

The Economy in Profound Transition: The Disruptive Realities of the Pandemic and the New Industrial Revolution

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Abstract

The mass economic upheaval of the past 2 years created conditions in the labor market not seen for 70 years prompting many to ask, “Where have all the workers gone?” The absence of willing workers to enter the job market is indicative of worker dissatisfaction causing mass resignations, a reassessment of workplace conditions, positive migration, and a perceived position of newfound power. Such shifts in the economy suggest renewed worker interest in union activities that may usher in a period of aggressive collective bargaining and energized organizing campaigns not seen since the early 1950s.

Keywords: disruptive economic structure, new industrial revolution, labor market, union organizing

1. Introduction

COVID-19 as a disruptive force in the current labor market has been massive and significant. Work-related phenomena not expected to be seen for years or even a decade are now upon us. Working remotely and telework which was seen before COVID as novel and a coming trend that would dominate the later years of the 2020s is now the new normal as a result of accelerated events that took it from experimental to widespread reality. The current labor market has been turned upside down where workers who had been in a position of fear and weakness in their jobs now have recently discovered the power to effectively leverage their standing in the market. In light of the recent significant paradigm shift in the labor market is it essential for organizations and their respective Human Resource professionals to acknowledge and to develop strategies that can effectively address the current realities associated with employee recruiting, retention, and selection. It is therefore imperative to understand that employee issues in this current labor market require a different approach in helping organizations recover in a post-COVID environment as seen by the fact that recent efforts to fill open positions has not been easily accomplished using established recruiting, retention, and selection procedures. This research is an urgent wake-up call to all those involved in dealing with the “new” labor market.

According to Karin Kimbrough, the chief economist for LinkedIn, a shift in the social contract of work has occurred and the employees hold the pen (Whitaker, 2022). The current market reflects a kind of worker attitude and confidence not seen since the post-World War II era of the late 1940s and early 1950s. At that time, we saw the end of a 20-year period of pent-up demand in the consumer market that had resulted from the Great Depression and World War II that ushered in a market where labor had the upper hand. Women of the time had a new personal perception of independence and newly acquired job skills as male workers returned to the economy in huge numbers to take advantage of the GI bill to increase their human capital along with heightened job expectations. These events and more led to a period of worker dominance that put business owners and management at a well-recognized disadvantage. To counteract this, the immediate reaction was to turn to legislative initiatives such as the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 to create a better balance between the forces of labor and management (Shister, 1958). Despite this, labor participation rates continued to increase at a record pace realizing the highest amount of unionized workers in the American economy of about 35 percent by 1953 (Calloway & Collins, 2017). This in turn ushered in the era of collective bargaining that saw gains by big labor in terms of higher wages and benefits that soon became widespread and institutionalized. Similar to the current economy, the demand for higher wages and consumer goods in the early 1950s saw a sudden rise in inflation up to the onset of the Korean War (Mathy, 2021). These economic conditions and worker dominance would last until the 1970s when overarching economic realities, as a result of a

series of events and political movements, shifted power into the hands of management which would last well into the third decade of the 21st century.

The 1970s were fraught with major economic disruptions that put the American economy into a depressed and difficult reality for labor. International events in the Middle East in late 1973 brought on a worldwide shock related to the availability of oil and thus the first of two embargoes during the 1970s that created an economy based on the uncertainty that shook both labor and management. In addition, as related to energy and production costs issues, global competition threatened the American economy to its core. This uneasiness resulted in worker displacement, industry restructuring, and evolving political philosophies that significantly influenced the shift of the pendulum of power decidedly to management's favor. Events such as Black Monday hit industrial centers such as Youngstown, Ohio forever changing our nation's steel production capabilities. The closing of the famous Jeanette Blast Furnace in 1978 marked the loss of over 50,000 steelworker jobs and the beginning of American deindustrialization in the Midwest (Linkon & Russo, 2002). Businesses in wholesale fashion either closed facilities in strong labor-areas altogether or shifted them to parts of the United States where unions were relatively weak or nonexistent. Later years would see the shift continue to off-shoring and establishing foreign operations to replace American factories and labor. The automobile industry was rocked by the two oil embargoes of the 1970s and failed to see the coming competition from foreign producers which led to the steady decline of the power of Detroit as a major automaker and the United Auto Workers (UAW).

At about the same time as this major paradigm shift in the American economy, the philosophy of the conservative view of politics and public policy became more pronounced as an influence on governance. Although the Conservative movement had existed for years because of individuals such as William F. Buckley, it was Ronald Reagan who made it a political power philosophy that would alter the role of labor in our country. President Reagan made this abundantly clear as early as his Inauguration Day in January 1981. In his Inauguration speech, he promoted a reduced role for government in the influence of public policy that eventually went along with deemphasizing legal remedies for solving problems, which among other things, put labor at a disadvantage. This became very true in matters related to collective bargaining, work stoppages, and organizing efforts as seen by the Air Traffic Controllers strike in 1981 along with a series of court rulings that weakened labor standing and power. The Conservative movement would put labor and workers at a disadvantage for decades. In addition, September 11 in 2001, and the Great Recession of 2008 also added to work anxiety and fear and thus a decided advantage for management well into the 21st century. COVID-19 appears to have altered that in a significant way. We now see a changed and active labor market that is moving into uncharted waters. The plans and projected realities for the 2020s and beyond that were formulated well before COVID-19 are now about to change significantly. Seismic shifts are coming, and the current state of the labor market is already showing that new view.

2. The New Labor Realities of the 2020s

2.1 The Redefined Economy

So, what is happening and what are the reasons for the current labor shortage? What new realities and philosophies are workers now pursuing? It is an amazing time, and the effects of the outcomes will be felt for decades to come. Current members of the labor force along with those about to enter the labor market after high school and college will most likely look back at this time in a most significant way. Several movements and personal choices make for an interesting study of the current state of the economy and the labor market experiencing recent phenomena of major paradigm shifts and significant waves. Let's look at recent phenomena.

2.2 Worker Demographics

The jobs market has been facing a potential labor shortage for years based on several factors such as demographics, family-related issues, and the more recent pandemic implications (McMillan, 2021). Changing demographic factors make it clear that we have been facing several major labor market shifts. An ever-increasing number of workers are involved in service and technology-related occupations while a decreased share is engaged in factory and farm work (BLS, 2021). Farm labor which was about 90 percent of the American economy 200 years ago now accounts for only about 1.6 percent today (PBS, 2021). In addition, older workers present some interesting possibilities for the near future. As they grow older and many are health compromised, some have decided to leave their jobs as hastened by pandemic-related health fear related to COVID-19. Despite this, the Bureau of Labor Statistics still reports that those over the age of 65 or older will account for an increase to about 23% of the labor force participation rate by 2029 (Coate, 2021).

From a sociocultural perspective, working families have been more acutely concerned about personal leave opportunities which are longer and compensated. These requested leaves are generally for themselves and to be devoted to family members as related to such issues as child and elderly care as seen with recent attempts to pass President Biden's American Families Plan along with some proposed changes to the Family and Medical Leave Act (Findlay, 2021). Beyond sociocultural issues related to the labor market, demographic factors also deal with other changing realities. These are factors such as worker diversity, organizational design, work arrangements, safety, and health concerns, changing technology, the effects of global climate change, and the fact that many were able to accumulate more savings during the pandemic due to stay at home orders (Syron, et al., 2021).

2.3 The Great Resignation or the Big Quit of 2021

Workers are currently quitting at record rates in the manufacturing, transportation, utilities, and professional and business services sectors with losses in retailing signaling a difficult 2021 holiday season for large employers such as Amazon and Walmart (Mitchell, Weber & Cambon, 2021). The Labor Department reported that 4.5 million workers quit their jobs in November 2021, which is about 3 percent of the workforce leaving about 10.6 million jobs unfilled (Cox, 2022). In addition, well over 20 million people quit their jobs during the second half of 2021 (Whitaker, 2022). While most of these workers are expected to return to the labor force eventually, there is some evidence that they will not return to similar jobs or similar types of industries. Because of fear of COVID-19 and other factors many are leaving jobs that require personal contact to ones where they can work apart from others or in some degree of isolation (Molla & Stewart, 2021).

When people leave jobs to the extent they have recently it implies a sense of perceived confidence and more personal reflection on the employment situation. Feelings of job dissatisfaction, resistance to vaccine mandates, the need to relocate, and the need to try a different career path seemed to be supported by feelings that this is the right thing to do at this time. This is not considered to be some short-term trend or a mere moment in time, rather it is a movement supported by the notion that resigning positively is the right path to pursue alternative career paths (Fox, 2021). While some are leaving the workforce completely, many seem to be seeking better work opportunities in the areas of self-employment. The self-employment entrepreneurial route has allowed professionals to fully embrace remote careers and to pursue careers that align with their natural skills and passions. For example, financial advisor Mandi Woodruff-Santos of the Brown Ambition Podcast and Mandi Money Media, and Kenzie Biggins of Worxbee, a virtual executive assistant provider, have leveraged their skills to become extremely successful in areas they have longed to pursue as their own bosses (Woodruff-Santos, 2021; Whitaker, 2022).

While some see the self-employment route as merely a worker negotiation tactic, the fact is that many just want something else and therefore have resisted attempts by organizations to institute aggressive recruiting and retention programs. However, there is a potential negative effect of the movement to self-employment and the continued rapid growth of the gig economy. The jobs that many now seem to be going to are considered by some to be lower-level type jobs in terms of skills, lower wages, and no real possibility of any type of benefits such as health care or retirement. The continued erosion of stable middle-income jobs that started about a decade ago has created a disparity in the labor market that may have major implications for future generations of workers. The fear of a future economy with a wealthy elite on one end and a large low-wage service class creates the reality of what some refer to as the barbell economy (Kain, 2011). To deal with the fear of what a barbell economy would mean in terms of employment polarization of the labor market and workers many have undertaken specific actions to build and support a stronger middle economy. This has been achieved through local government action, the devoting of resources to various types of education related to STEM and vocational-based, and steady and healthy investment in creating job opportunities in various industries (Morrison, 2020; Sheehy, 2018).

2.4 The Rise of Zoom Towns and Amenity Migration

Since about March 2020, a significant change has taken place that in many ways may explain the new attitudes of current workers and their work preferences. Because of the shelter in place mandates that were issued by the various states as related to federal government guidelines many workers were sent home to work reinforcing an ongoing recent trend in employment. Work at home was nothing new. Many progressive organizations have been encouraging this method as an employment option for many years before 2020 as evidenced by many initiatives over the last few decades. Because of the changing demographics of the American workforce and the cultural shifts seen in many business organizations, the advantages of telecommuting programs for lower-level administrative employees showed great promise of increased productivity, lower turnover rates, and reduced non-salary expenses (Frolick et al., 1993). The possibility of workplace and worker flexibility have been great incentives for such work-at-home activities to continue to grow. As a way to compete for workers then and now, organizations that have offered greater

worker freedom and choice have had a marked advantage in recruiting and retention efforts (Kay, 1990). Workers are two and a half times more likely to apply for jobs that are remote with the reality being that before the pandemic remote jobs were 1 in 67 and now 1 in 7 jobs are classified as being remote (Whitaker, 2022). Despite concerns about building and maintaining a strong organizational culture that thrives on personal interaction, organizations have recently conceded to the telecommuting wave because of the obvious case of COVID-19 and because recent innovations have provided a platform for it to be easily and efficiently done. In addition, improved and readily available technology has greatly facilitated this movement of not only the flexibility of working from home but also the choice of where home for workers now needs to be.

Zoom Video Communications or Zoom as it is called was developed about a decade ago as a way to host video conferencing among groups of various sizes (Lorenz, 2020). Because of Zoom many American workers and their families have had the opportunity to reevaluate their lives and to pull up stakes to move to more desirable living conditions that offer better weather, more affordable lifestyles, personal enjoyment, and freedom. Employees now locate to where they want to live instead of where they have to work in places such as Florida, Montana, and Texas creating what some call “Zoom Towns” (NBC, 2021). While oil and gold discoveries of the past created Boomtowns in the west, modern technology coupled with COVID-19 concerns created Zoom Towns. Recent research indicates that in response to COVID-19, about one in twenty younger adults have moved away from expensive, cramped, and larger coastal American cities to the wide-open interior areas that offer a pleasant lifestyle and nature (Johanson, 2021).

This move to nature and away from crowded and expensive urban centers has spawned what is called Amenity Migration. Amenity Migrants and Migration has created a phenomenon known as Gateway and Natural Amenity Region (GNAR) communities whose characteristics that attract people also offer challenges such as rural gentrification (Sodja, 2021). As recently seen, the irony is that smaller communities suffer rural gentrification because the things that attract new amenity migrants often mean that their very “unspoiled” nature has to change suddenly to accommodate the sudden influx of population and their associated needs and demands (Weeks, 2021).

2.5 Plug and Play Labor

Another reality of today’s labor market is the existence of large, transitory, low-income workers who are readily available for work at short notice. These individuals, many of whom are retired, can easily shift from one place or job to another as needed by the businesses across America. Because of the harsh realities of inadequate amounts of income from pensions, Social Security, and mounting debt, these older Americans have taken to the road to go where the jobs are to be found. Many have traded real estate for “wheel estate” as they travel via RVs, travel trailers, and vans to become the nomads of the twenty-first century (Grant, 2021). From North Dakota to California to Texas and many places in between, the group form what many refer to as generic workampers or Amazon’s CamperForce (Bruder, 2017). This nomadic group of gypsy labor is the new precariat of society and is an emerging class of people facing insecurity and precarious lives. According to some, this barbell-type phenomenon creates instabilities in society where there is not a strong middle-class base and therefore these individuals are potentially vulnerable and susceptible to dangerous forces such as political extremism (Standing, 2011).

Although it’s been well over a decade since The Great Recession, its impact on our society and economy is still being experienced. No longer do we see just the normal choices and decisions made by families to settle into a region where the lifestyle and the economy offer safe and stable lives where generations live out comfortable and somewhat affluent lives. Since 2008 many workers have been challenged to make their way to some sense of economic stability through creative options such as the gig economy wave and these nomadic lifestyles. Workers who are part of the Amazon CamperForce system can be aware of where temporary work is available through the Amazon network and quickly pull up stakes and drive to warehouses in non-urban areas with huge parking lots to settle for the next period of work. They have embraced a life of resisting market logics of accumulation, the absence of possessions, and social displacement (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021).

3. Labor Market Solutions

3.1 Short and Long-Term

As the overall economy and organizations strive to overcome the major challenges of the current shift in the labor market many employers have been pursuing some possible solutions. While some of these ideas may be considered short-term fixes, they may in some cases prove to have long-lasting benefits to the overall economy.

For example, organizations such as Chick-fil-A, Kroger, AMC Theaters, McDonald's, and Dairy Queen have been hiring 14- and 15-year-olds for basic support jobs based on the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) guidelines (Ryan,

2021). Although there are labor restrictions placed on the employment of these younger workers, employees this age are generally more physically able and energetic, are eager to learn and pick up concepts quickly, and better understand the technology required in today's workplace. In addition to alleviating some of the hiring and retention pressures of the current labor market, such programs help these younger workers gain valuable work experiences, instill a greater work ethic and teach basic personal and business skills.

In addition to hiring younger workers, many believe that a change in attitudes and policies on immigration could be helpful. Although recent policies have been to close our borders and tighten immigration standards, the reality is that foreign workers could be of great value to close the current hiring gap. Low-wage foreign workers who are desperately needed in construction, transportation, warehousing, hospitality, and personal services can do jobs that have little negative effect on American workers (Narea, 2021). Organizations have hired immigrant workers through the H-2B visa program. Although Congress, with the support of the Biden Administration, recently authorized the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to issue additional visas for H-2B workers for the seasonal agricultural industry and the labor market in general, DHS has yet to do so (Bier, 2021). Despite the demand for action in this area, action may never be taken because of the fear of abuse by these workers who game this very flawed system and because some dispute the existence of a labor shortage in H-2B related industries (Costa, 2021). In light of this inaction, employees continue to complain that they struggle to hire in a market where job openings far outnumber those seeking jobs. Immigrants are generally more flexible as related to job requirements and while many will perform manual production type jobs some are more highly educated such as those who were major contributors to developing the COVID-19 vaccines (Schunurman, 2021). Therefore, a possible solid option to help resolve the woes of the labor market is caught up in politics and ill feelings from years of frustration associated with American immigration policy.

As has been an investment issue for many years organizations have long considered the use of technology and automation to support or even replace employees in the performance of certain jobs. Now with the pandemic and the recent labor shortage, decisions on the use of automation, which had been difficult to make because of the amount of investment required, have been made more clear and specific. Investing in automation to support and replace workers is now upon us where the technology can now be applied to such activities as retail self-checkout, production monitoring, the performance of simple and routine tasks, and patient care oversight in the healthcare industry (Mitchell, 2021). The food and delivery industries have made major commitments to employing automation instead of workers. McDonald's has integrated the "flippy" hamburger cooking machine, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) uses robotics from Hyundai Robotics to cook chicken, and Chick-fil-A, Dominos, and Grubhub use autonomous vehicles to deliver food (Joseph, 2021). In addition to solving the short-term labor shortage problem, these investment decisions make great sense as long-term solutions. Many of the tasks in food preparation and delivery are routine, repetitive, monotonous, and reduce labor-related issues that promote product consistency and production efficiency.

Other organizations have tried bold and creative ideas to solve the problems of the current labor market. Some of these ideas are initiatives related to Levi's offering their employees training to promote digital upskilling in the application of AI to their job duties, JBS building affordable housing for employees, Project 44 offering employees the use of a luxury camper van to travel for a time while they work away from the office, Russell Stover using prison labor for production jobs, Michigan State University encouraging faculty and staff to volunteer to support dining hall worker shortages on campus and retailers such as Rite Aid, CVS, and Walgreens who are adjusting and reducing pharmacy work hours (Rainey, 2021; Thomas, 2021; Kaplan et al., 2021).

4. Conclusion

The current labor market has reached a critical mass that requires Human Resource professionals to extend recruiting, retention, and selection efforts beyond what was sufficient and acceptable in the past. In observing current attempts by organizations to fill numerous open positions, it is obvious the required effort applied and the strategic plans being employed are falling significantly short of the desired results. This study is an attempt to accomplish a variety of objectives. It is therefore important to be open to new ways to recruit and hire by acknowledging and adjusting to employee needs, being open to different types of employees, being more adaptable and flexible, and very importantly being open to adjusting and revising corporate culture to facilitate the transition needed to be successful.

The recent labor market has certainly presented some very unique events that indicate in some ways a repeat of earlier economic realities and business cycles. The prevalence of recent strikes and renewed labor activity remind many of an earlier time after World War II up until the 1970s. The recent phenomenon known as "Striketober" was a show of labor power not seen for several decades. The recent labor militancy has been fueled by the disrupted status

quo caused by the pandemic that raised worker expectations based on more perceived leverage as associated with such ideas as the “Great Resignation.” In addition, the current labor movement seems to be energized by the current administration in power which is viewed as a “labor supporter” and what some believe today is that strikes breed more strikes as compared to what was seen with the Air Traffic Controllers strike of 1981 (Janse, et al., 2021). Throughout 2021, there have been strikes against 178 employers such as John Deere, Kelloggs, Kaiser Permanente, Nabisco, Frito-Lay, Major League Baseball, airport workers in Phoenix, and maintenance and service workers at a Huntington, West Virginia hospital (Bogage, 2021; Funk & Brant, 2021). Labor harmony now seems to be unsettled due to recent labor organizing efforts. Trouble may be “brewing” for employers based on the recent successful organizing campaign at Starbucks in Buffalo, with another store pending, and by the fact as reported by Gallup that Americans have had the highest positive opinion of labor organizing since 1965 (Molla, 2021). As recently reported, of the 890 private-sector union elections held during 2021, 573 resulted in union certification at a rate of 64 percent (Sainato, 2021).

In addition, recent labor disruptions have no doubt compounded the recent inflation and supply chain nightmares. Shortages of dockworkers, truck drivers, and employees for many factories such as chipmakers and toys created a bottleneck for the last months of 2021 that caused major disruptions for automakers, Christmas shoppers, and a multitude of consumers. With shortages in the goods and services and the labor market come immense pressures on prices and on wages causing 7 percent inflation in late 2021, which is its highest level in four decades (Guilford, 2022).

World War I and the Great 1918 Pandemic, The Great Depression, World War II, September 11, and COVID-19 were the great disruptors throughout our recent history. Major paradigm shifts come along maybe once in a generation but create profound realignment throughout the globe, across productivities systems, the economy, and populations (Michelson, 2020). Thomas Kuhn, a famed physicist, once defined paradigm shifts as when the established paradigm is rendered incompatible with new systems and new realities thus creating a new paradigm and how things are now significantly realigned (Kuhn, 1962). It is interesting how the science of physics came to help define economic systems as well.

Despite the short-term economic uncertainty because of the pandemic, it is somewhat obvious that several longer-term labor market shifts are already in motion. Beyond the current efforts to get a handle on the economy and its recovery, trends are emerging in areas such as long-term refinements on the nature of work such as remote at-home responsibilities, energized labor movements, and structural changes in the labor market itself. Because of the pandemic, the slowly evolving concept of remote work assignments went from a new area of experimentation to the sole reality of how work had to be done with the help of a technology base such as Zoom and other methods. As a result, workers found it to be to their liking and the general view was that overall productivity did not suffer any significant declines. According to some reports, worker productivity went up (Maurer, 2020). In addition, we have seen more evidence of increased talent management through people analytics, job, and company reengineering, and trends toward a marked increase in wage demands and wage earnings (Freidrich, 2021). As we move to the midpoint of the 2020s, labor market disruptions, major economic paradigm shifts, and changed workers' expectations will drive our future in very significant ways in a matter of a few short years versus several decades as once imagined not that long ago.

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