

Study finds constraints causing significant post-pandemic stress for hospitality job seekers

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Researchers at the University of Houston Conrad N. Hilton College of Global Hospitality Leadership say post-pandemic job search and work

constraints in the hospitality industry are causing higher stress for job seekers, leading to more turnover and less qualified candidates.

"About a year after the pandemic, the vaccines started rolling out, but there were still a lot of constraints," said Juan Madera, the Curtis L. Carlson endowed professor at Hilton College. "We found the higher the number of constraints, the higher the stress among [job seekers](#) and, in turn, the higher intentions were to leave the industry."

In a study published in the [Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management](#), Madera and his Hilton College colleague, Ph.D. candidate and teaching fellow Iuliana Popa, found the pandemic intensified constraints on job seekers' ability to find things like [child care](#), time to interview in-person and transportation which increased their overall stress levels. And if job seekers had [family members](#) that were immunocompromised or were at high-risk for contracting COVID-19 themselves, there was even more stress and uncertainty.

"Hospitality is such a high-touch industry, there's a lot of interaction with people and that presents many challenges," Popa said. "Because of the face-to-face, close contact nature of the business, job searching in hospitality can constitute a greater risk to people's well-being."

Working conditions, such as quarantining for a positive test, wearing masks, social distancing and no work-from-home option, were another constraint causing stress among job seekers and potentially pushing them towards positions in other fields. The hospitality industry was already facing lingering anger and fear from workers furloughed or laid off during the pandemic who were unlikely to return, as outlined in [a previous study by Madera and Popa](#). Now, they say, the situation is even more challenging.

"A talent pipeline, finding people with unique skills, is critical in the

hospitality industry," Popa said. "And despite pressure to increase wages, the industry is struggling right now because it can't offer the pay or the benefits, like [remote work](#), that other sectors can offer."

From February to April 2020, more than 8.2 million hospitality jobs were lost due to lockdowns, closures and layoffs, making it the hardest-hit industry in the U.S. by the pandemic in terms of workforce reduction. Two-thirds of all restaurant workers lost their jobs and 80% of all hotel rooms were empty. By 2021, only one in four of those jobs were recovered.

But according to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), the U.S. economy is expected to add more than 8 million jobs by 2031, with 1.9 million of them—or nearly 25%—in the hospitality industry. This rapid projected growth is the fastest of any industry at an annual rate of 1.3%, but it would still fall 500,000 jobs short of its 2019 peak of 16.6 million.

"The hospitality industry has always been slow in adopting progressive, pro-employee policies like a [living wage](#), more [vacation time](#) and better health benefits, but it's getting better to some extent," Madera said.

"Wages are going up, supervisors and managers are getting signing bonuses, but there's still a long way to go."

But Popa adds that it will take more than better pay and benefits to attract and retain top-end talent. Businesses will need to start showing their employees more empathy as well.

"Even before the pandemic, workers felt that was lacking," Popa said. "Organizations need to put themselves in the applicants' and employees' shoes and adopt policies that make them feel protected and appreciated. Hopefully, that will remove the constraints causing all of that stress, but only time will tell."

More information: Iuliana Popa et al, Job searching during the pandemic: The roles of job search constraints, stress, and coping on industry turnover intentions, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.10.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.10.013)

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