to Bartaco and I, I feel like this question was written for this company because it's the reason why I chose to work for them. They are so innovative and nimble and that's what attracted me to work for them because they have been very adaptive to what we've overseen over the last year and a half. It's been a very tough environment. And so I think some of the things that they've done that I love is, you know, everything is mobile friendly and mobile optimized, from both the application to the onboarding. During covid, they shut down the support center, so they were allowing the corporate or support employees to work remote. They did just open up a beautiful new office as, you know, covid cases decreases and as vaccine increases. So I think that was, you know, to make sure that everyone felt safe. I mentioned we were cross training the front of the house position called the Dragonfly, and that's actually our logo as well. So now what we're doing is we're hiring for soft skills. It doesn't matter if they have retail experience, customer service experience, call center experience, as long as they're a people person. You know, hospitality is a send them. Those are the skills you can't really teach, and so I think that's one way that we've been able to be very successful in hiring, is less about the technical and whatever positions they can and more about the person and the vibe.

Jamie Starner: [00:06:45.99] And then because of that, they've actually been able to start this tip pool or now both front of the house and back at the house employees are getting tips. So we have dishwashers, line cooks, prep cooks who are making between 20 to 24 dollars an hour, which is extremely ahead of the curve for our industry. So fortunately, where I say that covid was the pandemic for 2020 and staffing is a pandemic for 2021, it's yes, it's a challenge, but we're paying fair wages where what many people don't know how many back of the house line cook, you have to have two positions to make up for the livable wages. And so people will come in and work for a restaurant and then at the end of the shift, they'll go next door and look for another one. So we're hoping to mitigate that and give them a fair and livable wage where they can just work for us and then go home and relax and come back the next day. So I think those are some of the biggest ways that we've been able to adapt and then like our peers, we're also, we did roll out a really competitive referral program honoring both hourly and management and corporate employees that work for us. We want to hire like minded individuals.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:54.54] I love that. You're changing people's lives with with with some of these new programs, which is amazing.

Jamie Starner: [00:08:01.32] Yes, really exciting. And again, I just think being able to you know, I know that labor wages are, is a hot topic right now. And so I feel like this company and there's some others that are kind of leading that initiative. So it's really nice to see.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:08:17.01] How are you measuring success when it comes to your TA work at Bartaco?

Jamie Starner: [00:08:22.26] I think there's a couple big things that resonate, speaking for myself and the TA team, I think the biggest one is always going to be time to fill. But I think more importantly than time to fill is the quality of hire, and looking at their tenures, looking at turnover in general. So I think, yes, it might take an additional week for us to fill a position sometimes, but finding that right candidate. So the quality of hire and the tenure in the position are two big things that I'm going to be analyzing to measure the success. And then I think just being a support team member, it's also building that relationship with operations and making sure that their needs are met and they feel heard and communicated. So I think it's also the relationship component as well.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:08.55] I and I know our listeners would love to learn more about the work that you're doing. Where can people go to connect more with you?

Jamie Starner: [00:09:16.38] Yeah, absolutely. So if you just go to bartaco.com and then select the work at Bartaco tab, you'll be able to see corporate, hourly and management positions. And then we also have a promoting a lot of our different jobs on LinkedIn as well as my own as well.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:32.70] Wonderful. Thank you, Jamie, for taking the time to chat with us.

Jamie Starner: [00:09:36.39] Thank you so much for having me today.

Break: [00:09:38.73] This is part of our Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and Ace The HR Exam. This episode is part of our TA Insights series powered by Heroes Jobs. I'm talking with three TA leaders in the hospitality and restaurant series. Let's get to our next interview.

Break: [00:09:54.69] Personal and professional development is essential for successful H.R. leaders. Join Upskill HR to access live training, community, and over a hundred on demand courses for that dynamic leader. HR recert credits available. Visit UpskillHR.com for more.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:10.91] Marsha Lacey is a corporate director of human resources for LBA Hospitality. Marsha is responsible for managing the company's people resources, planning, developing, implementing and evaluating HR strategies. Her experience in various industries and prior military experience and advanced degrees in H.R. management has led her to her passion for understanding people providing a positive influence and helping them unlock their potential through training and development. With both her PHR and SHRM-CP certifications, she is an advocate for HR professional learning and is an adjunct instructor for Troy University, and she often speaks on leadership, employee development and other H.R. related topics. Hi Marsha, welcome to the Workology Podcast. Can you tell us a little bit about LBA Hospitality and the types of jobs you're trying to fill?

Marsha Lacey: [00:11:02.99] Hi, thank you for having me. Yes, absolutely. We are a company that provides third party management of hotels for other hotel owners and essentially we're responsible for staffing every position within the hotel. So from general manager, assistant general manager, all of the department managers, sales, food and beverage, housekeeping and maintenance.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:11:27.89] Wow. I know that that is really opening up. So you guys are having to move very quickly and staff up for the for the companies and the clients that you support.

Marsha Lacey: [00:11:39.51] Yes.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:11:40.58] What is the biggest challenge you're facing right now when you're recruiting for your clients at LBA Hospitality?

Marsha Lacey: [00:11:48.44] Well, as you know, as you can imagine, being in the hospitality industry, every position interacts with the general public to some extent. Since the onset of the pandemic, one of our biggest challenges has been dealing with the fear of working with the public due to the potential, right? Of contracting covid. This is compounded by the fact that the hotel business is a 24/7 industry and it relies solely on occupancy. The work schedules often vary depending on the number of guests checking into the hotels. And because of this, many of our line level positions, such as room attendance, guest service representatives and food and beverage associates are classified as what we refer to as variable hour positions, which just means that the number of hours available to work can vary week to week based on the occupancy of the hotel. So today, because there are so many other companies vying for the same talent, not being able to guarantee a set schedule week after week with the same number of hours, it has really become challenging. I would also say that occupancy, because occupancy, unfortunately, has declined drastically. Due to the pandemic, we did have to lay off many of our associates at the onset and operate the hotels with an extremely limited staff, and unfortunately, because those associates were required to work in multiple departments and sometimes very long hours as occupancy started picking up, some of them just became burned out and made the choice to leave the hospitality industry altogether. So we see that mostly in some of our management positions because our managers had to fill in and work all of those different hours that we did not have the line level associates in. And they've just decided that maybe hospitality isn't the right industry for them right now. And so for us trying to get some of those managers back, this has been quite challenging.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:13:55.63] Wow. Well, I know all of us are, are planning our, our vacations and our trips. So we are wanting to make sure that that, the hotels and restaurants on the resorts are stacked up so that we can have a really great experience. And I know you're, you're wanting to do that, too. You mentioned some of the challenges with hiring right now. What are some ways that you have flexed and adapted with success, maybe for others that they can learn from

Marsha Lacey: [00:14:25.63] With most of our portfolio consisting of limited service hotels? We've always made it a point to cross train across departments. So historically, this has always helped in some ways as we've been able to move associates into other positions and it gives them more of an opportunity for growth. So we are continuing to rely on that process. We've also created an internal manager task force with associates who are capable and willing to travel and assist other hotels that have, you know, are having more difficulty in some of those staffing areas. And that also creates an additional opportunity for growth and development from our recruiting and hiring standpoint. The need to evaluate wages obviously was a need, but we also took the time to evaluate our total compensation. And so we began considering ways that we can enhance our current health benefits, our paid time off policies, and we are in the process now of reinstating our bonus plans. Additionally, we've made some business intelligence changes by moving to a more proficient HRIS and accounting system that essentially moves the candidate from the applicant tracking system all the way through the entire employee cycle. This also allows the associate to self manage many of the things that are related to their individual employment. We've incorporated technology to allow for job postings to auto post on multiple job boards and social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. We've enhanced our referral bonus to now also include a hiring bonus for the person who was referred. You know, we all know that word of mouth is the best advertisement, and this allows our team

members to have a voice in building their own teams, which seems to work really well. And we've also established a QR code that we embed into all of our recruiting materials now that allow our applicants to, you know, they have that, that one click apply capability.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:16:35.50] This is like the master class for all the things that you need to be doing to be able to compete in, in this talent market. And I feel like you just rattled off, you know, three years worth of programs that you guys have probably squished into implementing and making changes to in a period of months. So that's really impressive.

Marsha Lacey: [00:16:59.10] Well, some of the things we were doing, hopefully we're just doing them more efficiently and more rapidly now, maybe we're hoping our reaches is a little bit further than it was pre pandemic.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:17:11.64] How are you measuring success when it comes to your work at LBA Hospitality? What metrics equals success and what a success look like for you?

Marsha Lacey: [00:17:22.53] Well, of course, as a management company, we are hired to effectively manage and produce revenue for the owners of our hotels. So from an operation standpoint, of course, we rely on the financial statements. We rely on guest satisfaction surveys, sales reports, things of that nature. From an HR standpoint, ultimately, success is found at happy associates. Happy associates from our team equates to satisfied guests and those in return, you know, our guests keep coming back to our hotels, which generates the revenue that our owners expect. So it's very important to me to do everything that we can to make sure our associates are as happy as possible. Obviously, we utilize the most, most of the standard H.R. metrics, such as turnover reports, time to fill reports, performance reviews and things of that nature. But our leadership team also at the regional and our executive level, we spend a lot of time discussing trends and concerns that our managers and our associates are experiencing at the property level. So we rely on associate opinion surveys as one form. Those are really great, but we've also created several advisory councils as well. Many times associates are willing to share more freely and offer suggestions whenever that feedback can be given peer to peer versus to their direct supervisor or to the to the corporate teams. So we want to be able to give them the opportunity to do that.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:18:56.19] I love the task force and the associate teams of conversations, because you're right, they when they're talking to their peers, that's when they spill the tea and tell you what's really going on so that you can you, as the leadership team can make some meaningful change.

Marsha Lacey: [00:19:12.84] Yes. And we have I mean, our referral bonus is just one example and incorporating the hiring bonus since the onset of the pandemic. That's one of the things that was really recommended from from the property level. So it's it's awesome to hear their suggestions because they see things from a different perspective. They're in it day after day and they're actually, you know, doing the work.

And sometimes from a corporate standpoint, you don't get the opportunity to see that as closely as they can present it to you.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:47.04] Well, Marsha, I know that I and our listeners would love to hear more about the work that you're doing. Where can people go to connect with you and to learn more about LBA Hospitality?

Marsha Lacey: [00:19:59.67] Sure. Our company website is LBAHospitality.com. And I am also on social media, you can find me on LinkedIn as Marsha Lacey and I'm also on Twitter, @mjcbama. I would love the opportunity to connect with anyone who's interested.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:22.83] Amazing. And we'll link to your LinkedIn company website and your Twitter in the show notes. So I really, really appreciate you taking the time to chat with us today.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:35.65] Our last and final interview is with Shelly Wilt. She is a Talent Acquisition and Operations Leader in the restaurant and hospitality industry with CAVA. She has a passion for data science and all things people. Hi, Shelly, welcome to the Workology Podcast. Can you tell us a little bit about CAVA and the type of jobs right now that you're trying to fill?

Shelly Wilt: [00:20:59.11] Yeah, absolutely. Hi, Jessica. Thank you so much for having me, CAVA. You know, it's, I don't even know where to begin. I'm so proud of CAVA. We we are the fastest growing Mediterranean QSR concept in the United States today. And that alone, I mean, who doesn't love Mediterranean? It's healthy, it's fresh and I think larger. We're just a socially conscious company. And though we're rapidly expanding, we're a company that really tries to do things like sourcing locally when we can, being responsible leaders in our communities and in larger taking a stand for our people. We're known for that. And so we're just a humble company that's rapidly growing, entrepreneur founded and with that are hiring everything and anything. We, we're opening up fifty four locations this year, looking at another hundred next year, post-covid. And so with that, we've got a lot of opportunity. Anything from, you know, somebody just looking for that first shot at their first job in our restaurants as a team member all the way up through senior SVP roles that we're hiring for for our support centers. And so we try to do a lot of promoting from within and really, you know, giving people a true career path to go from team member to SVP, CEO, whatever it may be. And so we're we're hiring for essentially everything.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:22:19.66] That's why I love the restaurant industry, because really, you you have so many options and you don't have to have a traditional background to move quickly through an organization.

Shelly Wilt: [00:22:31.81] Agreed. That gives a lot of people, you know, just that first shot at an opportunity and it gives them a career path whether or not they have a formal education or experience in that field.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:22:42.28] So what's the biggest challenge you're facing right now recruiting talent at CAVA?

Shelly Wilt: [00:22:46.69] You know, it's interesting. You hear a lot of things today. You hear, you know, no one wants to work, you know, unemployment, stimulus, labor migration out of geographical areas too, you know, people are moving out of the restaurant industry as a whole. And when I hear those things, I think, wow, if you have that perspective, you're going to fail. It's it really comes to mind set in changing people's perceptions on people. And so I would say our biggest challenge is doing just that, you know, training and coaching people to hiring managers to get out of their own way and to look at the labor crisis as an opportunity and quite frankly, as being the ding thing that's happened to our industry. And I, I say that because it's forcing people to look at talent differently, whether it's our internal talent or talent that's coming in. And if you think about it, you know, a lot of times in a restaurant there could be that shy cook. You know, nobody talks to this gal, you know, pre covid, you know, she's just somebody that kind of sneaks through the back door and doesn't even get a hello. And and, boy, has that perspective changed. You know, after covid people started to say, wow, I value that cook that's coming in the front door, whether she's shy, introverted or what, I'm going to talk to her and make an effort to do that, so that helps retention.

Shelly Wilt: [00:24:00.79] From a staffing standpoint, you know, a lot of times in the restaurants you could have that poor kid who took two bus lines to apply for your 15 dollars an hour job, and they're a little sweaty coming into their interview. And in the past, pre covid, you know, that that person might have been overlooked. But now we see that person a little bit differently and we look at them and say, well, that's commitment. That person took two bus lines to get here. They busted their butt, but they're sweating to come into the interview. So it's a really, you know, the challenge is training people to relook at the way that they look at their own people and their talent and to consider hiring outside the box. And I think that's, that's the biggest piece across the industry as a whole. But I think it's good because we now appreciate the people we have.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:24:41.14] I love that. And I love its mindset because you're right. Like, if that person took two buses to be able to come to your restaurant to to come to the interview, they are going to be there on time. And you want that person part of your team.

Shelly Wilt: [00:24:55.63] That's right. That's right. And even with our supports in our roles or corporate positions like in the past and not necessarily CAVA, but other companies I've been with, you might turn somebody away if they have purple hair and heaven forbid, a nose ring, you know, for a marketing role. And and ultimately, we're seeing now that companies are realizing that could be the best outgoing person they've ever hired in a creative position. So just across the board, I think it's it's helping our industry.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:25:20.62] I think you described me. I have purple hair and a nose ring sometimes. So. Yeah, no, it's not, it's not just your restaurant employees. It's everybody. They just want to be comfortable to be who they are. I know, I know that hiring is a challenge. That's why you and I are talking. I wanted to ask what are some ways that you and the covid team have flexed and adapted with success right now?

Shelly Wilt: [00:25:44.92] Definitely just, you know, number one, changing that mindset and also looking at speed. You know, no longer can a hiring manager say, I want to play the field a little bit, I want to talk to 50 people, you know, before I make a decision so number one thing is speed, getting them to make decisions quickly and truly make connections with people. If you think about it, you know, it's, it's so funny. Like, you'll often hear, you know, text recruiting is the new thing. And I'm like, oh, no, it's not. It's been around for 30 years. People truly want to make a connection. So using video job descriptions, I'm encouraging candidates to do video resumes through our platform is important and just truly making sure that when we do interview that candidate, that the hiring manager is moving quickly and that they're giving them the quality time and attention that they deserve.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:26:34.38] I love that. And it sounds like a lot of training and focus and conversations and good relationship building with that hiring manager to ensure that they are moving quickly, evaluate candidates and then fill in those roles so that they can step up and and serve customers and drive profitability.

Shelly Wilt: [00:26:53.01] That's right. Being thoughtful and letting them bring their full selves to the to the team.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:26:57.69] That's what we all want. That's what we all want. How do you measure success when it comes to the work that you do at CAVA?

Shelly Wilt: [00:27:05.20] So really for us it's two things. I think that Quick Service Base is a very data driven space in the restaurant industry in general. So we definitely love our data, but we put common sense and smart thinking behind that data and explain the reasons why. So whenever we share data like time to fill quality at a higher you know, how long it takes an applicant to get through our ATS system, we we want to put that into a visual explanation or human, we want to put the human content behind that and really help the data make sense. And ultimately, for me, it's satisfaction, satisfaction across the board. How well did that candidate, you know, feel that they were treated throughout the process? Are they excited about their onboarding experience? Is the hiring manager equally excited and just as engaged with a candidate? Those things are key for us.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:27:54.18] I love that you're data focused. I think that's critical. And you don't have a moment to waste that good talent. Taking the two buses, they might be talking to somebody next door. So you want to be able to move quickly to snag those people and get them started at your company.

Shelly Wilt: [00:28:09.72] Absolutely.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:28:09.99] How are you communicating your results and what success looks like with your executive team? Sounds like hiring managers too and and your executive leadership team.

Shelly Wilt: [00:28:19.32] You know, ultimately, you know, I think we try to communicate with our executive team the way that we would do with candidates. So if we want our executive leaders and our hiring managers to be comfortable with video interviewing, with, you know, video job descriptions, we have to do that with them as well. And so we try to take the data, put it into visually appealing, you know, dashboards. We, video calls, video messages. We use a lot of cool tools. But really, we want to communicate with them the same, the same way that we do with our candidates. And as far as success is concerned, ultimately, I think because we are an entrepreneur founded company, satisfaction is number one for them. So they want to make sure that our business partners feel supported, that the candidates are happy, and that we've got retention within our teams. Those are big for us.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:29:06.48] I love that you guys are storytellers. I mean, really, that's, you're telling story through data and using the tools and technology that your candidates are using to talk to all the leaders in the company. Shelly, I loved and I know that other listeners have also enjoyed hearing from you and learning more about the work you're doing. Where can people go to connect with CAVA? Maybe they're like, hey, I need to come and work with Shelly. You probably have recruiting jobs open, but where can they also connect with you?

Shelly Wilt: [00:29:33.39] Absolutely. And I do have a recruiting job open. So anywhere I'm on every social platform imaginable. You can just look me up @ChefRecruits. On LinkedIn, @ShellyRWilt. Just look me up there, or certainly our career site at CAVA.com/careers. We've got a lot of fun video content on there. So definitely check us out.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:29:55.65] We will link to your job site, your LinkedIn profile and Twitter on the show notes for the Workology Podcast. So thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us.

Shelly Wilt: [00:30:04.89] My pleasure. Thank you, Jessica.

Closing: [00:30:06.75] I love hearing from TA leaders and getting insights and inspiration, especially now with so many of us working crazy hours and try to fill your company's open job ranks. Right now, you and I need resources, information and support now more than ever. If you are interested in being a part of our TA Insight series or want to nominate someone you can visit www.insights.com. A special thank you to Heroes Jobs for powering the TA Insights series. The Workology podcast is sponsored by Upskill HR and Ace the HR Exam. Now, thank you for joining the Workology Podcast. This podcast is for the disruptive workplace and HR leader who's tired of the status quo. My name is Jessica Miller-Merrell, until next time you can visit Workology.com to listen to all our previous Workology Podcast episodes.