

7 Steps You Can Take When You're Understaffed

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Discover the top solutions and productivity strategies for your HR team

Given the labor shortage in the United States, many companies are understaffed. Short-staffed, understaffed, labor shortage — it's all the same. You're suddenly faced with a significant problem: There aren't enough employees to cover the next shift. The anxiety you experience when faced with an understaffed support team is real, and it can create a lot of stress in the work environment.

A recent CNBC Workforce Survey found that half of all workers described their companies as understaffed. Among the people reporting their company is facing a worker shortage, 43% also mentioned they have thought about quitting in the past 3 months.

The labor shortage in the United States has lingering effects on businesses, leaving the rest of your workers feeling overwhelmed, out of control, and overworked. This can lead to burnout and poor work performance due to an increased workload for your current staff. Knowing how to deal with a worker shortage is critical for your business.

What causes worker shortages?

Aging employees and retiring workers are just a few of the changing demographics causing a shortage of labor in the U.S. Additionally, recent graduates, Millennials, and Gen Zers are eager to find flexible work arrangements, better pay, and more fulfilling work.

Job dissatisfaction, disliking long commutes, and wanting more time to spend with family are also reasons why people voluntarily quit their jobs or look for a career that offers a better work-life balance.

The current labor shortage

Waitstaff, retail employees, emergency services workers, doctors, nurses, and more are all in high demand, but there consistently aren't enough workers to fill all the available jobs.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported job openings in the U.S. at nearly 11 million in November 2021, and that number has been growing. A record number of 4.4 million people quit their job in September.

Health concerns surrounding the continuing pandemic are also contributing to stress, burnout, and resistance to returning to the office. But, when it comes to the bottom line, managers and department heads are still expecting results.

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What to do when you're short-staffed

So, in this economy, how do you handle being understaffed or being asked to do more with a reduced staff? Here are the top 7 tips and suggestions on ways to make it through those tough times when your workforce is thin.

Make operational adjustments

If you're facing a labor shortage in the United States, you may have to forgo the normal chain of command. Your employees are already understaffed, crunched for time, and doing the work of multiple team members. They can't chase down a hiring manager or head of the sales department to answer a pressing question. Instead, give your team the power to make decisions as they occur.

If your company normally has lots of meetings, you might have to slightly adjust your calendar. Schedule fewer meetings, reschedule meetings, plan shorter meetings — whatever it takes to get through a labor shortage and work efficiently.

Hire temp workers

Reach out to your local staffing agency for help meeting a temporary labor shortage. They often have day workers already registered in their database who are ready to work on short notice. Building a strong relationship with the owners or executive assistants at temp organizations is key to finding dependable workers during the U.S. labor shortage.

Automate tasks

Anything you can do to save time and automate processes is a big help. Use software and technology to improve workflow. Ask for recommendations from team members and get buy-in and support from your IT department.

Programs such as Hootsuite or Infusionsoft can help you manage your social media accounts. Asana, Wrike, or Trello can automate project management tasks. Use Microsoft Teams, Google Chat, or Trello for smooth internal communications.

Support your team

DON'T OVERWORK YOUR CURRENT STAFF BY SCHEDULING TOO MUCH OVERTIME. OTHERWISE, YOU RISK HAVING THEM QUIT AND MAKING THE WORKER SHORTAGE EVEN WORSE.

Offer additional benefits for your current employees on understaffed teams. Bump up the current overtime pay rate for full-time employees willing to take on more hours or extra shifts, but don't overwork your current staff by scheduling too much overtime. Otherwise, you risk having them quit and making the worker shortage even worse.

You can also consider asking senior employees if they are willing to switch departments for the day. They may have spent many years at the company learning different positions and working in multiple departments. Your chief marketing officer may even think it's fun catching up with clients as they spend a day working the sales floor.

Communicate proactively

Prepare for holidays and summer vacations in advance. If you know there are certain times of the year where more people call out sick or request time off, you might want to overschedule those periods in advance.

Be sure you keep an organized calendar to keep track of any paid time off (PTO) requests. You may want to implement a policy where employees need to request time off at least 1-3 months in advance unless there is an emergency.

Close early

Sometimes, despite your best efforts to hire adequate staff and proactively handle PTO requests, you may find you are extremely short-staffed. For instance, if you manage a restaurant and only one employee showed up for the Sunday brunch shift, it may be smarter to close for the day than to deliver poor service with an understaffed business.

Cross-train or overlap teams

Training team members in multiple departments can help to ease some of the strain of the U.S. labor shortage. Say you have a marketing coordinator that is also interested in sales. You can cross-train them on how to work with customers on the retail-facing side of the business.

You can also look for overlap in any of your teams. Instead of having an understaffed department, switch an employee from an adequately covered department to a short-staffed one.

You can weather a worker shortage

Staffing shortages present a real challenge for your business, and it's not always avoidable. To deal with it adequately, you must find ways to provide support and find solutions for the team that's dealing with the stress of the shortage.

The next time you're faced with a worker shortage, take a look at what you can do to make it through the day and keep operations steady until you can restore your full workforce.