

3/1/2023

No One Wants to Work Anymore

Jennifer Polanz



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Maybe you've heard others say this. Heck, maybe you've said it, lamenting the lack of potential new hires for spring.

I get it; it's tough (or darn near impossible) to find good employees these days. BUT there are many factors involved with labor shortages and only a few of them translate to people don't want to work anymore.

I thought it was important to look at some statistics for a deeper understanding. As I write this, unemployment numbers in January are at 3.4%, the lowest in more than 50 years. However, unemployment only reflects those who are looking for a job who can't find one.

According to stats from the University of Minnesota, 76% of people aged 25 to 54 are employed in some way, mostly full time, others part time. Which means there's about 24% who either can't find a job, are not interested in

working at all or would like to work but can't because of extenuating factors like school, their health or taking care of a family member.

To extrapolate further: 11% of the U.S. population was experiencing the effects of long COVID as of January 2023. And while that rate is declining as we move out of the pandemic, thankfully, it does impact employable people's ability to work—as in, they want to work, but are physically unable. According to an August 2022 story citing Brookings Metro data, between 2 and 4 million people were out of work due to long COVID.

A sad statistic that I don't think we talk about enough: more than 270,000 Americans of working age (18 to 64) died of COVID between 2020 and 2023. If you add in ages 65 to 74, that number goes up to nearly 519,000.

And, finally, over the past two years more than 3.5 million Americans aged 55 or over retired. Looking out to the future, by 2030—a mere seven years from now—the entirety of the Baby Boomer generation (1946-1964) will be over 65.

That's a lot of data to show the strain on today's workforce, but what can you do about it? There are a couple of positives. One, some who retired early during the COVID pandemic are coming back to work. A survey in the fall from Jobslist showed those who are coming back are doing it because of financial reasons (27%) and because they're looking for something to do (60%). Two, a fair amount of Gen Z, defined as born between 1997 and 2012, is working now, joining the other generations in the workforce.

These kids do need some help learning how to work, though; I've heard from a couple of retailers now that they enjoy hiring teens and high school grads, but they make sure they lay out the parameters of the job and what's expected. On the flip side, older generations may have more physical limitations and workers of all ages are looking for more flexibility in their schedules. Perhaps there are opportunities for mentorships to allow more experienced workers to pull newer staff under their wings?

I know labor will continue to be a challenge, but there are bright spots. You can read about Amanda Thomsen's experience hiring a Gen Z worker. Our researchers conclude their three-part series, which talks about the mental health benefits of plants. If owning plants is a mental health positive, then perhaps we could argue working with plants would be one, too?

On a separate note, our editors hit the road this winter looking for new products at a variety of shows. See what we found and then check out my visit to My Secret Garden in Atlanta.

We're not unlike most retailers, operating with a small staff and looking to do big things. In the end, the goal is to make the most of who and what you've got, and maybe even have a little fun while doing it. **GP**