

# Chain Leader

INSIGHT FOR RESTAURANT EXECUTIVES

## The People Principle

Bravo Development's expansion plans put human capital first.

By Mary Boltz Chapman

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While the number of Bravo and Brio restaurants that [Bravo Development](#) Inc. plans to open is fluid, its growth strategy is not, says Saed Mohseni, CEO of the Columbus, Ohio-based company since February. He says Bravo's expansion will continue to emphasize human capital above all else.

"We don't really have a number in mind," says Mohseni, who has sat on the board at Bravo since its acquisition by New York-based private-equity firms Bruckmann Rosser Sherrill & Co. and Castle Harlan Inc. last summer. "Our goal is to grow the concepts in the same manner they have been built so far. First, to make sure we have the human capital we need to operate the restaurants. No. 2, we're fortunate the company has been recapitalized, has the financing to build restaurants. And No. 3, we're very selective in terms of what sites we will go to."



With an average check about \$18, Bravo has an upscale-casual Italian menu of pastas, salads and entrees, and can work in different locations like malls and inline spaces.

Pressed for specifics, he says he expects to open between five and 10 units for each of the next three to five years.

## First Things First

Bravo Development operates four concepts: Bravo, a casual Italian neighborhood concept with 34 units and an average check of about \$18; Brio, a more upscale Tuscan concept emphasizing lighter fare and wood-grilled steaks and chops, with 20 units and a \$23 check; plus two Bon Vie French bistros and a white-tablecloth Lindsey's. Bravo and Brio are the growth vehicles.

The company will add new units in those markets where it already has a strong team of regional managers and partners. Mohseni points to the Midwest, Northeast and Florida. "At some point we will grow toward the West Coast," says Mohseni, former CEO of McCormick & Schmick's. "At this point we'll focus on these areas."

Vice President of Training and Development Jeff Ramm is not surprised to hear Mohseni putting human capital first. "It's very clear, his passion for the people part of the equation," says Ramm, who has worked with BDI for 12 years, starting as general manager of the third Bravo store.

## Promoting from Within

The company began its Rising Star program about four years ago. Meant to train employees for management positions, Rising Star begins with identifying promising hourly employees. The employees learn several different positions in the restaurant, then work a few new store openings to perform outside their comfort zones. Each quarter up to 20 hourly employees will participate in more advanced training in Columbus.

Key to identifying and developing the hourly employees is an assessment tool that Plano, Texas-based human-development firm [Batrus Hollweg International](#) developed. Batrus Hollweg examined the competencies that Bravo's successful managers exhibit and set norms based on them. Future managers are measured against and trained to achieve those norms. The competencies vary from level to level and include a range of skills from math to enthusiasm.

Ramm says that BDI's goal is to have 50 percent of unit-level managers come from the hourly ranks. Currently, about 35 percent of managers were former hourly employees. He adds that approximately 90 percent of regional managers were promoted from within the company.

He's pleased with how the Rising Star program has helped retention as well. Prior to using the Batrus Hollweg tools, manager turnover was 35 percent. Two-and-a-half years later, that figure is close to 20 percent.

## Looking Ahead

Bravo Development's emphasis on human capital will serve the brands as they expand. Mohseni has spent the first several weeks in his new role visiting restaurants and checking out possible sites with Chairman Rick Doody, who co-founded the company in 1992 with his brother, Chris. Mohseni says Brio works best in lifestyle centers with other upscale retailers, while Bravo is more flexible, fitting in malls, inline locations and freestanding pads.

The two Italian concepts share services like accounting and construction, but each has its own brand president, marketing team and operations staff. "We operate them as two companies, but build them as one company," Mohseni says.

Though Mohseni won't get specific about the number of units opening this year, emphasizing again and again, "One location at a time, one guest at a time, one experience at a time," he's confident that within 10 years Bravo and Brio will be operating 150 units.