

Features

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The New AbNormal

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The “new normal” isn’t coming. Instead, we’re facing a continually changing “new abnormal.”

The old social contract between workers and employers has broken. Companies proclaim “People are our most important asset,” while laying off thousands by email. Some employees feel responsible for the company’s current success and demand big bonuses after six months employment. Ghosting employees feel no obligation to continue their employment if they don’t feel like showing up. “No Call–No Show”

describes these workers, many of whom may be on their way to becoming former employees.

Our Opportunity

We were all impacted by “The Great Resignation,” during which millions of employees checked out of the traditional workforce. Digging deeper, we find some factors continually arise when employees explain why they quit.

Money: It’s an easy cop-out. However, sometimes a competitive local market requires frequent adjustments to existing pay levels. Often an employee claims to quit for money, yet accepts a new position with almost identical economic benefits.

No future: In smaller companies, sometimes it’s hard to see professional growth. One solution is to show your employees how in a small business they’ll perform a variety of tasks, giving them more experience (and less boredom) than performing a single repetitive job in a larger corporation.

Management neglect: Companies like Starbucks and Amazon are facing union elections with reports of “management doesn’t listen.” Employees tell reporters/union organizers that they’ve talked to management without response or signs of change. Communication will mitigate this problem.

Not feeling part of a team: The polite term is “uneven collaboration.” One person feels they’re doing all the work when slackers don’t show up or don’t commit to the job when they do appear. Accurate or not, these feelings lead either to “quitting in place” or resigning.

Not doing anything meaningful: It’s our fault if a garden center employee feels this. Horticulture has many societal problems like pollution, mental or physical health issues, fresh air, etc. However, it provides beauty and general well-being. We must share daily with employees the impact our industry has on our customers and the world around us.

Adjusting to Abnormal Recruitment

Van Cooley of Malmborg's Garden Center in Rogers, Minnesota, is pleased to report he has low staff turnover and repeat employees returning each season. Van admits they try to adjust the company's requirements to make work fun and easier for employees.

"It's like a jigsaw puzzle when we try to schedule around each employee's unique needs," he said.

Malmborg's has a larger team than ever before, although some work fewer hours. Having more people available than needed gives employees flexibility in their personal schedules, while the company has a deeper bench to pull from as needed.

"We pre-screen applicants," Van said. "If a part-time summer applicant only wants to work 10 hours a week, we usually ask them to commit to 20 hours. We try to set realistic expectations so there are no unpleasant surprises for either the company or the employee."

Van enjoys employing high school students, many working holidays, summers, and sometimes weekends, through college. With applicants under 16, parents usually drive them to the interview and wait in the car. If the young person is offered a job, Van asks the student to bring in their parents. He explains how this job will set work habits and be their first job reference. He tells the new employee what went right and what could have been improved during the interview.

"We're helping them build life skills," he added.

The parents learn why their offspring was selected and what to expect as far as hours and scheduling. As a bonus, Van asks if the parents ever shop at Malmborg's? When they say yes, he smiles. He tells them: "Hiring your son/daughter is going to cost me a lot of money. As an employee's parent, you'll receive 25% off everything you buy from now through December 24." Now the parent is doubly enthusiastic about their child being on the Malmborg's team.

Staying Flexible

Kate Terrell, owner of Wallace's Garden Center in Bettendorf, Iowa, values students as employees, too. She has two students on the same track team and they work as a pair, "loading mulch like a machine," faster and cleaner than anyone else. Students like to hang together, so she reminds them it only takes one person to empty garbage.

Kate also finds setting the standard and enforcing it sets the tone for everyone. Like Malmborg's, she over-hires to provide flexibility. She insists people work their scheduled shifts when needed. When she enforces this rule by termination, other staff is grateful. If students use school or medical appointments as an excuse, Kate confirms with the school or requires a doctor's note. She enforces her rules uniformly. About terminating no-shows, Kate said: "I'd rather adjust my life to your permanent absence than adjust my boundaries to your disrespect."

Jessie Jacobson at Tonkadale Greenhouse in Minnetonka, Minnesota, said she's tried hard to raise efficiencies. Since 2016 her wage and benefit increases have been at the higher end of garden center pay rates. She sets high brand standards of doing what matters for the greater good. This results in a team that's daily praised and thanked by both customers and fellow employees.

Branching Out

Rich Christakes at Alsip Home & Nursery in St. John, Indiana, needed to add a top management person so he hired a professional headhunter. BEST Human Capital of Indianapolis helped him through lots of pre-work to determine criteria against which to evaluate applicants.

"The process at times was exhausting. It cost money, but in the end the investment was well worth it," Rich said.

Rich is mitigating potential labor shortages by migrating to technology, as well as reinforcing employee well-being and safety. He's added electric pallet jacks and now wonders how they got along before. His mantra: "Don't give employees hammers. Give them nail guns, along with proper training. They'll be able to do more in shorter time and be less tired at the end of the day."

Waldoch Farms in Lino Lakes, Minnesota, has a great website employment page showing seasonal jobs throughout the year. The company's internship offering brings inquiries that sometimes lead to immediate hires.

Owner Doug Joyner had poor results with Indeed.com online hiring. He quit because the no-show rate for appointments was high and applicants weren't properly qualified. Promoting job openings to "current fans of our product" gets great results. "Our fans see our staff enjoying themselves and decide they want to be a part of that," he added.

What's in Store

Qualified help is getting scarcer in some regions. Sunday, July 16 at Cultivate'23, Clint Albin, the Strategic Marketing Advisor for Homestead Gardens in Maryland, along with Jessie Jacobson and Rich Christakes, will be speaking on the coming changes to look for in the years ahead.

Clint forecasts future garden center "workforces" must include more automation, including some aspects of self-service checkout. This will require growers to ship "retail ready" products to resellers.

"The garden center employee will become the equivalent of a five-star chef with the ability, year-round, to educate, inspire and attract customers. Revenue will be generated by cash-and-carry product sales, while services and entertainment/education events become even more important to garden centers' profits," he said. "When hiring, we should evaluate prospective employees for these capabilities, including service in supporting roles like event planning and information technology."

Constant change is the only certainty. Stay flexible. Observe. Challenge your team to help customers have their dream gardens and we can all grow successfully together. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future stories. He's a Green Profit columnist and owner of the consulting firm McCurry Associates Inc. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 731-8389.

More Resources

Check out www.SeedYourFuture.org and www.WeAreBloom.org for ideas on how to reinforce the good things we deliver. Plan to participate in Green Career Week October 2-6, 2023.