

Cultivating Talent: A Case of Samurai Yakiniku

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Prologue

At Samurai Yakiniku, the Wagyu isn't the only thing that's sizzling the whole business is on fire (in a good way). Founder Wan Muhammad Asraff (WMA) had one bold idea: mix Japanese flavours with Malaysian heart, and serve it halal with hustle. But behind the juicy cuts and happy customers were challenges hotter than the grill staffing, training, and keeping the passion alive. As he cheekily puts it.

“Great meat needs great people nobody wants a steak cooked by someone who's half-cooked themselves!”

This story, however, is not just about one restaurant. The food and beverage (F&B) industry in Malaysia is one of the nation's most dynamic service sectors, contributing significantly to the economy and shaping lifestyle trends. Samurai Yakiniku provides a timely lens to explore how these broader industry issues play out in practice, and how one founder's approach to managing people becomes as important as the product he serves.

Entrepreneurial Journey and Business Foundations

Behind the success of Samurai Yakiniku stands WMA, a passionate entrepreneur with a clear vision: to introduce the essence of Japanese yakiniku to the Malaysian market, while ensuring the business remained accessible, halal-certified, and operationally sustainable. His journey into the food and beverage sector was not one of convenience but conviction. With a keen interest in Japanese cuisine and its meticulous discipline, he set

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out to build a brand that would resonate with Malaysian diners seeking authenticity and inclusivity.

Samurai Yakiniku was founded on the principle of offering a premium yet approachable Japanese dining experience. The restaurant is best known for its table-side grilling concept, where customers participate in the cooking process, creating an interactive dining experience. By ensuring that all dishes are halal-certified, WMA strategically positioned the brand to attract Malaysia's Muslim-majority market, which represents a growing segment of halal-conscious consumers.

From the outset, WMA understood that food alone would not guarantee long-term success. He placed strong emphasis on building a solid foundation of people development, inventory discipline, and service quality. This aligns with the idea that investing in employees' knowledge, skills, and abilities creates long-term organizational value. Under WMA's leadership, Samurai Yakiniku grew beyond just a restaurant it became a model of responsible growth, talent development, and operational excellence.

Forging the Team: Talent Management and Cultural Fit

Recruiting and retaining staff in Malaysia's F&B industry is notoriously difficult, particularly among younger workers who often view the sector as a temporary option. Samurai Yakiniku challenged this norm by focusing recruitment on attitude, potential, and cultural fit rather than prior experience. Candidates undergo trial shifts that test technical ability, stamina, adaptability, and teamwork. This practice reflects a competency-based approach to selection, increasing the likelihood of long-term retention.

Once hired, employees are provided transparent career pathways from dishwashers to branch managers where promotion is based on merit. This resonates strongly with Gen Z and millennial workers who value progression and fairness. Such initiatives reflect the Performance Management Cycle, which emphasises goal setting, feedback, and career development as integral to employee engagement.

Furthermore, Samurai Yakiniku embeds its values in the workplace culture, inspired by the samurai code (bushido): discipline, loyalty, and integrity. These values are modelled by leadership and reinforced through structured training and mentorship. For younger employees, this values-driven culture provides not only a job but also a sense of purpose and belonging, consistent with the growing literature on meaningful work in service industries.

Sharpening the Sword: Structured Performance Appraisal

To maintain consistent performance, Samurai Yakiniku introduced quarterly appraisals grounded in developmental feedback. Employees are assessed on service quality, operational efficiency, teamwork, and adherence to SOPs. Unlike punitive systems, Samurai Yakiniku's approach emphasises coaching and mentoring, aligning with the Performance Management, which frames appraisal as a continuous improvement process rather than a one-off evaluation.

This structured feedback process provides employees with clarity, reduces miscommunication, and fosters accountability. It also reinforces Herzberg's Theory, where recognition and personal growth serve as key motivators. High-performing employees are rewarded through promotions, new responsibilities, and training opportunities, reinforcing the link between performance and advancement.

Rewarding the Warriors: Motivation through Incentives

Employee motivation at Samurai Yakiniku is anchored in a structured reward system. Managers participate in a profit-sharing model tied to outlet performance, including cost control and customer satisfaction, while employees receive monthly incentives, leadership opportunities, and recognition programs. This reflects Herzberg's motivator factors achievement, recognition, and responsibility—that drive higher levels of engagement beyond salary.

Such incentives are particularly relevant in an industry where financial instability and low wages often undermine retention. By introducing both monetary and non-monetary rewards, Samurai Yakiniku addresses turnover challenges that can cost F&B boost up productivity annually. The approach also aligns with Malaysia MADANI values of inclusivity and shared prosperity, reinforcing the social as well as financial dimensions of performance management.



Epilogue

The case of Samurai Yakiniku shows that success in the halal F&B industry depends not only on good food but also on effective talent management. By linking practices to Herzberg 's and the Performance Management Cycle, it highlights how training, appraisal, and incentives can reduce turnover and build stronger teams. For managers, the lesson is clear: investing in people creates long-term business sustainability. For entrepreneurship studies, this case adds to our understanding of how human capital shapes competitive advantage. At the policy level, it points to the need for government support in training and talent development to address labour challenges in Malaysia's F&B sector.

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