



IoH Broadsheet

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Behind the Lights: The Hidden Emotional Labour Powering Nightlife

Michael Kill FRSA FIH is the Chief Executive Officer of the Night Time Industries Association (NTIA) and has become a national figurehead for the UK's nighttime industries, working relentlessly as a voice for nighttime industry operators and suppliers.

Mike is also Vice President of the International Nightlife Association (INA), which joined the UN's Global Compact Network in February 2025, when he was appointed the INA's European representative to the initiative. Further reinforcing his commitment to global collaboration and advocacy for sustainable, secure nightlife economies.

In this month's IoH Broadsheet, Mike examines the unseen aspects of working within the nighttime economy: **"Behind the Lights: The Hidden Emotional Labour Powering Nightlife."**



Introduction

Nightlife is often painted as a world of escapism, pulsing music, dim lights, and the promise of freedom once the sun goes down.

To those on the outside, it can look like a constant stream of excitement and connection.

But beneath that surface is a reality that's far more demanding than it appears. The people who keep this world turning, bartenders, DJs, promoters, security staff, carry an often-overlooked burden: emotional labour.



Emotional Labour

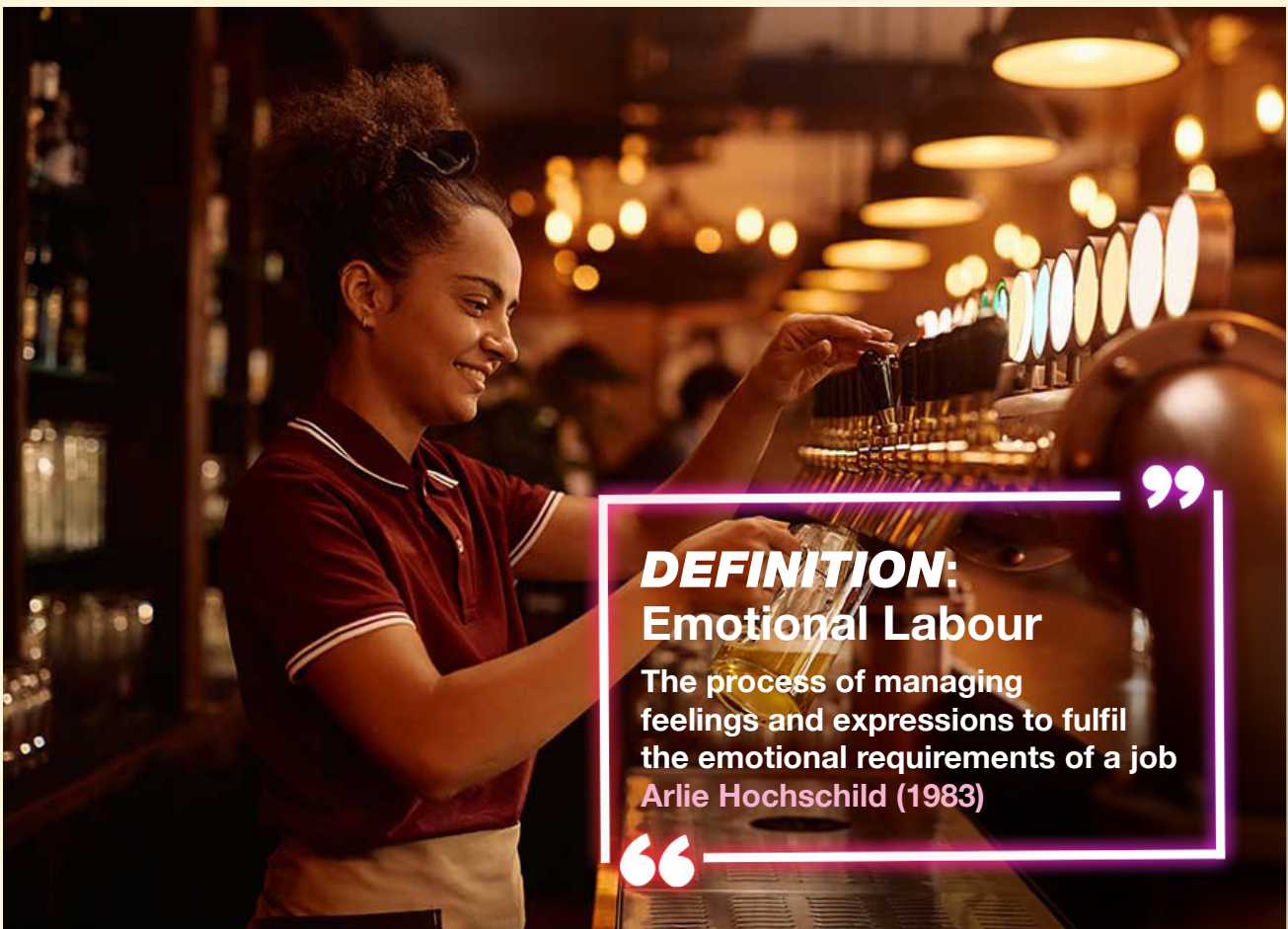
At its core, emotional labour is about managing your own feelings while presenting a particular version of yourself to others. In nightlife, this isn't occasional; it's constant.

Workers are expected to be warm, patient, engaging and unflappable, no matter what kind of night they're having personally. Even when they're exhausted, stressed, or simply not in the mood, they must show up as the version of themselves that the environment demands.

Take bartenders, for instance. Their role goes well beyond pouring drinks. They're hosts, listeners, entertainers, and sometimes even mediators. They're expected to remember faces, recall favourite orders, and keep conversations flowing, all while working at pace in often chaotic conditions. They need to read people quickly: who wants a chat, who wants to be left alone, who might cause trouble. And when tensions rise, as they inevitably do in alcohol-fuelled environments, bartenders must stay calm, polite, and in control. It's not just about good service; it's about emotional regulation under pressure.

In busy venues, that pressure multiplies. Staff aren't just responding to individuals, they're responding to the mood of the entire room. A shift in energy, a lull in music, or a difficult crowd can change the atmosphere in seconds. Workers are expected to sense this and adapt accordingly, keeping things upbeat and cohesive. It's a kind of emotional choreography that requires constant awareness and quick thinking.

DJs and performers carry a different, but equally intense, version of this labour. While their role is often seen as creative or expressive, it's also deeply reactive. They're constantly reading the crowd, adjusting their sets, and managing expectations, both their own and the audience. There's pressure to appear confident, in control, and full of energy, even when they're feeling the opposite. When a crowd isn't responding, or a set isn't landing as hoped, they must absorb that in real time without letting it show. That gap between how they feel and how they must appear can be draining over time.



DEFINITION:
Emotional Labour

The process of managing feelings and expressions to fulfil the emotional requirements of a job
Arlie Hochschild (1983)

High stakes

Security staff, meanwhile, operate in a space where emotional control is critical. Their job isn't just about enforcing rules; it's about preventing situations from escalating. They deal with conflict, intoxication, and sometimes aggression, all while maintaining authority and professionalism. This requires a high level of emotional intelligence: knowing when to be firm, when to be calm, and when to de-escalate. The stakes are high, and the emotional toll of constantly being on alert shouldn't be underestimated.

Promoters and front-of-house teams sit somewhere in between, blending social energy with responsibility. They are the first impression of a venue, setting the tone before people even step inside. They need to be approachable, inclusive, and enthusiastic, often acting as the bridge between guests, performers, and staff.

Their work relies heavily on relationships and perception, which means they must navigate feedback, complaints, and social dynamics with care. The expectation to remain upbeat and engaging night after night can wear thin, especially when personal energy is running low.

One of the most challenging aspects of emotional labour in nightlife is how invisible it is. For most guests, a night out feels effortless, as it should. But that seamless experience is carefully maintained by people who are constantly managing themselves behind the scenes. Positive feedback can be rare, while criticism or entitlement can be frequent. Workers are expected to absorb this without it affecting their demeanour, which over time can lead to burnout or a sense of disconnection from their own emotions.

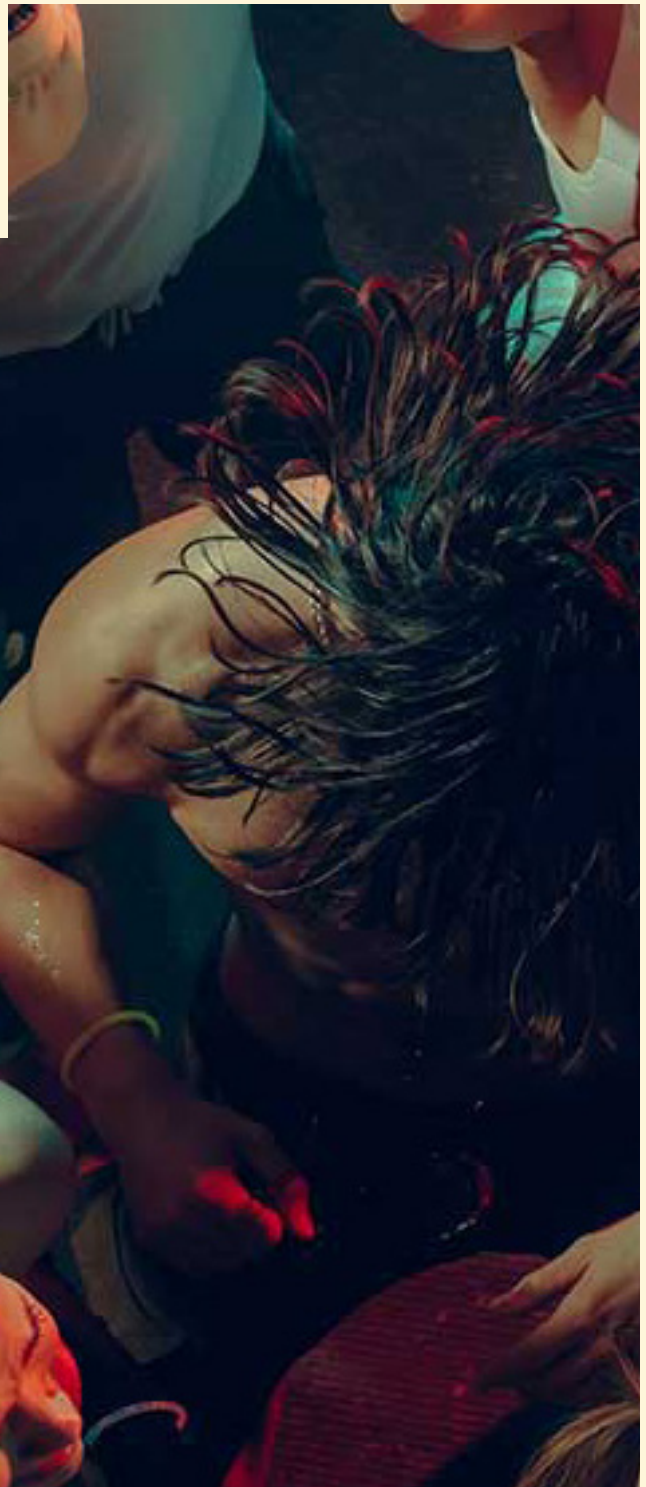


Conclusion

Despite this, many people in the industry take pride in what they do. There's a genuine skill in reading a room, lifting an atmosphere, and creating moments that people remember. When supported properly, emotional labour can become something empowering rather than draining. The key lies in recognising it for what it is.

Better support systems, open conversations, and workplace practices that acknowledge emotional strain can make a real difference. Simple things, like allowing staff to take breaks, encouraging peer support, or creating spaces where people can be honest about how they're feeling, can help make the work more sustainable.

Nightlife may always carry a sense of glamour, but it's important to see beyond that. The energy, warmth, and connection people experience on a night out don't happen by accident; they're created by individuals putting in real emotional effort. Recognising that doesn't take away from the magic; if anything, it deepens it.



About the Author

Michael Kill FRSA FIH is the Chief Executive Officer of the Night Time Industries Association (NTIA) and a prominent leader and passionate advocate for the UK's night-time economy.

With decades of hands-on experience in the sector, he has consistently championed the rights and interests of the businesses, workers, and communities that form the backbone of the country's vibrant nightlife landscape.

As CEO of the NTIA, Mike plays a pivotal role in shaping national discourse around the night-time economy, working closely with a wide range of government bodies, both local and national, regularly providing expert testimony to Parliamentary Select Committees.

His influence extends beyond policy, driving awareness and solutions around safety, workforce support, and economic sustainability within the industry.

In addition, Mike serves as Chair of the UK Door Security Association and Vice President of the International Nightlife Association (INA). In February 2025, the INA joined the UN Global Compact Network, and Michael was appointed the INA's European representative to the initiative, reinforcing his commitment to global collaboration and advocacy for sustainable, secure nightlife economies.

In all his roles, he continues to promote high standards of security, operational excellence, and innovation across nightlife sectors globally.



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Further reading and resources

Mental Health at Work Toolkit – IoH and MIND <https://www.instituteofhospitality.org/iag/>

Webinar on demand – Wellbeing at Work: Building mentally healthy hospitality teams
<https://www.instituteofhospitality.org/event/wellbeing-at-work-building-mentally-healthy-hospitality-teams/>

IoH Library - Top 50 Tools for Employee Wellbeing: A Complete Toolkit for Developing Happy, Healthy, Productive and Engaged Employees

DEIB Information, Advice and Guidance <https://www.instituteofhospitality.org/equality-diversity-equality-edi/>

The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling (1983) - Arlie Hochschild - Publisher: University of California Press, Berkeley,

IoH and NTIA form strategic partnership - <https://www.instituteofhospitality.org/ioh-and-ntia-partnership/>

NTIA website - <https://ntia.co.uk/>