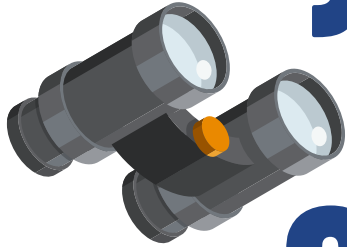


# Anybody Out There?



By Pamela Mills-Senn

When COVID-19 hit in 2020, Stephenson Wholesale Co., Inc., dba Indian Nation Wholesale, decided to launch an employee lunch program for those who worked on-site, said Corey Cooper, who handles new market development for the Durant, Oklahoma, distribution company.

The initial idea was to provide staff with one free meal per day, a “one-off” thank you for coming in. However, the response was so positive that it became a fixture instead.

“It was one of the most appreciated things we’ve ever done,” Cooper explained.

“I don’t think we’ll ever stop doing this. We’ve invested in a state-of-the-art kitchen and a full-time cook. It’s a four-way win for us. Morale is up, attendance is at an all-time high, turnover is the lowest we’ve seen in years and productivity is up.”

Also contributing to their high retention rate is the family-like work environment, four-day work-week and temperature-controlled warehouse.

However, when job openings come up, they are harder to fill, Cooper reported. To find new workers—currently there are 250 employees—Stephenson Wholesale participates in local job fairs, uses social media and hangs “we’re hiring” banners in front of the building.

“It has been an evolution since COVID,” Cooper said. “We just keep trying different things and doing the basics of trying to hire people willing to show up consistently.”

## DISRUPTIVE LABOR MARKET

The difficulty of finding labor is ubiquitous, said Chris Smythers, president/CEO of Merchants Grocery Company, Inc., a full-line wholesale distribution company with 160 employees in Culpeper, Virginia.

“Today’s labor market is probably the number-one challenge all of us are facing,” Smythers said. “It has become a major disruptor in the ability of businesses to function. Convenience stores, restaurants and distributors all face shortages and must make some very tough decisions.”

COVID-19 changed the way people look at work and how they want to spend their time, Smythers explained. Many employees are opting for jobs that allow remote work, flex-time scheduling or four-

day workweeks.

The pandemic also caused people to reevaluate themselves and what they think they should be paid—particularly those who worked in front-facing, essential jobs, Smythers shared.

“Everyone wonders when things will return to normal,” said

Smythers. “I don’t believe we will go back to the way things were pre-COVID, if that was what we all considered normal.”

Government regulations are another factor to consider, said Shawn Burcham, founder & CEO of PFSbrands and GRITT Business Coaching, both headquartered in Holts Summit, Missouri. PFSbrands is a 100-percent employee-owned wholesale food



Stephenson Wholesale Co., Inc., holds an annual “Red, White and Boom!” party for all employees and their families. Remote employees are offered complimentary hotel rooms and shuttles. The one-day event includes food trucks, bounce houses and a fireworks show—all at no charge—as a way to show the company’s appreciation.



Merchants Grocery Company, Inc., builds on-the-job satisfaction by providing employees with a comfortable working environment and technology tools to do their jobs efficiently.



PFSbrands' employees gather to raise an "employee-owned" flag at the company picnic, which celebrated the business' 20th anniversary.



Lunch is "on the house" every day at Stephenson Wholesale Co., Inc. An employee dining room, state-of-the-art kitchen, and full-time chef encourage employees to stay onsite during the workday.

and equipment company; GRITT works with organizations to improve employee engagement. Collectively, the two companies have 193 employees.

"My overall opinion is that most government regulations negatively affect the labor market," Burcham said. "While all businesses should want to protect workers and treat them fairly, in most cases government regulations make this more difficult. The best thing our government could do is encourage everyone to go to work and find a place where they can take pride in their work while earning an honest pay."

### Step 1: FINDING

Determination and out-of-the box thinking are required when looking for new employees. According to Smythers, hiring managers can't keep doing the same old thing.

To grow the applicant pool, some employers are considering non-traditional hires, such as candidates who may have less-than-perfect pasts, would

respond well to less restrictive dress codes or want flexible scheduling.

Smythers advised contacting local schools and community colleges, along with reaching out to those who might have a connection to young people looking for work.

Taking advantage of social media and asking current staff for referrals are also important. "Happy employees represent the best advertising opportunity for your business," Smythers said.

### Step 2: KEEPING

Finding employees is one thing; keeping them on the job is another. Burcham explained that employee engagement is essential for creating a stable workforce. But, according to a February 2023 Gallup Poll, a mere 33 percent of employees are described as engaged while 16 percent are actively disengaged.

As such, employers must focus on retention and creating an environment where workers want to be, said Burcham. But what does this look like for wholesale distributors?

## How to Find Workers

- Help-wanted ads
- Banners/signage at your company
- Social media posts
- Local community college career centers
- Trade school placement offices
- Job fairs
- Recommendations from family and friends
- Referral bonuses to current employees

"[It's] a place where [employees] can continue to learn, a place where they can grow, a place where they know how they contribute to the success of the company, and a place where they can be seen and heard," said Burcham. "The millennials and Gen Z workers want to learn. Focus on finding ways to help them in both work and life."

## Playing Detective



## 'Stay' Interviews

Knowing why employees stay can help employers fine-tune their recruiting and retention strategies, said Chad Sorenson of Adaptive HR Solutions, a leadership development and management training company located in Jacksonville, Florida.

One way to learn this "why" is through "stay" interviews.

"Unlike a reactive exit interview with a resigning employee, a stay interview talks with current employees about why they joined the company and why they stay," Sorenson explained. "Is it the family atmosphere, the boss, the benefits, the hours or the fact they get to work outdoors? Find out why employees like to work for you and use that to recruit new employees."

Don't assume you know what employees want. "The worst thing an organization can do is to develop a new employee benefit without first talking with the employees," he said. "Too often companies spend time and energy developing a new program [that] employees don't want or see value in."

In response, many companies are creating a la carte packages in an effort to provide more customized and meaningful benefits and rewards.

Smythers agreed that listening and responding to employees is essential. "There's nothing worse than when an employee brings something to a manager's attention and the issue is ignored," he shared. "Provide growth and development opportunities in both pay and skill sets."

Providing support to employees may help them stay when times get tough. "When the workload is heavy and we are short-staffed, we do our best to give additional help in the areas that need it most," Smythers said. "Burning out employees will cost you. Your best ones might be the ones who leave."

## CORPORATE CULTURE

The work culture you create can help or hinder your labor efforts. Smythers said he looks to the best-run sports teams for inspiration.

"Create an environment of high expectations and start building a 'bench' of employee applicants for every single position in your company," Smythers advised. "Get more winners on your team and get the losers off your team. Winners like to be around other winners, so focus on building a team of 'A' players."

Even the best-run companies need to be flexible and creative when it comes to hiring in the foreseeable future. "We have seen where the workforce seemed to recover from COVID," Smythers said. "It was a huge relief to be able to fill all positions, train and retain some employees."

However, some of that relief was short-lived. "Then we saw a very rapid descent back to the difficulties we were having before," Smythers shared. "Turnover ramped up and the difficulties of finding committed individuals are back."

## NEXT STEPS

The news isn't all negative when it comes to hiring, however. Businesses that think creatively and offer opportunities for employees to grow in their positions have seen positive results.

Burcham reported that, because of the extensive engagement work his companies have done over the years, they are facing limited labor challenges. These results show that helping employees understand their importance, why they matter, and how they can grow in their jobs and lives leads to a more stable workforce.

Keep looking for employees who are willing to work. When you find them, engage them with challenging work that leads to future opportunities and provide them with meaningful rewards. **CD**