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Keeping up with labor issues

By

Craig Levitt, managing editor

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As shoppers walk through almost any supermarket these days, more often than not they are greeted with an unwelcome site — empty shelf space.

It's not only supply chain issues impacting the dearth of product. A real issue for most retailers is labor. Sometimes grocers simply don't have the requisite number of employees to do what needs to be done throughout the store. Other times store managers may think they are fully staffed for the day — until the “out sick” emails start rolling in and the store is short staffed again — just another gift COVID-19 keeps providing. Despite the hope that omicron may be waning, industry observers think the labor issues may last for weeks, possibly months.

In some cases the labor issues are changing how some retailers have to do business. Roche Bros., based in Massachusetts, on the occasions when staffing is low is forced to close certain service-related areas of the store. Despite the adversity, Roche Bros. is still thriving, as Arthur Ackles, senior vice president of merchandising and buying, pointed out, commending the effort Roche Bros. associates have given since the onset of COVID-19.

“If we didn't have the people we have here, we are making it through the pandemic in as good a shape as anybody. We have had our struggles, but comparable to where everybody else is, I'm really proud of how we handled this,” he said. “It's because of the people in these stores and the people that support them.”

In-stock levels of food products at U.S. retailers hit 86 percent for the week ended Jan. 16, according to data from market-research firm IRI. That is lower than last summer and pre-pandemic levels of more than 90 percent.

Now some executives say supply challenges are worse than ever. The lack of workers leaves a broader range of products in short supply, food-industry executives said, with availability sometimes changing daily.

Eddie Quezada, produce manager at a Stop & Shop store in Northport, NY, told *The Wall Street Journal* that omicron has stretched his department more than any previous wave of the pandemic, with one in five of his staff contracting COVID-19 in early January. Deliveries also have taken a hit, he said.

“We were expecting supply issues to get resolved as we go into this period right now. Omicron has put a bit of a dent on that,” Vivek Sankaran, chief executive of Albertsons Cos., said on a recent call with analysts, adding that he expects more supply challenges over the next couple months.

The issues go beyond retailers.

Steve Church, co-chairman at Church Bros. Farms, told *The Wall Street Journal* that 10 percent of the employees at his Arizona vegetable processing plant and distribution facility were out sick on any given day earlier this month. Church said he still has been able to fill orders, but he worries about the toll the added work is taking on Church's remaining employees, who are working overtime to keep fresh-cut vegetables and bagged salads moving.

"Those people are tired and they want days off," Church said in the Journal. "It's a vicious circle."

It's the employees that Ackles is most concerned about. "During these last two years, they (employees) are the ones that keep me up at night," he said. "People ask all the time 'What keeps you up at night?' The last two years it's the health of our associates. They've been put on the front lines, they have been dealing with the worst of the worst, and they are the best of the best. Somehow they have kept their heads high and managed to get our customers food."

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