

Central Florida's largest workforce is lost in a fog with an uncertain future. Here's what needs to be done about it.

By [Richard Bilbao](#) – Digital Producer/Senior Staff Writer, Orlando Business Journal
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Stephanie Edwards knows all too well what's going through the minds of millions of tourism and hospitality workers who were laid off during the Covid-19 pandemic.

For 23 years, Edwards worked for Orlando-based Darden Restaurants Inc. (NYSE: DRI). She started as an hourly employee and moved up the ranks, nearly three years ago reaching her most recent position as head of human resources for Bahama Breeze, one of the company's brands.

Edwards loved her job and being part of the hospitality industry, she said. However, it abruptly changed in July, when she was informed her position was being eliminated as a result of the pandemic. Darden merged her duties with another division to consolidate operations.

It's a common story in Orlando, most prominently in tourism and hospitality, since government lockdowns caused people to essentially stop going out and/or traveling, which led to major workforce reductions.

Leisure and hospitality, which boasts Central Florida's largest workforce, also has the biggest employment gap with 97,400 fewer workers as of March 2021, per the most recent U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Many industry positions, ranging from hotel housekeepers to event planners to some restaurant jobs, may not recover anytime soon. As a result, many — like Edwards — must reinvent themselves.

While she's job hunting, she's also been consulting. Among the companies she's working with are those that no longer have a full-time human resources employee or recruiter, but still need help to create job description, salary and benefits information for other new positions.

"I never had to market myself to anyone who didn't know me. And that's what you have to deal with in a time when the market is flooded with applicants."

The primary culprit to Central Florida's workforce debacle is the collapse in travel and convention business, said Wells Fargo Senior Economist Mark Vitner. However, some of the region's other industries have proven to be far more resilient during this economic downturn. That emphasizes the need to find ways to rapidly retrain leisure and hospitality workers for sectors that are growing and less volatile, he said.

"Some of the fastest growth in the region has taken place away from the tourist corridor. While the recovery story largely will be about the bounce-back in tourism, Orlando's secular growth increasingly is being driven by technology, health care and professional services."

Even an anticipated economic recovery may not fully solve the hospitality industry's problems. Take this statistic: every 10 people directly employed on a U.S. hotel property support an additional 26 jobs in that respective community, a study by Oxford Economics showed. Hotels are expected to end the year down 500,000 jobs, so based on the study's pre-pandemic ratio, another 1.3 million hotel-supported jobs are in jeopardy this year, the American Hotel & Lodging Association said.

That further emphasizes the need for hospitality industry workers seeking a stable job to find other options.

Opponents a-plenty

There's a lot of competition in the market now that hundreds of thousands of workers are fighting for the same prospective paycheck.

Compounding that is the fact that there are 145,000-plus fewer jobs in many of the Orlando market's top industries, including hospitality, transportation/trade/utilities, professional services, education and health care, government, construction and manufacturing.

Many businesses, such as hotels, are limiting services since there's not much customer demand, said Sean Snaith, executive director of the University of Central Florida Institute for Economic Forecasting. If things stay the same post-Covid, those service job may not be available anymore.

"If you traveled at all during the pandemic, hotels are not doing daily service to your room. I could see that continuing after the vaccine is distributed and the pandemic is over, as a cost-saving measure."

Offsetting those huge declines in local employment is a key goal as regional stakeholders introduce programs to help hospitality workers maximize their existing skillsets or upskill through rapid training for jobs in other industries.

For example, Orange County changed the way it looks at incentive programs for relocating or expanding businesses, and how it can assist those workers stuck in limbo, said Eric Ushkowitz, Orange County economic development administrator. The county even is considering putting language in incentive proposals tied to hiring displaced tourism industry workers, he said

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Another strategy is giving students ties to tourism along their career paths in other industries, said Youcheng Wang, dean of the UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management. Rosen College last fall launched a bachelor's degree in senior living management, connecting students with a segment of the health care industry ripe with employment opportunities, Wang said. The program focuses on management, rather than daily operations of taking care of seniors, Wang said.

The Rosen College also partnered with UCF's engineering and computer sciences college to encourage a workforce that would provide tech opportunities in hospitality.

Framing it right

Workers also may need to rewire the way they think to find that next job.

So said [Cheryl Brown-Merriwether](#), president of the Greater Orlando Society for Human Resource Management.

Techniques in translating skill sets to other industries will be critical in job searches, as well as leading unemployed workers to find other means — including volunteering — in both office and non-office environments to maximize marketing their skills, she said.



[Cheryl Brown-Merriwether](#)

“A lot of it is just language in terms of how you frame it and present it in such a way that an employer recognizes the content of that work. While people are unemployed or in transition, [they are] engaged in the community and using skills and talent to benefit other organizations.”

Of course, in the end, Orlando's travel industry will remain a juggernaut workforce, said Wang. The industry's energy and excitement, and the allure of exploring the world still will attract new talent, he said.

"Tourism is the No. 1 economic driver, and it plays such an important role. We have 35% of the people here working in and around the tourism industry, so the demand will be there."

Successes

- The University of Central Florida Rosen College of Hospitality Management in November 2020 launched a bachelor's degree in senior living management, providing a mix of health and hospitality classes. It also partnered with UCF's engineering and computer sciences college to find paths for those in tourism to meet technology needs.
- Industries such as construction are working to provide in-house training for trades where they require skilled labor.
- Hotel and restaurant businesses are reshuffling workers to cover needs in other areas.

Challenges

- Hotel and restaurants risk overworking employees, since many laid-off workers are not returning.
- Orlando International Airport's concessionaires are struggling to bring workers back fast enough rate to meet increased demand from customers.
- Long-term retention in the tourism industry needs to be addressed, including wages, benefits, career advancement and more to rebuild the workforce.

Resources

- The Jobs Partnership of Florida: (407) 641-0755; jobpartnership.org
- Greater Orlando Society for Human Resource Management: goshrm.org
- UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management: (407) 903-8000; hospitality.ucf.edu