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## Summer job prospects not so sunny for teen workers

By Dina Berta

**WEST COVINA, Calif. (May 5)** - [Cold Stone Creamery](#) manager Adrienne Navarro has 45 job applications from teenagers in her file cabinet and plans to hold group interviews this month to beef up her staff for the summer season. But out of those applications and any additional candidates who show up for the audition-style interviews, Navarro expects to hire only 10 or 15 teens.



*A sour economy and higher unemployment rates mean a deeper labor pool to draw from and less employee turnover, so teen workers are expected have difficulty finding jobs for the summer.*

"I'm looking for the elite — the best of the best," said Navarro, who is 18 years old and started with Cold Stone three years ago.

Navarro and restaurant managers around the country can afford to be choosy as summer approaches. A sour economy and higher unemployment rates mean a deeper labor pool to draw from and less employee turnover. For teenagers, though, finding that traditional summer job will be harder.

"Last year, teen unemployment was at a 37-year low, and from where I sit, I don't expect 2003 to be much better," said Renee Ward, founder and executive director of [Teens4Hire.org](#), an online job-posting board for teenagers based in Huntington Beach, Calif. "I expect it to be worse."

The restaurant industry long has been the first employer for young people. Teens represented roughly 20 percent of nonmanagerial employees in foodservice occupations in 2001, and the industry still is the largest employer of 14- and 15-year-olds, according to the [National Restaurant Association](#). But that trend appears to be changing as more adults vie for hourly jobs and operators try to maintain consistent staff levels throughout the year and avoid running afoul of federal or state child labor laws.

"When you look at quick service and fast food and casual dining, they are tending to hire older rather than younger," said Ward, whose Web site lists 2.4 million job seekers, ages 14 to 19. "Instead of [16- and 17-year-olds], restaurants are skewing to hire at least 18. And ideally they are looking to hire college graduates into positions."

Indeed, some fast-food operators said they no longer look for high-school students to fill openings. "I have plenty of adults to fill all my summer positions," said [McDonald's](#) franchisee Steve Bigari in Colorado Springs, Colo. "I'm doing really well in the staffing department. I do not need any kind of summertime help."

Denver-based [Good Times Burgers and Frozen Custard Co.](#) has preferred to build its hourly workforce with adults, said Gary Staton, director of human resources.

"We've always been of the mind-set that if we're going to train somebody and put time and effort in, we want them to work through the fall," Staton said. "If we hire teens, it would be with the assumption that they would work during the school year."

San Antonio-based [Taco Cabana Inc.](#) prefers to hire teens who are at least 18 years old because the quick-service concept also serves alcohol, said Doug Gammon, vice president.

"Our store managers may hire a 17-year-old to work the cash register or the drive-thru, but they can't serve margaritas and beer," he said. "There are huge restrictions."

Legal restrictions are greater for 14- and 15-year-olds, who can work for fewer hours during school and in the summer. Those aged 16 years or older

can work any time of the day for any number of hours, according to the Fair Labor Standards Act, although some states may have stricter rules. A restaurant must follow whichever government regulation is stricter.

Some businesses in areas around the country, however, experience a noted spike in business during the summer and specifically look for more teenagers.

Twelve years ago, the [Wisconsin Restaurant Association](#) joined a successful push by businesses and the state's tourism industry to increase the number of hours teenagers could work in the summer and pushed back the start date for school to Sept. 1 for all students in the state.

"One of the big problems, and not just for restaurants, but for resort towns as well all over the state, is the need for workers," said WRA spokeswoman Sara Lathrop Stinski, who, as a teenager, worked at the Dells, a tourist destination some 200 miles northwest of Chicago.

[Ruby Restaurant Group](#) in Newport Beach, Calif., increases its summertime staff in California stores with teenagers.

"Our business goes up dramatically in the summer, and we have to have additional team members to manage," said Doug Cavanaugh, founder and chief executive of the 1940s-diner-theme restaurants. Cavanaugh does not expect store managers to have problems finding younger workers as Ruby's Diner has gained a reputation as a place for teens to hold their first jobs, he said. Parents will encourage their children to apply there, and as employees grow up and go on to college, their younger siblings will replace them.

"So far we have a great supply of young people," he said.

[Hot Dog on a Stick](#), a Carlsbad, Calif.-based chain with 101 stores located in shopping malls and centers throughout California, will increase its workforce by 20 percent this summer, mostly with teenagers, said operations director Toni Estrada. Teens already compose about 75 percent of their employees.

The tall, brightly striped hats employees must wear have not deterred teens from applying for jobs, she said.

"People who don't want to wear the hat don't want to work here," said Estrada, who used to wear the hat when she started with the company several years ago. "We're about customer service and putting on a show. We're for those who aren't afraid of the hat."

The millions of young people looking for jobs through [Teens4Hire.org](#) refute media claims that teenagers do not want to work or don't have to work, Ward wrote on the Web site's job board.

In a survey that asked 6,500 teens where they wanted to work, 20 percent picked fast-food and full-service restaurants, second behind the 27 percent who selected retail. Other ranked job categories were arts and entertainment, sports and recreation, and health care.

"It's not entirely true that teens are shunning summer jobs," Ward said. "They're not finding summer jobs." She further contends that if a teen can't find something to do with his or her time, "they might go to summer school or do volunteer work."

Teens also must compete for jobs not only against their peers but also against adults.

Noodles & Company tries to achieve an even staff level throughout the year, and that means more adult than teenage workers, said John Puterbaugh, vice president of human resources for the Boulder, Colo.-based chain.

And adult employees are not proving difficult to find given that the national unemployment rate was 5.8 percent in March.

A 40-year-old employee at a Noodles store in Milwaukee told Puterbaugh she had been a biochemical engineer who, unemployed and needing work, took the job at the restaurant.

"I think there are a lot of people out there who need the employment as a first priority," Puterbaugh said.