

Where have all the (visible) employees gone?

Last week someone had posted on FB about the abysmal conditions in a Target; a store in total disarray and only two visible employees. The person writing the post was saying this is why he doesn't shop locally, so he buys from places like Amazon instead. Which led me to the response below-

Gary Zaphiris It's not just your problem; it's building up momentum because who would want to work in a store that looks like that? As customers avoid the store and metrics get worse, the corporate folk aren't going to be thinking the answer is to throw more employees at it; they'll be thinking lower sales justifies fewer employees.

Everything snowballs. The pandemic created what I call "The Great Migration." Employees decided that they had more value, or perhaps felt more empowered, working from home. Those holding jobs that didn't allow that, the front-line folk, they all know people who, in their mind, no longer had to "go to work" and were also making darned good money. The front line people were working HARDER and seeing others who seemed to have it easier.

No wonder the front line employee is becoming increasingly unhappy with their situation. Things may level out over time, and more and more people are being called back into their offices, but look at all the reports about people resisting that. Adding fuel to the fire that working in-person represents a lower rung on the social ladder. And nobody saw this coming.

We enabled it by throwing an ungodly amount of money into the economy, to keep Covid from causing a collapse. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I think we're now seeing some of the downside.

Society is moving towards believing there is more value in the invisible employee than those visible. We actually want to avoid direct interaction with people who are working. And when things go wrong behind the scenes (a company's website goes down, orders get mixed up), it's the visible person that is left holding the bag, sometimes even being yelled at by a customer for something they are required to deal with but not responsible for causing. We've found new ways to devalue their work, and what do you know, they're just not happy working anymore. The visible people, the front line employees at Starbucks, at banks, at restaurants, the landscapers, checkout staff at grocery stores... and bicycle salespeople and mechanics... they're walking away from their jobs. It's not just about the pay. It's about having a job that says you have to put on a smile and take it, whatever's coming your way, maybe from someone who has an invisible job, someone who didn't have to risk their health during Covid, and is now complaining about having to go back to the office.

Obviously, I see great value and have immense respect for those with front-line jobs. It's what our business is built on. I campaigned, along with another bike shop owner, to get bicycle retail declared an essential business. Instead of getting paid to shut down, we wanted to keep our doors open, helping people get through the pandemic by commuting on their bicycles or cycling for exercise and stress relief when the gyms shut down. Overall we had exceptional response from customers; very few instances of mis-placed anger from customers (oh, we did have a few, but they were exceptionally notable because they were the exception). It was hard work, having to wear a mask all day long without a break, enforcing social distancing, and the stress of sometimes seeing long lines of customers waiting outside until a staff member was ready to help them. That and listening to the phone ring and ring and ring and not be able to answer it.

We felt we had a purpose, and as a small business, we had more control over keeping our employees and customers safe than most businesses did. But we're reminded of what it's like, for the typical visible employee, every time we go to the grocery store and the lines are long and the cashiers are complaining about employees who suddenly just stop coming to work, no warning. We're reminded of it when a bank or even a Starbucks has a sign saying this location closed today due to staffing. And we're reminded of it as we try to bring on new staff so we can do a better job taking care of our customers, maybe able to bring in more repairs instead of telling people there's no room at the inn. Finding enough staff is such a big issue that it's already shut down a number of shops.

We want to tell the potential visible employee hey, we're not like everyone else. But when the Starbucks Barista has a friend who works in high tech complaining about "having to go back to the office" and the translation kind of comes across as complaining about having to go back to work... it's a tough sell. Especially when their friend also brings up how expensive their Iced Mocha Latte is, shortly after saying they can't afford rent, much less a house, with their six figure income.