

Change: ‘Oh, wait, there are other options’

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Lilly worked as a waitress at several restaurants for over two decades. She was working at Astoria Coffeehouse and Bistro when she was laid off in March 2020.

Shortly after she lost her job, her daughter’s school closed to in-person classes. A lack of child care options meant Lilly spent the early days of the pandemic as her daughter’s playmate, only adding to her desire to make a career change.

“It was kind of like a sense of feeling trapped because I was with my daughter 24/7,” she said. “I loved her, but at the same time, I need space to do stuff I need to do.”

So Lilly finally took steps toward pursuing her longtime goal of becoming an electrician.

She enrolled in classes at Portland Community College and worked part time at Columbia Housewarmers when she was able to find a babysitter.

Now over a year since her career shift, she is still taking classes remotely and hopes to land an apprenticeship in the coming months.

Reflecting back on her time as a waitress, Lilly remains happy with her decision to exit the field. “I was actually elated because I wanted out of the restaurant industry for a really long time,” she said.

While a number of factors led to burnout, she said the lack of respect from customers played the biggest role.

“It’s pretty draining because people go in there and take out all their problems on you,” she said. “(When) people are hungry, you are basically constantly being abused and expected to smile and



Ethan Myers/The Astorian

Josie Lilly chose to change careers during the coronavirus pandemic.

be nice to them.”

The added tensions during the pandemic could be among the driving forces behind the worker shortage that has plagued so many businesses.

“A lot of it lies with the way they’re treated and the people who are coming in,” Lilly said. “I know they are trying to raise people’s wages, and that definitely helps because people are more willing to take on those sorts of things if they’re making a higher wage to kind of mentally compensate themselves for the abuse.”

“But I really think that stuff has to happen to bring the anxiety levels down, or anger levels down, to make it better for people.”

Judging from her own experience, Lilly also thinks the lack of affordable child care options is a barrier.

As the labor shortage takes its toll, she believes it’s going to take a major effort to lure workers back.

“If employers treat their employees with better wages, health care, making it more stable ... and finding a way to help them deal with the abuse in some way, that would definitely help,” she said.

While Lilly sees her exit from the restaurant industry as inevitable, she is grateful she was able to use the pandemic as a transition period in her life.

“I probably would have (changed careers), but it would have probably taken me a lot longer,” she said. “You get stuck in the loop of, ‘I just need to pay the bills. I just need to keep going on the same course until something (gets) derailed.’”

“You only have to be like, ‘Oh, wait, there are other options.’”

Shortage: ‘We got aggressive with compensation’

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show up. If someone did show up, return my call for an interview, that was rare. It was a strange position to be in.”

The labor shortage has hit some industries harder than others as they ramped up all at the same time after government-mandated restrictions were eased. At restaurants, reservations stacked up, causing long lines at the door. At hotels, bookings soared from summer travelers flush with cash from government stimulus funds and pent-up demand. And at medical clinics, staffing issues thwarted outreach and hospitals delayed elective surgeries.

Switching jobs prevalent

As the leisure and hospitality industry heads into the slower season, some hotels that barely had enough staff to get them through the summer are keeping their workers on and finding work to occupy their time before the next busy period during the holidays.

Statewide, the hardest-to-fill jobs through the spring were housekeeping, sales clerks, personal care aides and cooks and restaurant workers, said Damon Runberg, a regional economist with the Oregon Employment Department. During the second quarter, which is the most up-to-date data, 71% of the nearly 98,000 job vacancies were deemed hard to fill, Runberg said.

“We tracked restaurant workers through the pandemic and found a higher than normal transition to different industries,” Runberg said. “It was a disproportionate share moving to retail, professional services, warehousing and health care.”

“The pattern was they were moving to industries that were more stable and higher paying. The result is the lowest wage jobs have the highest demand.”

To meet the labor demands, employers have raised wages, offered bonuses and tried to be flexible with hours. Brick-and-mortar businesses that vie with other businesses for workers are finding themselves having to compete with giants like Amazon that recently announced that the starting wage was more than \$18 an hour and could include up to \$3,000 sign-on bonuses.

“During the pandemic we have, for the most part, been able to continue to offer our normal services without having to turn anyone away for care,” said Elaine Knobbs-Sea-sholtz, the director of strategy and development at Mosaic Medical. “Our staffing capacity, plus pandemic restrictions, have impacted our ability to send our teams out into the community as often as we had anticipated.”

Businesses in the hospitality industry that kept in contact with their laid-off workers during the early days of the pandemic were able to restore their workforce, said Jason Brandt, the president and CEO of the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association. In a survey of its members in June, the association said only 4% had enough workers.

“So 96% of the survey respondents are dealing with a worker shortage,” Brandt said. “The folks who were able to hold on to their staff were the ones that kept the relationship alive during the volatility of the pandemic. Even if they had to furlough the workers, they kept in contact and had more success to bring them back online.”

There’s a lot of hindsight in the industry right now, Brandt said. Hospitality businesses are

recognizing that they need to focus on their workers and forge a culture of taking care of their workers. The hospitality industry is often an entry point into the workforce, Brandt said, and 1 in 3 Americans had their first job in a restaurant.

Each summer, Sunriver Resort brings in student workers from around the globe to fill out its workforce needs, said Tom O’Shea, the resort’s managing director. This year was no different, other than the fact that only 35 of the 100 who were scheduled to work arrived.

In addition, the resort held several job fairs and boosted housekeeping salaries to \$25 an hour. Still, the resort was 85% staffed this summer.

“We got aggressive with compensation,” O’Shea said. “We got through the busy summer. We managed to pull it off and find staff, but we did pay significantly higher wages. We all worked longer hours, but we got through the summer.”

Impatient customers

At the Redmond Consumer Cellular call center, a daylong job fair this month netted a handful of customer service representatives, said Tiffany Smith, the company’s call center manager. The company was hoping to fill 300 positions during the job fair. With call centers in Phoenix, Portland and Redmond, Consumer Cellular holds job fairs every two weeks to fill out vacancies.

To lure in more applicants, the company is offering remote and in-person work for part-time and full-time positions. New hires who stay at least 90 days can receive a \$1,000 bonus, Smith said.

“We didn’t get the turnout we expected, with what we’ve been experiencing for the past few months,” Smith said. “We’ve had a big downturn in the number of people applying.”

It’s a hard job these days to be in front of customers. Businesses say that customers are impatient with delays, lines and service.

“We still see certain times when callers are waiting longer than normal due to the sheer number of incoming calls,” said Carla Stevens, Mosaic Medical’s director of operations.

‘THE PANDEMIC HAS SHOWN US THAT WORKERS ARE IMPORTANT TO THE BUSINESS AND THEY HAVE TO BE PAID A COMPETITIVE WAGE.’

Daniel Elder | The Campfire Hotel’s general manager

Mosaic has about 70 vacant positions. For the first time, the nonprofit company offered an employee retention bonus program and is offering bonuses to employees who refer applicants, said Jennifer Stewart, Mosaic Medical’s human resources director.

“We also have a renewed focus on our employee retention strategies, including providing increased opportunities for social connection and team building to keep our connections and resiliency strong during these stressful times,” Stewart said.

Finding the right employee at any price is a challenge. With central Oregon’s high housing prices, it’s difficult to find workers who can afford to live where they work, Elder, of the Campfire Hotel, said. The goal is not just to recruit but retain the workers who are passionate about their position, he said.

“We’ve looked at our hourly wage and where we want to have it start,” Elder said. “To be competitive, we need to offer sustainable wages. Bonuses are great, but they’re not sustainable. We want people who have bought into the business.”

“The pandemic has shown us that workers are important to the business and they have to be paid a competitive wage.”

Causeway: ‘It was the strangest sound ever’

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“The next step is A — we need to figure out a plan to restore some power back to the boat tenants down there, and then B — working with Bergerson Construction to get a plan together for getting that debris out of the water,” said Isom, who said the collapse occurred on the northernmost portion of the causeway.

Shelley von Colditz, who lives along the riverfront near the East Mooring Basin, said she heard a loud noise and looked out toward the causeway when it collapsed.

“It was the strangest sound ever,” von Colditz said. “It sounded big. It sounded very destructive. The only thing that came to mind right away was maybe a boat hit it. But it was too loud for one of these boats.”

The state had urged the Port to shut down the causeway after inspectors found rotting timber pilings and other problems.

A fence was installed at the base of the causeway at 36th Street near the Astoria Riverwalk to keep people off the span. Locals and visitors now gather along the riverbank to watch sea lions. Fishermen and other boat owners have had to fashion workarounds to get to their slips.

The East Mooring Basin was originally built after World War II. The causeway extends to a breakwater on the Columbia River constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Both the Port and the



Jean Danforth

The collapse knocked out power.

city hope to improve the marina for redevelopment.

The Port has struggled to keep up with deferred maintenance and other infrastructure challenges along the waterfront. Some materials meant for fixing part of the causeway were purchased in 2019, but layoffs to the maintenance staff during the coronavirus pandemic stymied that process.

The Port is looking at a grant proposal to the state for a portion of the cost to rehabilitate the causeway.

“We have been in the process of trying to secure grant funding in order to rehab the causeway and just have not quite gotten there yet, both from a financing standpoint as well as a permitting standpoint,” Isom said.

School staff: ‘The timeline was tight’

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of Seaside, said over 90% of their staffs are vaccinated.

“The timeline was tight, but we got on it pretty quick and gave our staff numerous different options for them,” Hoppes said. “I was, to be honest, pleased to see the large number of staff who got vaccinated based on this requirement. We weren’t sure how that was going to go, but a large number got vaccinated based on this mandate.”

Superintendent Tom Rogozinski, of the Warrenton-Hammond School District, said about 87% of his staff are vaccinated, but he expects the number to reach 92% by the deadline.

“As far as the challenges of meeting that deadline, it was a tight window to get a two-dose vaccine ... but at least in my experience, it’s very manageable,” Rogozinski said.

Superintendent Steve Phillips, of Jewell, said he believes his staff will reach the 90% mark by the deadline.

Superintendent Bill Fritz, of Knappa, said 92% of his staff are vaccinated and he anticipates the

number reaching 95%.

Fritz said the school district will lose a couple of staff members who are choosing to step away due to the mandate.

“We’re saddened by that. We value all of our people, but we also understand that people need to make individual choices,” Fritz said.

School districts are working closely with the county’s Public Health Department to track and respond to virus cases.

“We work together to make sure that there’s consistency between the guidance and the school protocols, and that we’ve covered all the bases without overreacting,” said Margo Lalich, the county’s interim public health director. “We want to maintain perspective. It’s been a little bumpy — as we all expected — coming back to a new school year and yet we’re working through it.”

During the news conference, Hoppes laid out the process of how the Astoria School District responds to virus cases.

“We have, as the other schools do, a procedure and process we put in place where ... we identify a case, we contact trace and then

based on that contact tracing, we do specific phone calls or in-person meetings with either parents or staff members to let them know of the positive case, or for people who have come in close contact with them that have to quarantine,” Hoppes said. “Then the final step is that we inform our parents at the very end of the day of any cases within our school system for that day.”

While the county has experienced the worst few months of the pandemic, superintendents described schools as safe for students.

“Due to the safety protocols that schools have currently and have had for the last year, schools are the safest place in the community for children to be,” Fritz said. “The likelihood of COVID spread in schools is far lower than the likelihood of spread in our communities at large.”

The Oregon Health Authority reported 14 new virus cases for the county on Wednesday and 15 new virus cases on Tuesday. Since the pandemic began, the county had recorded 2,146 virus cases and 26 deaths as of Wednesday.