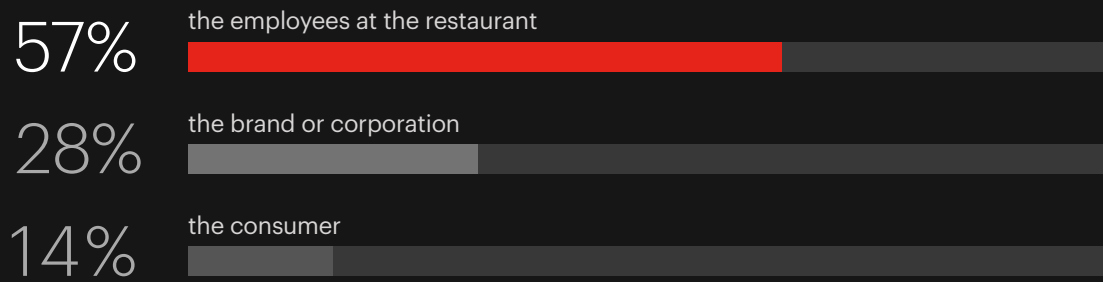


Why Employees Don't Want to Work **for You**

While no industry is exempt from the labor shortage, retailers, and quick-service restaurants are seeing staff turnover and staffing shortages more than anywhere else. If the pandemic-accelerated pace of industry innovation continues, perhaps an automated future will be our reality, one in which digital technology and automation replace the need for the human experience at retail.

However, we know from recent consumer research that that reality is not today. In fact, our research revealed that employees have the most impact on the consumer's brand experience, more than any other experience attribute. But during a labor shortage, there are no employees to be found, causing devastating effects on service and consumer brand perception. The future design of stores must be more holistic and factor in the experiential needs of employees, not just customers, to be successful going forward.

Who has the greatest control over the experience?



Have we already dehumanized the retail employee?

Knowing that employees have the greatest impact on brand experience and that they're in short supply – we surveyed and engaged with them directly to hear their concerns and frustrations and get to the root of why they aren't returning to the workplace.

Overwhelmingly, we've heard is that **there is a massive disconnect between employer and employee**. Customers emphasize the importance employees have on their personal experience, but employees themselves are not feeling valued by the brands that employ them. And that lack of employee recognition has led to employees feeling like they aren't appropriately treated or respected, not only as workers but as human beings.



Treat us like we see things, we know things. We have experiences. We have something to bring to the table, treat us as equals, treat us as if we are knowledgeable. Not like we are children. Not like we are robots.

The issue of pay is important and has been discussed widely but we learned there's more at play. As companies have sought to cost cut and improve margins, it seems they've already begun the work of automating the service experience. Without the right environments, protocols, and support systems, employees do not feel empowered to perform at their best. These staffing issues make it difficult, if not impossible, to deliver a remarkable brand experience to consumers.

In order to attract and retain talent as an employer of choice, brands need to start holding themselves accountable and focus on attracting employees just as much as consumers. This includes supporting a positive workplace culture and creating environmental solutions that address the physical and mental needs of their employees.

Safety and comfort aren't "perks", they are basic human needs.

Employees don't want to work in an environment where they don't feel safe or comfortable. It's as simple as that.

When asked to rank the most important elements of their job, "the store/location feels safe and comfortable" ranked within the top 3, underscoring the importance of meeting the physiological needs of employees. Respect, happiness, and even perks are all important – but if the employee doesn't feel safe, they're ultimately meaningless.

Attributes	Importance
My pay	1
My schedule is flexible	2
The store/location feels safe and comfortable	3
They offer healthcare, paid time off and other benefits	4
I like the people I work with	5
I'm given respect as an individual	6
The job is easy to do	7
I like what the company stands for/their values	8
I have the tools, technology and training I need to do my job	9
They care about me and my needs/individual situation	10

When asked to define what they meant by "safe" and "comfortable," respondents connected feelings of safety to their physical wellbeing, and comfort as the more mental/emotional side of things.



Comfort is tied into feeling mentally safe, particularly with the abusive/creepy customers, but it's also about knowing I can do what my body needs. It includes the ability to sit down without your boss freaking out because heaven forbid the public see that after 7 hours on concrete, you kind of need 3 minutes to sit. It's also being able to run to the bathroom and to take your breaks as needed.

When looking at employee retention, businesses must critically ask themselves, "are we creating environments that are comfortable for our customers while simultaneously ignoring the identical needs of our employees?"

Workplace culture appears to be, at best, non-existent and at worst, toxic and exclusionary.

In the past 18 months, particularly in the restaurant space, we've seen a lot of rapid innovation and technology integration. And while the inclusion of tech is a critical operational enabler – human interaction is nowhere near an obsolete concept and, in fact, more important than ever.

Employees are humans first – and businesses would benefit by helping employees feel that way. They often feel frustrated when there's a perceived lack of control over their schedules, a lack of agency when communicating to angry customers, and a lack of connection to their coworkers and customers. And this frustration often leads to resentment.

When asked about their least-favorite jobs, common themes around least favorite jobs included a lack of diversity, inclusion, and clear communication. Employees are looking to have a voice in their workplace environment. Lack of clarity around roles, rules, and regulations also contributed to negative workplace perceptions.

The employees we heard from want a culture of recognition. They want to be in an environment where they feel seen and respected. And this often starts with the managers.

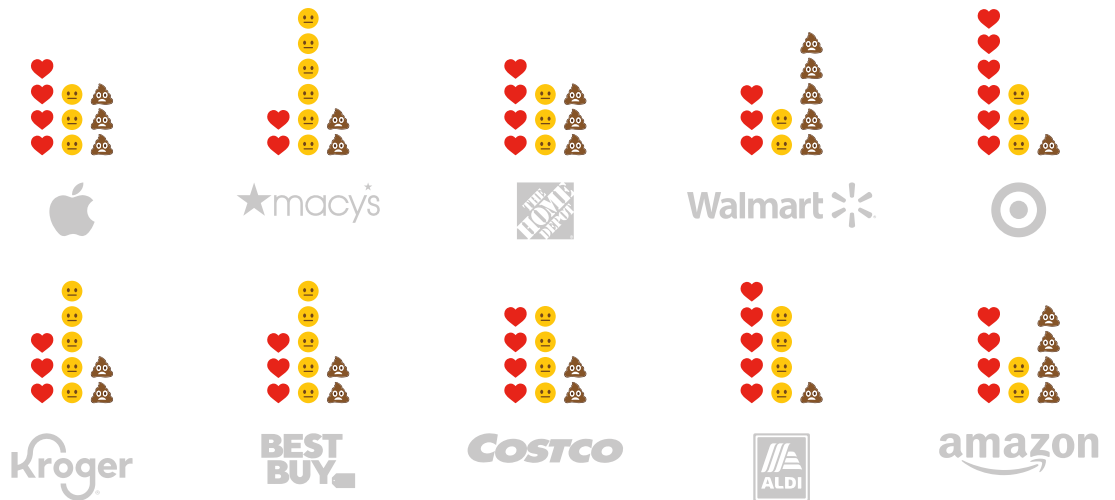


When customers are awful to us, we don't have a way to defend ourselves. Usually, management does not stick up for us and instead fawns over the customers.

There's nothing wrong with taking care of them, but you don't need to make us look incompetent while you do.

In our research, we asked employees to indicate their employer of choice through the use of emojis. There was a huge spread of emojis across brands and sectors, indicating that no one brand has a standout reputation right now.

Employee Perceptions of Brand as a Potential Workplace



The short-term cost of this is manifesting now in a myriad of ways. Starbucks is turning off its mobile order-ahead during high traffic periods when consumers have been trained to rely on it. Restaurants like Cane’s are closing their dining rooms ad hoc to focus on drive-thru traffic. Malls across the country are changing store hours to address staff shortages. The momentum now is manifesting in record-high resignations and job vacancy rates across the retail industry. Changing the social discord through reputation rebuilding can be a first step in reversing the trend.

Dear Golden Corral,

Helping employees succeed is **essential**. A strong emphasis on teamwork is an absolute must. With the amount of business, there needs to be enough people in all positions to accomplish what needs to happen to take care of the guests. As well as having multiple people cross-trained in several areas, this would help in the kitchen and dish room mostly. It would also help the store run smoothly by boosting the morale. Small gestures go a **long way**.

- Optimistic Golden Corral Employee

Brands need to recalibrate now before the damage becomes permanent.

Due to the lack of employees, fast food and retail are experiencing erratic business hours, closing dining rooms to keep drive-thrus open, and general inconsistencies throughout the experience. Beyond the immediate chaos, these companies need to ask themselves, "what are the long-term implications of these problems?"

Headed in Q4, companies should consider shifting budgets toward employee-focused solutions rather than traditional advertising and marketing solutions, taking a holistic approach and accounting for the associate in new store designs. Because at this point, why push consumers to an experience where they will only be disappointed? It degrades your brand.

We asked employees what would improve their workplace culture and overall experience. Beyond the table stakes of wages and benefits, many responses reflected the idea of comfort and feeling free to relax during break times and have a chance to decompress.



I would create a space where the employees could truly relax in peace on their breaks. I would add things that let them pass the time and enjoy their break.

When presented with potential areas of improvement, having a clearly defined career path, on-site childcare, and upgraded break areas all ranked highly. This underscores employees' desire for a workplace environment that proves it can meet both their physical and emotional needs. Going forward, it's clear that there must be a change in how we create next-generation environments.

The existence of a strong employee culture requires intentionality on the brand's part. They must first go through defining what their culture is and then begin to infuse it through a combination of rituals, artifacts, and supporting communications. Without a legitimate investment of time and resources, internal culture will continue to spiral, eventually spilling out of the workplace and affecting the end customer experience. Right now, employees aren't being heard when it comes to considering the branded experience. And it's critical for companies to start solving for employees as well as consumers to drive growth in this next evolution of experience design.

About this study

Big Red Rooster conducted thought leadership in early Q4 2021 designed to understand the employee perspective on brand experience and ways in which retailers/restaurants can become an employer of choice. Our study was conducted in partnership with ENGINE Insights and included a 3-day Digital Hive with 188 U.S. workers 15 years of age and older who are currently or were recently employed by national retailers and/or restaurants. Questions included a mix of open and closed ended discussion, ranking and interactive exercises.

How are you addressing your employees' needs?

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