
Mid-Year STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

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Ag facing chronic labor shortage

By

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It has been dubbed the Great Resignation, and refers to the record number of Americans that have voluntarily quit their jobs in the past year.

In April of 2022, 4.4 million Americans quit whatever job they had, marking the eleventh consecutive month with more than 4 million resignations. Each month that 4 million represents almost 3 percent of the workforce. Though it's only a rough estimation, economists have guessed that about 40 percent of all workers have quit their jobs since the beginning of 2021.

To put this number in perspective, it is important to note that the average number of people leaving their jobs on a monthly basis over the past couple of decades is around 3 million. During the 11 months of greater than 4 million people quitting, new hires outpaced that number significantly each month. On average, nearly 6.5 million people were hired per month. The number of jobs created, in fact, is what many economists point to in explaining the Great Resignation, which has shifted leverage from the employer to the workers and created a tight job market. That tight market has led to higher wages and lots of empty workstations at almost every company, large and small.

The fresh produce industry has not escaped the impact of this high level of job mobility.

Vince Mastromauro Jr., produce director of Sunset Foods, which has five retail locations in the Chicago metropolitan area, told *The Produce News* that he has felt the impact of the current situation. "It's very difficult right now. I've lost a couple of produce managers already this year. Workers are looking at their options," he said. "Right now, we have a shallow labor pool, and the employee has the power."

Jeff Tomassetti, director of produce and floral operations for Buehlers Fresh Foods in Wooster, OH, agreed. "Staffing has been an issue for the past several years and continues to be a problem in retail," he said. "We have job fairs monthly; we interview 30-40 candidates, and we are lucky if we actually hire six people."

Ed Treacy, vice president of supply chain and sustainability for International Fresh Produce Association, said many IFPA members are reporting labor shortages at every level of the workforce. "From field workers to white collar workers, everyone is looking for warm bodies to fill the seats. It's crazy," he said, noting that produce companies are having to pay wages much higher than before to attract new workers.

Jason Resnick, senior vice president and general counsel for Western Growers in Irvine, CA, said, "the produce industry is not immune to the Great Resignation." He added that the California ag industry has always had some difficulty competing with Silicon Valley and the tech world for the best and the brightest workers. Neither ag nor most other industries have paid the wages these workers

can earn working for the tech giants. “But we are competing with them, and we point out that working on the farm and in smaller cities has a lot to offer,” he said. “You can buy a bigger home; you have a shorter commute in most instances, and we think it represents a better quality of life.”

He added that the “best and the brightest” is a large pool of workers, larger than what Silicon Valley can consume.

Many people believe this current imbalance in the workplace with the employee gaining leverage over a large variety of jobs will be short-lived. Employers and employees are adjusting and the number of people quitting jobs is expected to fall in the second half of 2022.

Unfortunately, production agriculture is facing a chronic shortage that didn’t begin 18 months ago, and that chronic shortage is showing no signs of abating. The current situation has made it worse with no quick fix in sight. Renick said Western Growers continues to work on immigration reform, but there is not currently a clear path to legislative action for that thorny issue.

The number of field workers available to harvest the crops continues to decline, largely because of a tighter border, but also because there is not an abundance of young people willing to make their living in the fields. The harvesting population is aging, and they are not raising their children to follow in their footsteps. New solutions must be found.

Mechanization is one solution, but it is expensive and impractical for many crops — though there is great headway being made in this direction.

John D’Arrigo, president of D’Arrigo California, said that he saw the handwriting on the wall a decade ago when attracting workers became more and more difficult. D’Arrigo established a mechanical engineering department in its Salinas Valley facility and hired a team who began working on potential solutions. Today, D’Arrigo has switched some of its field operations and is well down the path to building a viable robotic-equipped harvester for romaine and another for broccoli. John D’Arrigo is working with seed companies to produce crops that are easier to harvest mechanically, such as broccoli plant with a stalk grows higher.

He is also lobbying educational institutions to teach skills that the ag workers will need to run and fix the high-tech machinery that the industry will be using. D’Arrigo said mechanization is a win-win as it decreases the need for field workers while at the same time creating more technical and higher paying jobs. “As we incorporate more agtech into our operations, we will need more people with computer and tech skills to do the work. I am engaged with universities and colleges to create curriculums for the ag jobs of future,” he said.

In the meantime, agriculture still has a lot of crops in the ground that must be harvested the old-fashioned way as new solutions are researched, developed and put into play.

Resnick said the U.S. Department of Labor’s H-2A program does offer some relief and more and more employers are utilizing this temporary foreign worker program. “We are seeing a lot more of our members go in that direction,” Resnick said.

He revealed that even though California is the nation’s top agricultural producer, it was never in the top 10 of state’s applying for H-2A workers until recently. For fiscal 2021 (ending in October of 2021), ag employers brought in more than 317,000 workers. Florida led with 44,000 workers followed by Georgia, California, Washington and North Carolina. For fiscal 2022, two quarters are in the books

and the numbers of worker applications has jumped another 17 percent.

Resnick said the need is acute as the overall number of field workers continues to decline. Many are aging out, and many others find work in easier industries that offer steady employment or better working conditions. He said there is not a flow of new workers coming into the country to begin their climb up the U.S. socio-economic ladder.

He added that one of the best things about the H-2A program is that there is no cap attached to it as there is with other programs. Any ag company can apply as long as they can comply with the regulations, which include paying a higher wage and providing housing and transportation.

[Tim Linden](#)

About Tim Linden |

Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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