Brilliant

How Captain D's built a smarter hiring process and cut frontline turnover by 85%.



Slowing down hiring to reduce turnover.

Captain D's never had a hiring volume problem. If anything, the seafood quick-service restaurant chain had the opposite issue. But that speed led to turnover. So they introduced an intentional pause into their process — an assessment that helped them slow down, learn more, and retain better.
A faster process doesn't do much good if it's just helping you make the wrong hire more efficiently.

So instead of chasing more speed, Captain D's built something to slow itself down on purpose — a data-backed personality and cognitive benchmark that's now shaped hiring for every role in the company, from frontline crew to general managers. Three years and multiple iterations later, frontline turnover has fallen dramatically, and the company has a validated, role-specific picture of what a great hire actually looks like.

Who is Captain D's

Captain D's is a quick-service seafood restaurant chain, and like most QSR operators, its frontline roles don't map cleanly onto a single job description. Team members (Captain D's calls them "guest specialists") aren't slotted into narrow lanes like cashier or cook. Everyone does a little bit of everything, which means the company needs people who can pick up new tasks quickly, work well with a small team, and stay engaged doing repetitive work day after day.

Above the guest specialist level sits a familiar restaurant hierarchy: shift leaders (the company's assistant manager role), general managers running individual locations, and area directors and multi-unit managers overseeing several stores at once. Each level touches the business differently — a guest specialist affects a single shift, while a general manager's decisions ripple through an entire location's performance, culture and turnover.

Captain D's has used Traitify (now part of Crosschq) for roughly three years, expanding it methodically from a single frontline tool into a role-specific system covering nearly every position in the company.



The challenge.

The challenge.



Creating a more validated application process.

When Captain D's began evaluating a new applicant tracking system, MacMillan knew it would make an already-fast hiring process even faster. But that was actually part of the problem, not the solution.

"Our fastest hire isn't always our best hire," said MacMillan.

He wanted to build in what he called a "deliberate pause" — something that would give hiring managers objective criteria to evaluate candidates against, rather than relying purely on gut feel and interview charisma. But building that pause was harder than it sounded, for one specific reason: Captain D's didn't have annual performance reviews to build a benchmark from. There was no clean, existing dataset of "what a great guest specialist looks like" sitting in a spreadsheet somewhere.

On top of that, the company was already rejecting a large share of applicants by instinct. MacMillan estimated the team was saying no to somewhere around 60% to 70% of applicants, on top of a meaningful ghosting problem that thinned the pool further before anyone even got hired. If that filtering was happening regardless, MacMillan wanted it to be filtering for the right reasons — grounded in something more objective than a hiring manager's read on a 20-minute interview.

"We realized our fastest hire isn't always our best hire."



Sean MacMillan
VP Human Resources, Captain D's

Discovery

A truly customized view of candidates.

MacMillan's belief in psychometric testing predated this project by years — a product of his I-O psychology background and, as he put it, being "a big believer in the ability of psychometric testing to predict future performance."

When he went looking for a vendor, one company stood out for a specific reason: it didn't hand him an off-the-shelf personality test. It built a benchmark from Captain D's own people and data.

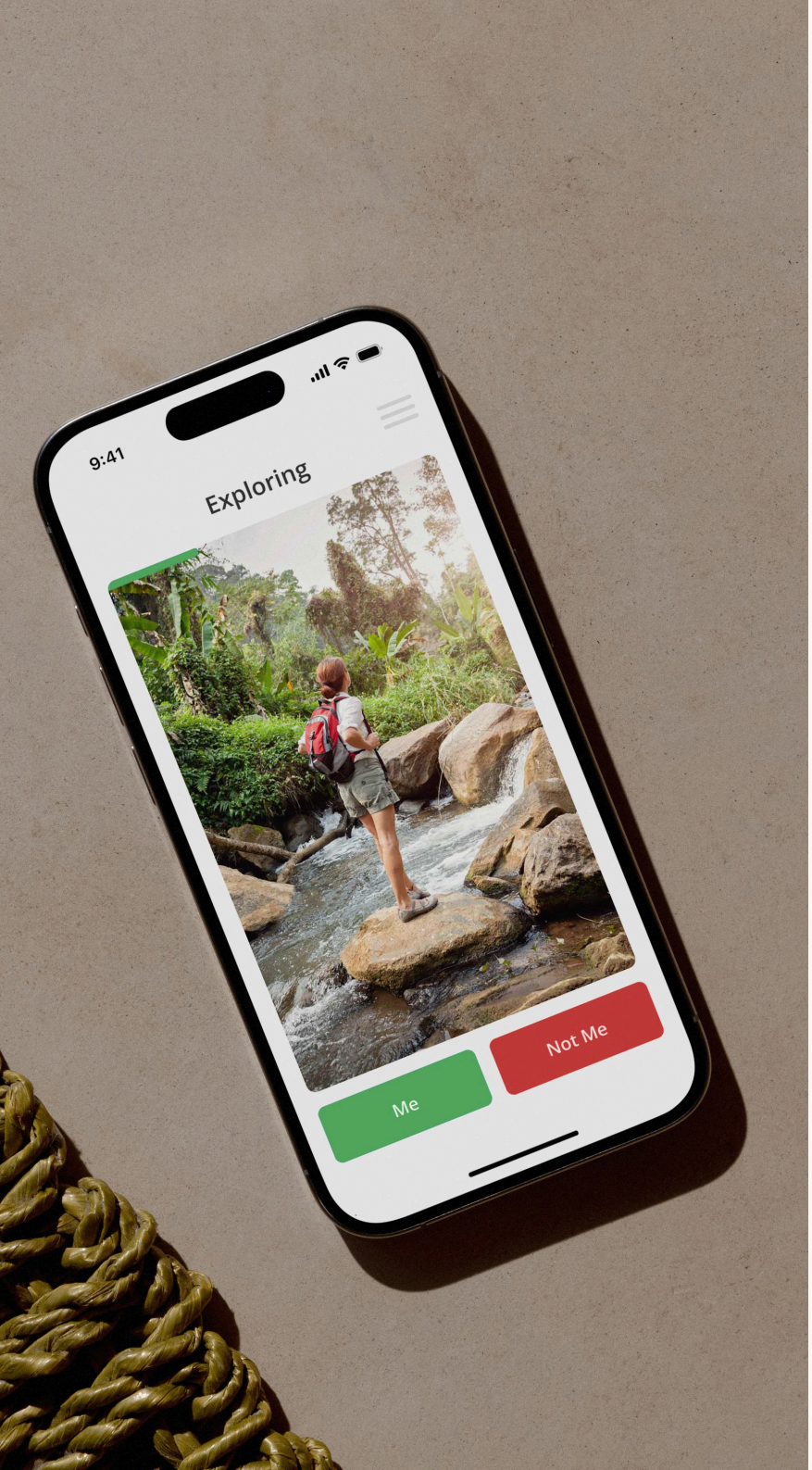
"There was really only one company that gave us a customized view for our people — that took our information and our data and said, ‘this is who would be best for you.’"

The customization that Traitify provided became the throughline for everything that followed. Rather than screening candidates against a generic "ideal employee" archetype, Captain D's built its benchmark from what its own top performers actually looked like — using proxy data like training completion rates, cashier performance ranking, and promotion timelines to stand in for the performance reviews the company didn't have.



The solution.

The solution.



Traitify assessments build a customized benchmark that fuels better decisions.

The rollout started narrow and grew more precise over time. Captain D's began with a Big Five personality assessment for guest specialists — the highest-volume, highest-turnover role in the company. About a year in, the team added a cognitive assessment layer for shift leaders, general managers, area directors and multi-unit managers, where more store-level performance data existed to validate against.

Roughly six months before this conversation, Captain D's took the customization a step further, splitting the shift leader assessment out from the combined general manager and assistant manager benchmark it had been using. The metrics that mattered, and the scores that predicted success, were different enough by role to justify separating them.

One of the most useful discoveries along the way ran counter to instinct: the candidates who perform best in interviews aren't always the ones who stay.

"The people that traditionally do great in interviews, that are the most gregarious and outgoing folks — those folks aren't always the ones that stay longer, because you have to do the same thing every day and some of the more expressive people are going to get bored with that," said MacMillan.

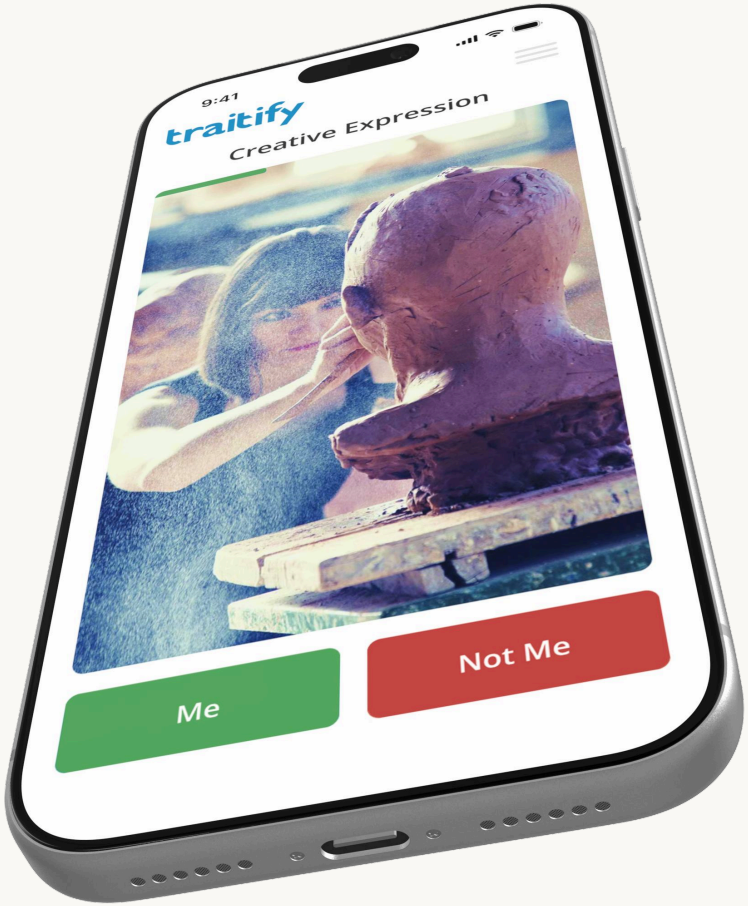
Rather than screening for maximum extroversion or charisma, Captain D's benchmark looks for a specific band within the Big Five — a sweet spot rather than an extreme — while staying loose enough not to choke off the applicant flow the company had always been fortunate to have.

Day to day, general managers retain real autonomy over who they hire. Green-scored candidates are the clear preference, but they aren't mandatory, and managers aren't blocked from hiring outside that range.

"We never wanted to take away the ability of an operator to make a decision," MacMillan said. "It's your call, you'll hire who you want. We just want to give you better information, a better tool to make that decision."

Hiring a red-scored candidate — particularly for a manager-level role — triggers a conversation with an area director or HR, not a rejection. Yellow-scored hires happen regularly too, since MacMillan considers them a reasonable calculated risk in the right circumstances. The internal messaging to operators is straightforward: green is good, and the door's open to talk if you want to go outside it.

Captain D's also applied the assessment internally, requiring every existing employee to take it when the program launched. That gave the team a performance baseline and, over time, a way to spot development needs in tenured employees being considered for promotion — without using a low score to stall anyone's career.



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The results.

The results.



Less turnover, higher performance, and faster new hire ramp speed.

The clearest, most immediate impact showed up in frontline turnover. Guest specialist attrition has dropped substantially since the assessment was introduced.

"It's gone down 85 points since implementation."

On the manager side, the impact shows up less in turnover and more in performance and ramp-up speed. When Captain D's ran the numbers on its combined assessment for general managers, the gap between top and bottom scorers was stark.

"A green on our general managers on the combined assessment had a predictive value that was about two and a half times more than somebody who scored a red," MacMillan said.

General managers who score well tend to hit full productivity faster, a pattern Captain D's tracks through a mix of training completion data and store-level scorecard metrics — sales, wait times, controllable costs and inventory shrink among them. And despite adding an assessment step to the funnel, external candidates haven't pushed back in any meaningful way. Captain D's built its application process to be fast enough that, assessment included, it's still quicker than what most competitors offer.

Internally, MacMillan describes a more cultural shift than a purely mechanical one — a change in how the company defines and hires for quality.

"On the cultural side, I think our operators see hiring for fit more than they see a predictive validity score. I know that's undefinable but I truly believe that the assessment score has helped us over time to know what fit and performance look like in an applicant."

85%

reduction in turnover.

The bottom line

A smarter, more intentional process that pays off in the long run.

Captain D's set out to make sure speed wasn't coming at the cost of fit — and built a role-specific, data-backed benchmark to prove the difference.

What started as a single personality assessment for frontline crew has grown into a layered system spanning guest specialists, shift leaders, general managers and beyond, refined every step of the way against the company's own performance data rather than a generic benchmark.

The payoff has been hard to argue with: guest specialist turnover down 80 to 85 percentage points, a roughly 2.5x predictive performance gap between top and bottom-scoring general managers, and a hiring culture that's moved past the assumption that the most charismatic candidate is always the best one. For a QSR chain built on consistency, that's exactly the kind of edge that compounds over time.

Smarter hiring intelligence.

