

How California North Coast casino owners up the ante in search for new workers

Written by Administrator
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Buoi Nguyen took a roll of the dice when he left a casino job he'd been at for seven years to join Graton Resort & Casino in Rohnert Park.

"A lot of times, it's not always greener on the other side of the pasture, but I wanted to take a chance to move up in slots, so I did," said Nguyen, who in 2013 left Cache Creek Casino in Sacramento to join Graton. "It was probably one of the best decisions I've ever made in my career and in my life."

The married father of two, who was hired as slot shift manager and promoted in 2017 to slot operations manager, said he enjoys good pay and benefits, including a 401(k)-matching program, further growth potential and a supportive culture at Graton.

Nguyen is happy at his job but casino owners are worried about their ability to find more people like him as the industry expands.

The American Gaming Association in a [survey released April 20](#), found its member CEOs "rank the labor shortage and competition for talent as a top concern for the industry's continued growth," Cait DeBaun, vice president, strategic communications and responsibility, told the Business Journal in an e-mail statement.

AGA members are raising base wages, offering jobs on the spot, investing in training, and providing bonuses and other benefits, she said, citing survey results.

Graton Resort and Casino

"We're always looking for people," said Greg Sarris, tribal chairman, Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria. "Currently, we're hiring across the board in food and beverage, gaming, hospitality, facilities, security — all of those positions."

Graton has offered 100%-paid employee health insurance since it opened in November 2013 and, last year, Sarris announced a minimum 10% pay raise for salaried employees, and hourly

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wage increases for tipped and non-tipped workers — in some cases an additional \$3 per hour, as the Business Journal reported at the time. Graton currently has a staff of 2,000.

A new quarterly discretionary bonus program was also announced.

“Each quarter, as long as you have no points against you and provide good guest service, you get a \$1,000 bonus,” Sarris said. “So in addition to what you're getting here, you get \$4,000 a year on top of that.”

And, although not unique to Graton, the casino provides in-house training, including for dealers and bartenders.

River Rock Casino

“We do offer dealers school,” said Sue Ascanio, CEO and general manager at River Rock Casino in Geyserville. “You don't have to have experience (but) you have to have personality.”

Owned by the Dry Creek Rancheria Band of Pomo Indians, River Rock, with a staff of 277, is among the smaller casinos in the North Bay, of which there are about 15. Although the smaller outfits can't compete for workers on the level of behemoths like Graton, they do have their own selling points.

“I think our culture is what differentiates us from some of the larger casinos,” Ascanio said. “I think it's like ‘Cheers,’ where everybody knows your name. That's how we look at it with our guests and with team members. It's that family atmosphere.”

River Rock has been focused on adding to its team, including offering up to \$2,000 sign-on bonuses, depending on the position, an incentive that Ascanio described as aggressive.

“Like everyone else, we have a lot of open positions — food and beverage, primarily; cage cashiers, security and housekeeping,” she said. “We do have a dedicated talent specialist. That

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is all she does is come up with creative ways to recruit to retain team members ... but it's not a one-(person) team. We're all ambassadors."

River Rock has an employee-referral program that pays out when it results in a successful new hire; employees are provided two free meals per shift; and the casino is currently giving staff a \$50 gas card each month to help offset rising fuel costs, Ascanio said.

Twin Pine Casino and Hotel

"I think we're in the same boat as just about everybody else, not just in the casino industry, but in general in that we are short staffed and are always hiring," said Kyle Lewis, director of marketing and guest services at Twin Pine Casino and Hotel, located in Middletown.

Twin Pine offers customer-service training, leadership-development programs, and dealer and pit boss trainings, among other specialties, said Lewis, whose employer has a staff of nearly 220.

"We want our employees to be able to see that there's upward mobility within the company," he said.

Lewis noted that casinos like Twin Pine, which added a hotel to its property in 2009, can offer workers coming from the hospitality industry — which suffered greatly because of the pandemic — a future with broader opportunities.

"We are very hospitality focused and we do have a lot of people coming from different (parts of the) hospitality industry into the casino," Lewis said. "Working for a casino opens the door to being a dealer, working at the hotel, finance and accounting, marketing. It just opens so many doors and creates opportunities for them to move around and move up within the company."

Twin Pine has a number of employees who have worked for the property for more than a decade, Lewis said, something he attributes to the casino's culture.

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“Our chairman is always saying that we're a family business, and we try and live by that,” Lewis said, referring to Middletown Rancheria Tribal Chairman Jose “Moke” Simon III. “I think that promotes longevity and people want to stay and work for us.”

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