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BOTTLE SERVICE: ACCOMMODATING LACTATING EMPLOYEES IN THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

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You've got a packed restaurant dinner rush and now a lactating employee you are legally required to accommodate. The problem is there is no time in the schedule for someone to leave the floor and nowhere to put her. What do you do?

Accommodating a breastfeeding mother returning to work after leave can be a challenge – but the restaurant industry faces some particular challenges because of tight schedules and often an inherent lack of space. Finding flexible and unique ways to accommodate lactating employees is key to staying in compliance with federal and local laws and keeping good on your investment in talent.

Before we dive in, why is this topic important? There are more than 1.4 million food and beverage jobs in the United States, making the hospitality industry the second-largest private-sector employer in the United States. And because more than 50% of the people working in hospitality are women, there are bound to be hundreds of thousands of nursing mothers in your workplaces at any given moment.

Meanwhile, the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), along with a multitude of state and local laws, require employers of certain sizes to provide reasonable break time and a private lactation space (other than a bathroom) for breastfeeding employees to express breastmilk. These requirements are not always so simple in a fast-paced restaurant environment.

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WHAT SPACE CAN YOU USE?

Many restaurants lack available private space for employees. Some solutions may be to use a manager's office or storage areas as temporary and flexible lactation space. Portable divider screens create privacy in these shared or common areas. It is key to provide a space shielded from intrusion from the public.

Some employers with limited space have decided to rent or purchase temporary lactation pods from companies like Mamava. These pods offer privacy, electrical hook-ups, and from as little as 14.5 square feet up to 26 square feet to accommodate employers of all sizes. These pods costs from \$250 per day for a temporary rental to \$11,000 to \$23,000 for purchase. If you have multiple lactating employees, you may also consider renting space from other businesses in close proximity to provide employees a private space.

WHERE DO YOU FIND THE TIME?

Flexible scheduling can help restaurants manage a lactating employee's need for breaks to express breastmilk. You can schedule lactation breaks during times outside of the rush period. If a lactation break is necessary during the rush, however, a manager or shift leader can fill in for the employee.

Some businesses may even allow employees to go home to breastfeed in between busy times or during double shift. Flexibility is necessary, and your supervisors should be aware of the need for lactation breaks when there is unscheduled overtime or extended duty hours.

CONCLUSION

These requirements may seem daunting and very expensive (depending on the size of your restaurant), but compliance with federal, state and local laws will certainly save your business money in the long run by avoiding litigation. One thing to remember is that this is only temporary. Accommodating breastfeeding employees is not only the law, it creates a positive workplace culture, and hopefully, will enable your business to retain talent.

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