Shattering the Myths of the Part-Time Worker

by Crist Inman and
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The time has come to tap the hidden talents and unappreciated potential of part-time employees, but first it's necessary to shatter managers' widely held beliefs about part-timers' work attitudes and behavior.

Part-time workers are an essential and flexible source of labor in the food-service industry. Reliance on part-time workers helps fill shifts during peak business periods while allowing for smaller shifts during slow business periods. Not only do these workers permit flexible scheduling, but on average they are less expensive to employ because they typically receive lower wages and many firms do not provide them with benefits.

Roughly two-thirds of the food-service-industry labor force is part-

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time.¹ The Bureau of Labor Statistics has reported that about 20 million employees in U.S. businesses—20 percent more than a decade ago—work fewer than 35 hours a week. Of those employees, six million work in the food-service industry.

Employing part-timers helps reduce wage outlays, but these workers frequently have high turnover rates. Often part-time workers simply move on to a better opportunity elsewhere, which may be another job in the food-service field. Frequently, however, they quit their jobs because they feel that they are unappreciated or, worse, ignored, and because they do not receive adequate training.² We feel that the beliefs some managers hold about part-time workers—often based on myth—contribute to the workers' dissatisfaction and turnover and cause managers to underuse them.

In this paper we offer a strategically useful view of part-time workers in the food-service industry and make suggestions for maximizing their impact in an organization.

The Myths about Part-Timers

The reader may recognize some of the following myths about part-time workers compared to full-time workers: they are inferior; less hardworking; less concerned with product quality, cleanliness of the operation, and cost control; and higher in absenteeism.

Such negative views are vividly captured in a study of managerial beliefs about part-time workers.³

Open-ended interviews with 82 managers, union officials, and workers from a variety of industries, including food service, revealed that many managers have bought into the myths, believing part-time workers have less experience, fewer abilities, lower work standards, and less loyalty to their position and to the company and are more prone to absenteeism, tardiness, and theft than full-time workers. Many managers view part-time workers as less competent, less work-oriented, less reliable, and less committed to organizational values and philosophies.

Shattering the Myths

In a recent study we explored whether the negative stereotype of part-time workers was accurate. We found that critical work attitudes and behavior were as strongly exhibited by part-time workers as by full-time workers.⁴

The widely held belief that part-time workers have less commitment, less competence, and less willingness to work hard than full-time workers may be the result of historical stereotypes and self-fulfilling prophecy. The benefits they bring to the firm are twisted into an indictment of their abilities and attitudes. Those views may become institutionalized in the firm's recruiting, training, and management practices and compensation policies. Thus the actions of managers may make it more likely that part-timers will respond negatively.

Since, in fact, employee work attitudes do not vary with employment status (see the box on the next page), food-service firms that assume the worst of their part-time

labor force are wasting resources. What they gain by using low-cost part-time workers may be lost through high turnover that results from treating them as less capable than full-time workers. By one estimate, the cost of replacing a single hospitality employee is at least \$1,700.⁵ A wiser strategy for the food-service industry would be to stop underusing part-time workers and take better advantage of the scheduling flexibility they can provide.

Value added. Part-time workers should be treated as valuable assets. Starbucks's, the now-famous coffee-shop chain, has carved out a profitable niche in the food-service market by doing just that. The company offers its part-time employees high pay (by industry standards) and health benefits. Starbucks proclaims that doing so differentiates it in the labor market, allowing it to hire the best workers.⁶ That has made Starbucks one of the fastest-growing, most profitable chains in the industry. Other firms are doing the same; for example, this year Hardee's made all its part-time workers eligible for health-care benefits.⁷

While there are no statistics available on how many food-service establishments provide health-care and other benefits to part-time employees, it has been estimated that in all industries combined, fewer than 25 percent of part-time workers receive health-care benefits, and fewer than 20 percent

¹ National Restaurant Association and Deloitte Touche, *Restaurant Industry Operations Report* (Washington, DC: National Restaurant Association, 1993), p. 5.

² Mike Duff, "If You Notice Part-Timers Leaving, It's Too Late," *Supermarket Business*, Vol. 44 (May 1989), pp. 90, 115, 140. This story reports the results of a Cornell University survey of part-time employees in the food industry.

³ Chris Tilly, "Dualism in Part-Time Employment," *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 31 (Spring 1992), pp. 330-347.

⁴ C. Enz and C. Inman, "A Comparison of Attitudes and Work Practices of Part-Time and Full-Time Workers in the Food Service Industry," in *1992 Annual CHRIE Conference Proceedings* (Washington, DC: CHRIE, 1992), pp. 19-21.

⁵ John J. Hogan, "Turnover, and What to Do About It," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (February 1992), p. 40.

⁶ Barbara Presley Noble, "At Work; Benefits? For Part Timers?" *New York Times*, August 16, 1992, Sec. 3, p. 23.

⁷ Beth Belton and James Overstreet, "Take This Job...Please!: Bidding War for Workers Stirs Creativity," *USA Today*, October 10, 1994, p. 1B. For other interesting examples outside the industry, see also: Samuel Greengard, "Leveraging a Low-Wage Work Force," *Personnel Journal*, January 1995, pp. 90-102.

A Study of Part-Timer Attitudes

Our study contrasted the work attitudes of part-time and full-time food-service employees. We collected data from 125 employees in a full-service restaurant chain in the northwestern United States. Part-timers constituted 52 percent of the sample. The sample was evenly split between men and women, who were predominantly white and single. The typical tenure with the chain was two years, and respondents expected to stay with the company for an average of three years. The average employee had some college training.

We explored whether work attitudes and behavior vary depending on employment status. To test the assumptions we believe are prevalent in the food-service industry, we conducted a multivariate analysis of covariance on the sample responses. We controlled for age, gender, race, and job type to avoid the confounding effects of those factors. We tested these managerial assumptions:

- Part-time food-service workers are less competent than are full-time workers.
- Part-time food-service workers have a weaker work ethic than do full-time workers.
- Part-time food-service workers have more absenteeism than do full-time workers.
- Part-time food-service workers have a lower level of acceptance of the organizational beliefs of restaurant cleanliness, cost control, honesty in guest relations, quality presentation of food and service, and high food quality than do full-time workers.
- Part-time food-service workers have a lower degree of value similarity with management on the values of efficiency, profits, adaptability, ethical behavior, company stability, quality, and service than do full-time workers.

The survey asked several questions on each of those topics. Work ethic was measured using an eight-item scale. The instrument captured the degree to which the respondents expressed a strong desire to work hard. A seven-point Likert-type scale was used, with the scale ranging from "completely disagree" to "completely agree." A work-ethic score was computed by summing the eight items in accordance with previous approaches.

Competence was measured using a 12-item scale that captured the degree to which respondents viewed themselves as capable of performing their job.

To measure perceived absences, respondents were asked to indicate how many days they were absent from work for any reason except vacation in the previous year.

Acceptance of company beliefs was measured by asking respondents to indicate the degree of importance they attached to six widely articulated company beliefs or standards, using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from "very unimportant" to "very important." The beliefs included items such as the importance of food quality, restaurant cleanliness, cost controls, honesty in guest relations, and presentation of food and service.

To measure operating values, respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they were similar to top management in six operations values (using a scale of value agreement developed by author Cathy Enz). Specific organizational values included efficiency, quality and service, profits, adaptability, ethical behavior, and company stability. The seven-point scale ranged from "very dissimilar" to "very similar."

The results may surprise food-service managers: we found that all the assumptions were wrong (see table, below). In short, part-time workers were not different from full-time workers on those five important measures of work attitude and behavior.

Some of the related findings are also interesting. Job type had a significant influence on acceptance of company beliefs. If there are certain jobs in which pockets of counterculture develop, and there are more part-timers in those jobs than in other types of jobs, that may be a source of the assumption that part-timers have inferior work attitudes. Nonetheless, our study provides evidence that it is not the work status but the job itself that influences the worker's acceptance of company beliefs. Gender was another source of difference in attitudes. Age, on the other hand, did not account for any differences in attitude or behavior, and neither did tenure in the job.

Most important, we found that an employee's status as a part-time or full-time worker did not account for any differences in the five attitudes. The desire to work hard, skill levels, loyalty to the restaurant, and absenteeism were not significantly influenced by the employment status of workers.—C.I. and C.E.

At the editor's suggestion we conducted the same analysis adding a further control for tenure in the job. Surprisingly, the results were unchanged.

Multivariate Analysis of Covariance, F-values

Independent variables	Full-time vs. part-time work status	Type of job	Controlled for gender	Age	Race
• Acceptance of company beliefs	.77	2.6*	.87	.84	.85
• Work ethic	.77	.69	.89	.83	.83
• Competence	1.42	1.33	.90	.74	.79
• Operations value-sharing	1.33	1.37	2.1†	1.62	.86
• Absenteeism	.8	1.22	1.22	.70	1.20

* $p < .01$

† $p < .05$

Note: The only significant differences in worker attitudes were based on job type in the acceptance of company beliefs and gender in the sharing of operations values.

receive life-insurance benefits.⁸ One way for food-service companies to differentiate themselves in the part-time-labor market may be to do exactly what Starbucks and Hardee's have done: offer the benefits that part-time workers need.

Staying on Top of the Market

To use part-time workers as a competitive advantage, firms should follow the following practices.

- **Revise compensation strategies.** We found from our study that work attitudes and behavior did not differ based on work status. If part-timers' work is as valuable as is full-timers', basing wage differentials solely on the number of hours worked can send the wrong signal to the workforce. Firms in many industries have adopted pay programs based on knowledge and skills. That concept makes sense, and food-service firms should also offer incentives for *any* employee to provide improved customer service. Such a compensation system would not only be fair, it would also send a signal to all employees that it is ability, not employment status, that matters. It would also help firms attract and retain part-time workers with the strongest skills.

- **Provide adequate training.** While training is more costly on a per-hour-worked basis for part-timers than for full-time associates, the cost of not providing enough training—or not providing it at all—is even higher. As long as part-timers stick with the job, the overall training costs are diminished. Many firms provide part-timers minimal on-the-job training, and that can frustrate the undertrained workers, their co-workers, and the customers. The result can be high turnover

and other forms of resistance among the part-time workers, thereby increasing the per-employee cost of selection and training.⁹

One alternative is to have part-timers participate in the segments of the firm's formal training program (if there is one) that cover critical skills. Another alternative that some firms have developed for part-timers is a home-study course that teaches basic job skills, appropriate attitudes for various service situations, and ways to deal with the most commonly encountered on-the-job problems. Such a program can have a high payoff for a firm that has a substantial number of part-timers on its staff. Both alternatives let part-time workers know they are important members of the team and sends a message to the other workers that management considers part-timers valuable.

- **Develop clear communication channels.** Typically, communication channels are opened during the recruiting process, when the interviewer explains what the job entails and what skills are needed. Those channels must be kept open. Part-time workers must be included in the day-to-day communication process. Job-related suggestions, announcements, firm news, and training updates should be directed to the entire staff. Part-time workers should not be ignored.

- **Open up the possibilities.** Part-time workers should be considered for some jobs that have traditionally been reserved for full-time workers. Many of the jobs in a typical food-service establishment should be within the reach of ca-

pable part-time workers who are paid a fair wage and properly trained. Full- and part-time workers have similar work-related values, beliefs, and behavior. Therefore part-time workers should have access to more jobs and responsibilities than are now within their reach.

- **Offer benefits.** Firms should look closely at the costs and advantages of offering health-care and other benefits to part-time employees. In a study of part-time workers in fields similar to food service (health care and retail), employees stated they wanted more vacation leave, merchandise discounts, and sick leave. The top three benefits that employees did not currently receive but wanted were cash bonuses, medical insurance, and sick leave.¹⁰

While there are obvious differences in cost between leave benefits and medical insurance, withholding benefits from part-time employees is not likely to be a viable tactic in the future. The competition for part-timers will probably force food-service firms to consider offering some or all those benefits.

Competitive Advantage

Full- and part-time workers have similar work-related attitudes and behavior. Recognizing that fact will be an important step in developing new management strategies in the food-service industry to accommodate shifting demand patterns and shifting demographics.

The time has come to tap the hidden talents and unappreciated potential of part-time workers. They may be the most critical ingredient for gaining a competitive advantage. **CQ**

⁸H.B. Williams, "What Temporary Workers Earn: Findings from a New BLS Survey," *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 112, No. 3 (March 1989), pp. 3-6.

⁹For an interesting investigation of the various forms of resistance, see: Craig C. Lundberg, "Forms of Resistance by Temporary Hospitality Employees," *Hospitality Research Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1994), pp. 127-135.

¹⁰Helen I. Doeringhaus and Daniel C. Feldman, "Employee Benefit Packages for Part-Time Workers," *Benefits Quarterly*, Second Quarter, 1993, pp. 72-82.