

# Addressing the talent shortage in the food service industry



## Boosting skilled talent through 'Art of Food' and the 'International Chef Program'

*Sodexo's award-winning response to talent shortages within the food service sector in Australia.*

### The Challenge

The wake of the global pandemic—that saw supply chain shortages, restricted movement, and border closures—has significantly impacted all major Australian industries through the availability of skilled labour.

Working both within the hospitality and energy and resources sector, Sodexo Australia (Sodexo) was met with challenges in recruiting and retaining trained chefs, experiencing approximately 200 vacancies at its peak.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2022 Skills Priority List identified the most prevalent shortages in Trades Workers occupation group comprised of qualified trades and chefs. The ABS identified obstacles to recruitment caused by the lack of experience in the occupation, with 65% of applicants deemed 'unsuitable' despite holding certifications in the relevant field.

Considering the finite talent pool of trained chefs and the lengthy training period for chefs before qualification, Sodexo turned to its own structure to explore ways it could enhance existing resource pools.

### Sodexo Solution

Sodexo reviewed the kitchen structure, role responsibilities, rates of pay, and rosters as an immediate action to address the skills shortages.

By establishing a fresh foundation of chef duties at Sodexo and outlining what a 'day in the life' of a Sodexo chef entailed, the business shifted the expectations of skilled workers in its employment.

From this foundation, Sodexo was free to build upon and address two key areas integral to maintaining its workforce; the development of career pathways for chefs and the support of current kitchen staff.

In 2021, Sodexo partnered with North Metropolitan TAFE to develop the 'Art of Food Program' (AoF); an industry-first hybrid commercial cookery apprenticeship program.

Addressing critical skills shortages and experience shortfalls, AoF provided participants with real, on-site experience while completing a nationally recognised Certificate III in Commercial Cookery—all on a fast-tracked course to recognise prior and current skills for an earlier competency-based completion.

Structuring AoF with the majority of the theoretical components at the beginning of the program, participants had more time 'over the stove' in Sodexo kitchens. This approach allowed them to get practical experience and enhance their skills efficiently. Available only to existing employees, places in the program were limited and highly competitive.

To supplement this, Sodexo made Certificate IIIs in Hospitality available to current and incoming employees. By doing so, Sodexo promoted access to those looking to complete relevant training and receive transferable credits should they want to enter AoF.

Working in tandem, Sodexo implemented measures to support kitchen staff who, according to annual employee engagement data, felt under-supported.

Aware that the experience of COVID-19 on the Australian labour market was not universal, Sodexo identified countries such as India and the Philippines where excess talent surplus to requirement during the pandemic meant that Sodexo chefs had been stood down. Leveraging the business's international footprint, Sodexo Australia engaged with these countries to develop the 'International Chef Program'.

At its core, this saw Sodexo access international talent pools and partner with talent agencies to identify suitable candidates.

Engaging candidates with at least two years' experience in catering in high volumes, the program saw Sodexo Australia sponsor the visas that lead to relocation and deployment of these individuals to Australian sites.

To provide the best possible relocation experience, Sodexo Australia tailored its arrival services with a global mobility partner and their dedicated team of "relocation Heroes". This ensured all chefs received a soft landing in Australia.

As well as the social support, Sodexo's relocation program provided individuals with affordable shared accommodation arrangements to give them the time to source long term housing. The search for long-term accommodation was also supported by the program.

# Results

## Achieved Together

The implementation of both AoF and the International Chef programs provided Sodexo with greater stability in its workforce and, more broadly, boosted the skills of the talent within the sector.

In the last 12 months since the implementation of these programs, chef turnover at Sodexo has **decreased by 30%**.

Within the first month of the launch of the International Chef Program, Sodexo Australia received more than 250 expressions of interest. To date, 98 chefs have been sponsored and settled in Australia through this program, alleviating staffing pressures at high-performing sites. The monetary investment from Sodexo currently sits at approximately \$2.4 million, covering the costs of visa sponsorship and the individual chefs' relocation.

A total of 43 employees across three intakes have participated in AoF, resulting in five trade-qualified chefs and 22 qualified cooks. Covering the training costs, in excess of \$86,000, Sodexo has also invested 840 hours of training per qualified apprentice to complete their qualifications.

Sodexo employs one of the industry's highest volumes of qualified and trained chefs in the industry—more than 500 nationally. By upskilling and attracting talent, Sodexo's draw on the national chef pool has decreased, allowing other players in the industry greater access.

*These programs were recognised in the 2023 Australian Resources & Energy Employer Association (AREEA) Industry Awards, receiving the top recognition in the 'Workplace & Workplace Relations Innovation' category.*

## Meet the chefs

*"Sodexo has gone above and beyond to fully fund this program. It's truly remarkable to see a company that is so committed to investing in the future of its employees. I highly recommend this program and have already shared it with others who were just as impressed as I was!"*  
Luke Ferry (AoF Apprentice Chef)



*"I had such a great time with this program! It was amazing to discover a new passion for cooking and realize that I had hidden skills. I would 100% suggest this program to anyone. And the best part? Sodexo covered the entire cost, so you don't have to worry about a thing. Plus, you get to meet many interesting and diverse people along the way."*  
Chloe Anderson (AoF Apprentice Chef)