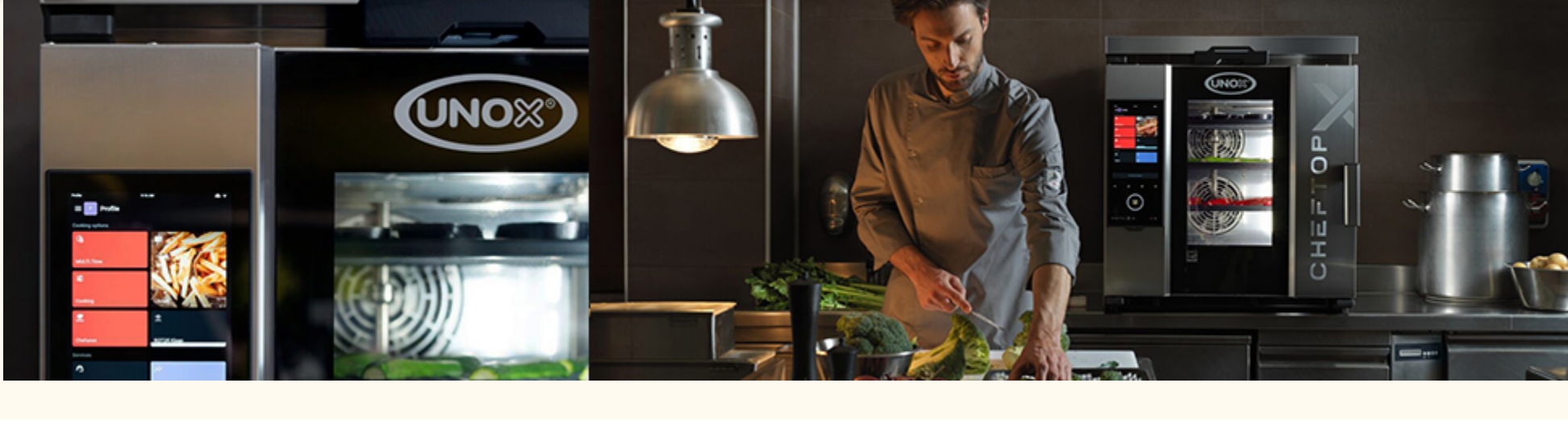




TECH | IN-DEPTH

How AI coaching and leaderboards are changing what happens on the floor

Nowhere to hide: how one startup is turning staff performance into a game, and the numbers venues are seeing because of it.

By Maida Pineda August 4 2026 6 min read



Restaurant & Catering Association benchmarking data show that wages, superannuation and salaries accounted for 40.25% of turnover among participating hospitality businesses in 2024–25, up from 27.91% in 2023–24. Restaurant owners and managers must ensure labour costs translate into revenue.

Bill Emeny has been working in hospitality for 20 years. He observed the biggest complaint in bars and restaurants is “I want another drink, but no one came and got me one.”

Hospitality Industry

From spreadsheets to startup

“I own two restaurants. The staff wouldn’t do what I want them to do. I was battling and struggling,” he shares. Frustrated with his staff’s performance, he was determined to find a solution: “I solved the problem using spreadsheets and data to try to get staff engaged, do their job better, and give better service. One day I was at my venue, and Vince walked by. I told him what I was doing. He said, ‘This is brilliant. I can make it better. I’m really good with SaaS.’ Using data analytics and AI, we solve the biggest problem in hospitality— staff not coming to sell you another drink.” Upsel.ai was born in August 2025, combining Emeny’s hospitality experience and Vince Edwards’ expertise as a Software Creator and SaaS developer.

Staff performance varies greatly, he observed: “Some staff were amazing. Some were average. Some were terrible. Some were hiding in the kitchen avoiding work, not being positive. Like when you’re not there, they just take the piss.”

Nowhere to hide: How the app works

“One of the big problems out there is the owner does not really have very good staff visibility,” Edwards chimes in. “So, what we do is we show for each staff member: their sales, their sales ratios, products they’re selling and all the data related to that staff member.” Just one look at the staff member’s page shows: total sales, target percentage achieved, beverage sold per hour, ROI, performance of FOH goal, revenue impact, efficiency versus team average, ranking in leaderboard, sales mix portfolio by revenue, and number of food vs beverage units sold.

“Once you show the visibility, they know there’s nowhere to hide,” Emeny says. With each staff member’s performance easily measured by the app, you can no longer hide poor performance. The app detects good and bad performers. Bad performers can watch the training videos on their phones.

Since rolling out the app in August 2025, Upsel.ai is now used in 50 venues in New Zealand and Australia.

Jolly Good Fellows, Taupō

Jolly Good Fellows, a British pub-themed restaurant and bar in Taupō, New Zealand, subscribed to Upsel.ai eight months ago. Jacki Hanning, the Restaurant Manager, says the owner, an accountant, appreciates detailed numbers. With the app, they are now able to track daily sales, staff performance, and missed opportunities with ease. Restaurants

The leaderboard has been crucial in improving the performance of their staff. Hanning says, “You can see very clearly where you’re not maximising sales, if your staff are maximising sales, and you can see very clearly which of your staff are not working to the best of their ability.”

Hanning uses the leaderboard to push her staff to perform better. “I use incentives for my staff if I want to make them sell better. I can put the leaderboard in front of them, and then they can rise to get to the top of it. It’s a little bit competitive, but that’s what younger staff are like at the moment. The leaderboard makes it easy to see who’s underperforming or not.” She noticed underperformers may get a little bit of ribbing from their colleagues. “You can see them sort of shrink a little and go, ‘Oh my gosh, I need to up my game.’”

To increase beverage sales, she will be starting a beverage challenge: “We’re going to do it for over a period of a month. Each week we’ll post the leaderboard. The top three will get a prize.” Hanning also rewards the person with the most reviews with a prize. They can win gift cards, cash or vouchers for a meal out. “They need to make sure they are logging in the app because if they’re not logging in, they don’t know what the incentives are and what they’re striving for.”

Smarter rostering, lower wage bills

Insights from the app have been crucial in making rostering decisions. Hanning says, “I can see where my peak sales are and where sales are being missed. Am I losing sales because I don’t have enough staff on, or whether I’ve got the wrong team on?”

After using the app for 8 months, Hanning can easily measure how much the business has improved: “We can see it in the numbers. We can see that we’re tracking well, that we’re tracking better than last year. I’m happy with how my staff are performing.”

First, their sales increased by roughly 20%. Second, their wage bill is dramatically down. She shares, “Each month we’re probably between \$4,000 and \$6,000 down in our wage bill, just because of smarter rostering decisions. We know when we need the people, and we know who we need when we need them.” Emeny observed similar results where his clients with 40% wages cost come down to 30 to 32% after using the app. Third, she shares, “We’re definitely getting a lot better reviews. We did have some pretty negative ones in the past few years, and they seem to have subsided now. Whether that’s up to Upsel.ai, I’m not sure. It certainly could be. There’s no proof that it is or isn’t, though.”

But she has clear evidence of improved service during the Rugby test on the All-Black Match: “We had so many people in the restaurant, but no one got sent away. Everyone got served. The staff made it work. Hopefully, that’s because of the video training that they’ve all been doing.” Restaurants

Training that actually fits the roster

“I think the training videos are another component of the app that is undersold. They’re short videos with a quiz that you do at the end. It means that your staff are all on the same page,” she volunteers. This ticks so many boxes for Hanning in the ease of training her staff: “They are all trained the same way by just watching the video. In hospitality, it’s very hard to get all your staff in one room at the same time. The fact that they can do that in their own time is proving to be really beneficial.” Best of all, when council comes around to do their annual inspection, Hanning can easily prove each staff member has done the required training.

Pairing Upsel.ai with incentives has been a game-changer for Hanning: “It’s not a disciplinary tool. You know you’re not going to discipline someone because they haven’t sold. You’re just going to incentivise them to do better.”

While restaurants like Jolly Good Fellows already benefit from improvements in running their business due to this technology, Edwards promises more upgrades: “We’ve got bigger plans coming with AI insights, AI Assist, AI coaching, AI training and AI Rostering.”

AI & Automation | Customer Experience | Staff Training



Commercial ovens to build your success.

Explore more topics

GROWTH

MENU

OPERATIONS

TECH

PEOPLE



PEOPLE

AI won't replace your GM: The human-first case for automation

Restaurant Business

Hospitality Industry

Aug 14



TECH

me&u launches all-in-one reservations platform to take on global booking giants

Restaurant Business | Aug 12



GROWTH

Applejack opens new all-day dining venue at Sydney Opera House

Restaurant Business | Aug 6



OPERATIONS

Low to no waste kitchens are what we should all be aiming for

Danielle Norton | Aug 5

EXPLORE

Trending

Growth

Operations

Menu

Tech

People

SEGMENT

QSR (Quick-Service)

Casual Dining

Premium Dining

CONNECT

About us

Contact

Advertise

Restaurant Business

