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COMMENTARY

OPINION

Commentary: As we reopen, remember: All workers are essential people first

By Sara Wasserteil

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A clear shield separates a cashier and a customer at a Jewel-Osco store in the 3400 block of North Western Avenue on March 25, 2020, in Chicago. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

Last week, a funny thing happened. I was shopping at my local grocer when the person in front of me tried to tip the cashier. The cashier thanked the customer as she politely declined, noting that it was against company policy. In this moment, two things struck me: One, that as a society, we've decided that grocery clerks shouldn't be tipped even in extraordinary times, and two, that community is beginning to show up in new and different ways.

Over the last few months, we've welcomed a new phrase into our vocabulary — the essential worker. While some have used it specifically in reference to our

health care workers, police and firefighters, others have expanded it to include more workers on the front line — those restocking shelves, keeping our supply chains humming, cleaning our offices, driving our buses, delivering our food, and feeding and sheltering our most vulnerable. Although I'm delighted to see those oft-invisible roles given the visibility they merit, I'm struck that this acknowledgment feels too small, because it ties their worth to their jobs.

It is a great American tradition to wrap our self-worth — and the worth of others — with employment. Think of how many times a new acquaintance has asked what you do — only to see their eyes light up or glaze over depending on how interesting they judged your response to be. Similarly, think about how chronically unemployed individuals are received — with pitying eyes and encouraging words, or side conversations about how they must be lazy or something must be wrong with them.

But then the coronavirus pandemic happened, and suddenly nobody's job was safe. As the pandemic ripped through our economy, it wasn't just the mediocre performers whose jobs were on the line, but the CEOs, the top performers and the untouchables.

As a society, it begs the question: Is our worth really tied to our jobs? And if not, doesn't it mean that it's not just the jobs that are essential, but the people who are essential too?

I think that's why I find our emphasis on essential workers too limiting — because, while my grocery store cashier and the cleaner at my gym were given a chance, millions of others have been overlooked because of low educational credentials, a justice-involved background or an unfamiliar name. But if we can decouple our worth with our employment and begin to see people as people, then I have hope for how we can create a more inclusive economy as we emerge from the pandemic's rubble.

As we rebuild, companies will begin rehiring for positions that were lost during this historical blip. And, much like how the woman at the grocery store saw the value in her cashier, I wonder if employers may be willing to see value in talent pools that have historically been overlooked too.

Imagine if employers were willing to flex their recruitment efforts beyond networks, colleges and trade schools to hire and cultivate talent from communities hardest hit by poverty. Because if we've learned a second thing during this pandemic, it's that while these essential people may not have the degrees and backgrounds recruiters typically seek, we are seeing them demonstrating leadership, problem-solving, multi-tasking, work ethic and many of the other traits we look for when we hire.

If employers recognize this and are willing to embrace more inclusive employment as they resume hiring, they might ask how. Here are a few things they could do:

- Partner with local workforce development organizations that have a track record of cultivating disinvested talent into roles where they stay and grow.
- Reassess job descriptions to eliminate unneeded educational requirements, criminal background barriers and qualifications; check those job descriptions with organizations that work with these populations to ensure you're not inadvertently excluding certain populations.
- Help different populations be successful by partnering with local agencies to provide these staff with coaching and other supports to help them grow professionally and maintain stability; these agencies have made sure people don't fall through the cracks for centuries, and they are often underutilized by employers.
- Create advancement pathways to ensure those you hire who have the will to grow have a way to get there.

- Share what you are doing with the world; there are so many pools of untapped talent, and you can be a leader in your community and among other employers if you shine a light on these talent pools.

It isn't lost on me that I began by making the case for why we should replace essential jobs with essential people, only to shift into how we could use that frame to build a more inclusive economy. But I think that's the point. That when we recognize people as individuals vs. the jobs that they carry, we do it with more openness, grace and an ability to see the true talents they bring to the table.

As we march toward an uncertain tomorrow, my hope is that we can see the people working now and those we would be lucky to hire not as essential workers, but as essential people.

Sara Wasserteil is the managing director of expansion and integration at Cara, an organization that works with individuals and employers to move people experiencing poverty into gainful employment.

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