

Training Top-Flight Hospitality

Why people development is vital to the premiumization of airport lounge experiences

sodexo live!

Feeling special is the new normal, and airport lounges must deliver every time.

Premiumization is transforming hospitality globally, with **guests expecting an elevated experience as standard**. This means that lounges looking to sustain loyalty and increase revenue must deliver to even higher standards consistently: **guests need to know that every visit will stand out**. Yet the rapid rise of the experience economy is creating a **gap between expectation and delivery,** visible in long waiting lines, variable service quality and a growing perception of overcrowding.

The key to the perfect experience has always been great people; employees whose warmth, generosity, and confidence under pressure convert even the simplest request into a moment that matters. But the hospitality industry is seeing **annual turnover rates of 70%-80%**, making it harder to find, retain and engage the people who have these essential skills.

Researching the evolving expectations of people with premium expertise

To help our airport lounge clients stay ahead of the challenge, we commissioned two waves of unique research into the perceptions and expectations of employees working in premium settings. In this snapshot report, we review the key findings and explain:

- **What's different about the people working in premium hospitality**
- **Why an elevated training experience is critical for this cohort**
- **Where the opportunities lie for airport lounges**

We also share how the Sodexo Live! Academy is transforming people development.

People working in premium settings have a unique outlook

Pay remains the top priority for all hospitality employees working in hotels, venues and resorts. But from food and beverage teams to concierge experts, those working in premium settings have distinct experiences and expectations:

Prestige matters when choosing an employer

77% of employees in premium settings perceive airport lounges as premium workplaces. Yet there is still an opportunity to strengthen this perception among the remaining 23%, particularly as these employees are more likely to switch to a role offering greater prestige (14%, compared to 9% in value settings).

Ongoing training & coaching feels natural

Almost twice as many employees in premium spaces get regular, ongoing coaching compared to those in value settings (39% vs 20%). And 24% experience 40+ hours of onboarding, compared to 10% in value settings.

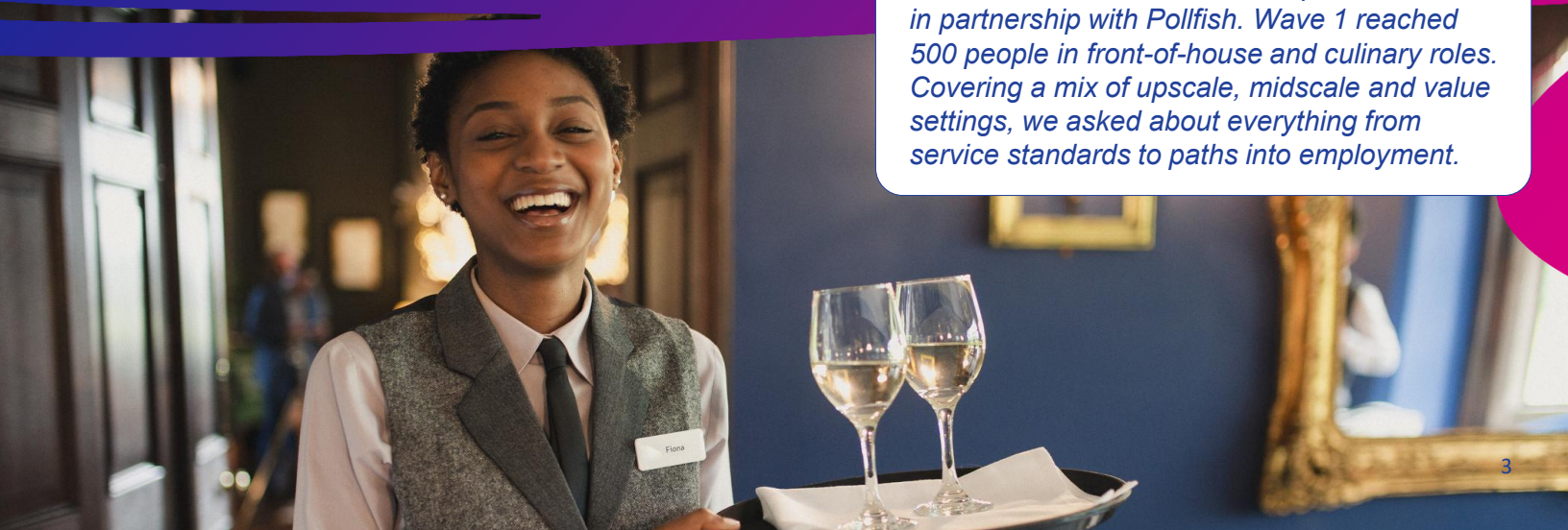
They're hard-wired for exceptional service

83% of respondents from premium settings say their guests expect "highly polished, personalized services", compared to 44% in midscale settings and 20% in value settings.

Talent attraction takes a little extra effort

Employees in premium settings are 2X more likely to use recruiters than those in value settings (20% vs 10%), and more likely to have found their current job via a personal referral (31% vs 21% midscale).

Both research waves were completed in the US in partnership with Pollfish. Wave 1 reached 500 people in front-of-house and culinary roles. Covering a mix of upscale, midscale and value settings, we asked about everything from service standards to paths into employment.



Career development is a signifier of prestige

Top-tier service needs a different kind of development experience, because perceptions of prestige inform long-term career decisions. Employees in upscale settings are worried that airport lounges won't deliver on their career aspirations.

Prestige represents long-term career value

61% of employees in premium settings already view airport roles positively. Among the remaining 39%, clear career progression could help overcome perceptions around prestige, motivating 49% to consider a move, and 57% among those in catering roles.

Ideal training format & frequency is role-dependent

While catering services roles had less experience of classroom-style learning, and less than 2% received AI-assisted coaching, they set the bar for onboarding:

43% of culinary employees expected 21- 40 hours compared to only 37% in front-of-house roles.

Portable certifications are game changers

Training is vital, and certification doubles its value: 63% of employees working in premium spaces see it as key. This rises to 65% if it's co-branded with known hospitality companies, compared to 30% for skills-only training programs.

There's a big appetite to fill training gaps

We asked what was missing, and **the #1 training gap was 'service recovery/dealing with difficult guests'.** 57% of culinary teams also chose 'food presentation/delivering a premium experience' over 'advanced cooking techniques' (43%).

Wave 2 reached 500 people working mostly in upscale and midscale settings. It dived deeper into perceptions of personal growth and training expectations.

Uncovering the opportunities for airport lounges

It's clear from our research that a considered approach to training can help to attract, retain and grow the talented people these unique spaces need. It reveals the practical steps organizations can take to sustain the exceptional brand experiences that grow their business:

01 Change perceptions to attract top talent

Premium lounges blend the highest quality food services with world-class hospitality, creating valuable training and development environments. This matters to employees in premium settings as they equate training quality with employer prestige, so partnering with leading culinary and hospitality brands will further elevate career development and attract the expertise lounges need.

02 Choice and place go hand in hand.

When extended vetting already complicates the recruitment process, there's a risk that onboarding gets rushed. Optimizing this critical training moment offers rapid payback by meeting the high expectations of employees from premium settings and ensuring effortless, brand-aligned hospitality on day one.

03 Elevate the experience for everyone by closing individual skills gaps

It's clear that employees working in premium settings are energized by training and want to resolve guest experience issues. Personalized development plans that match both their specialism and career aspirations will unlock the operational excellence that drives profitability.

Little touches can work wonders

We know many airport lounge workers struggle to park or find a restful place to eat.
By arranging premium parking and better back-of-house spaces, we make everyone feel like a VIP.

How the Sodexo Live! Academy delivers a transformative development experience

The Sodexo Live! Academy is a global training ecosystem that **empowers our 35,000 Experience Makers** to bring our clients' brands to life. From simulations in our **Experiential Training Centers** to **AI-enabled coaching** and **on-site learning**, its blended approach makes development personalized and sector-aligned to deliver **hospitality excellence** at scale.

Delivering for airport lounges worldwide

Complete immersion in a hospitality culture

From the very first moment, the onboarding experience role-models the warm welcomes and high standards that airport lounge guests expect.

Brand-specific training for confident execution:

Co-created and client-specific training programs – including immersive simulations – ensure day-one brand alignment and give guests the attentive service they value most.

Personalized, portable and premium career progression

Training and certification is delivered with renowned hospitality and culinary partners, like Lenôtre and the New Orleans Culinary & Hospitality Institute, to meet the prestige development expectations of people with premium experience



Inside our Flagship Airport Lounge Training Center

Based near our operations at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, this 5,000+ square foot facility is the first of its kind.

Proven to Power Retention

*150 members of our global airport lounge leadership team completed the Academy's hospitality management program here. 18 months later, the retention rate among this team is **92%**, helping to drive seamless execution for our clients.*

Expanding our Reach

Building on the success of the Atlanta facility, we're now actively developing plans for Training Centers in other cities.



Maximizing the benefits of a premium approach

As guest expectations evolve, so too does the world of work.
Through the Sodexo Live! Academy, we keep our clients ahead of it all.
By embracing AI where it enhances hospitality craft and using immersive Training Centers to maximize the value of a hands-on approach, we help hospitality-powered businesses to make every experience exceptional, at scale.

To find out more about our approach to people development, get in touch.

