

POINT/COUNTERPOINT: “The Great Resignation?” “The Laziest Generation?” “The Great Reshuffle?” Or no labor shortage at all?

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, at the height of the pandemic, more than 120,000 businesses temporarily closed, and more than 30 million U.S. workers were unemployed.

Since January 2020, job openings have steadily increased, while unemployment has slowly declined. Overall, in 2021, employers ended up adding an unprecedented 3.8 million jobs. But at the same time, millions of Americans have left the labor force since before the pandemic. There are more than three million fewer Americans participating in the labor force today compared to February 2020.

Is the workforce supply versus demand issue because people are just too lazy to work? Have government handouts created a mass epidemic of generational unmotivated workers? Or are workers still working, just in different roles? Or maybe it's because the baby boomers are retiring, earlier and in larger numbers, after spending an exhausting two-plus years trying to manage an unprecedented, unusual and stressful work world?

As we continue moving out of the two-year-plus pandemic that indelibly changed the way we work, we might also be witnessing the fallout of what many refer to as a “necessary reassessment of work-life priorities.”

Here's a further look at the conversation:

Stephanie Ferguson, director of Global Employment Policy & Special Initiatives, **U.S. Chamber of Commerce**: “The pandemic caused a major disruption in America’s labor force—something many have re-

ferred to as The Great Resignation.

“But a closer look at what has happened to the labor force can be better described as ‘The Great Reshuffle’ because hiring rates have outpaced quit rates since November of 2020. So, many workers are quitting their jobs—but many are getting re-hired elsewhere.”

Ferguson continued: “When taking a look at the labor shortage across different industries, the transportation, health care and social assistance, and the accommodation and food sectors have had the highest numbers of job openings. Yet despite the high number of job openings, transportation and the health care and social assistance sectors have maintained relatively low quit rates. The food sector, on the other hand, struggles to retain workers and has experienced consistently higher than average quit rates. Meanwhile, in more stable, higher paying industries, the number of employees quitting has been lower.”

Another pandemic statistic: As of October 2021, the pandemic pushed more than 3 million adults into early retirement. In all, the number of adults 55 and older leaving the labor force due to retirement grew from 48.1 percent in third quarter 2019 to 50.3 percent in third quarter 2021.

Allison Morrow with **CNN Business** wrote, “Retiring boomers, not lazy Millennials, are driving the labor shortage.” In this piece, Morrow challenges the notion that ‘young people didn’t want to work because they were getting by just fine on government aid.’

“The numbers don’t back it up. Early retirement — whether forced by the pan-

demic or made possible otherwise — is having a huge impact on the labor market. And data show that retiring boomers, far more than “lazy” millennials, are the biggest force behind the labor shortage.

Morrow continued: “People have left the workforce for myriad reasons in the past two years. But among those who have left and are least likely to return, the vast majority are older Americans who accelerated their retirement. [In Nov. 2021] there were 3.6 million more Americans who had left the labor force and said they didn’t want a job compared with November 2019. A whopping 90 percent of them were over 55.”

In May 2021, the **Economic Policy Institute** published a piece titled, “U.S. labor shortage? Unlikely. Here’s Why.”

EPI’s **Heidi Shierholz**: “One reason is that in a system as large and complex as the U.S. labor market there will always be pockets of bona fide labor shortages at any given time. But a more common reason is employers simply don’t want to raise wages high enough to attract workers... This points to the fact that the footprint of a bona fide labor shortage is rising wages. Employers who truly face shortages of suitable, interested workers will respond by bidding up wages to attract those workers, and employers whose workers are being poached will raise wages to retain their workers, and so on.”

Shierholz’s op-ed was later updated, noting that “data released following the publication of this piece show there are signs of short-term worker shortages in isolated sectors, namely leisure

and hospitality. There is, however, no evidence of a widespread labor shortage, and the isolated shortages that do exist are not a reason for concern.”

And in an August 2022 Los Angeles Times-published piece, **Georgetown University’s** labor historian **Joseph McCartin** noted that the notion that people simply don’t want to work is a long-running trope in American history.

“You find a lot back in, say, the 1870s,” explained McCartin. “There was a recession in 1873 and there was a ‘vagabond scare,’ they called it at the time: People were hitting the road to avoid a working life and trying to sort of bum around the country. Really what was happening is often these are migrant workers looking for work elsewhere, but in the public imagination at the time, there was this idea that there are people that just don’t want to work.”

In the same way, McCartin said, tropes about today’s labor shortages get linked to the idea that people don’t want to work. “But that sidesteps the key issue, which is that a lot of jobs, for the amount of wear and tear and the hard labor involved — they just don’t pay enough. Very often what this kind of rhetoric, whether it’s people don’t want to work or there’s a labor shortage, what that often speaks to is that wages simply aren’t attractive enough for workers.”

This debate is far from over, and the looming holiday season ahead will likely further fuel the flaming blame game, particularly if there’s a historical repeat of empty shelves, long waits, reduced hours, closed checkouts and delayed deliveries.

Anderson: *Workforce development is key in economic development. Our area is prepared for now and the future.*

In order for new and existing businesses to expand into the Southwest Illinois region, we must have an available workforce that is appropriately trained. Having a ready workforce in place to support existing and new businesses relies on two main factors.

First, the local business community, trade leaders, Madison county governments, St. Clair County governments and educational institutions must work together to keep the pipeline filled with quality talent. The Leadership Council Southwest Illinois’ Workforce Development Committee brings together all of these groups to ensure priorities are



Anderson

shared and support is provided to students and educational institutions. The objective of all these efforts is to make the next generation of workers aware of the rewarding and well-paying career opportunities that exist in the metro area. In addition, regional workforce development organizations work together to gain funding for new programs like the recently awarded \$5.8 million dollar apprenticeship grant. These are action-oriented programs that are changing lives and building out our workforce of the future.

The second factor required for a healthy workforce is a strong career and technical education system. The region has a very strong trade and career educational system including the Collinsville Area Vocational Center (CAVC) located at Collinsville High School, the Center for Academic and Vocational Excellence (CAVE) located in Belleville, the new

Manufacturing Center located at SWIC, and others. These outstanding institutions provide hands-on experience as well as certificate programs that offer students immediate access to good jobs in the region. The high demand for graduates from these schools proves they are putting out quality candidates that are ready to go to work.

For jobs that require a different kind of degree, our area has institutions like Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, McKendree College, Southwestern Illinois College, Lewis and Clark Community College, Kaskaskia College, Webster University, as well as Greenville University. Between these fine institutions, a student can prepare for nearly any job in the area from science to engineering to cybersecurity. Again, the demand for these students demonstrates the high educational value of these schools.

Recent announcements by businesses such as Boeing, Tyson, Pisone, Tesla, NOTS Logistics and many others indicate that the region is an attractive place to expand. Southwest Illinois can build it, store it, ship it and service it. All because of the effective working relationship between the local governments, business leaders, educational institutions and our young workforce. The Leadership Council Southwest Illinois is happy to play a key role in supporting this collaboration and helping to make sure that our young men and women are aware of the career opportunities that exist in the area and take advantage of the educational opportunities right here in our neighborhood.

Sincerely,
KYLE ANDERSON,
Executive Director, Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois

Morrissey: *No matter which political party a person supports, Amendment 1 would be bad for Illinois*

While we vote on Constitutional Amendment 1 on Nov. 8th, many voters are unaware of its profound ramifications. It proposes to give workers the right to unionize. But it is important to recall that workers already enjoy this right as Illinois is one of the most pro-union states in the country.

The amendment states that it is “... to promote their economic welfare

and safety at work.” Since “economic welfare” is not defined in the proposed amendment or other state law, it would allow a huge range of benefits at the taxpayers’ expense. Potential abuse is limited only by one’s imagination.

The amendment further prohibits our lawmakers and representatives from exacting reforms or fixes. It states - “The new amendment would also prohibit

from being passed any new law that interferes with, negates or diminishes the right of employees to organize and bargain collectively over their wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment and workplace safety.” Any unintended consequences would be prohibited from being fixed. No new state law or governor’s edict could fix it, only another constitutional amendment.

This is fundamentally wrong! It would result in more political posturing and endless litigation, all at taxpayers’ expense.

Residents and businesses have been fleeing Illinois in record numbers for years. Passage of this would further exacerbate this exodus, resulting in another nail in Illinois’ coffin.

ED MORRISSEY,
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