

‘People have to start thinking about a relaunch plan’

How staffing has changed – and will need to – during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

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Virginia Business *virtually* sat down with Mathieu Stevenson, CEO of Glen Allen-based hourly online staffing platform Snagajob, and Tammy Feaster, owner of the Spherion staffing services location in Winchester, to see how the staffing industry has weathered the coronavirus crisis. This is part of an ongoing series of conversations with Virginians about how their work lives and businesses have changed during the pandemic.

VB: What changes are you seeing in the staffing industry?

Stevenson: It’s the largest and most unprecedented shift in employment across sectors. There have been millions of layoffs and furloughs — particularly in the restaurant and hospitality [sectors] and also retail. And now there are acute hiring needs in grocery, convenience store[s], cleaning, warehousing and health care. The single biggest trend four weeks ago would have been the lack of available workers and workers seeking employment, relative to the number of jobs available. There was a shortage of more than 2 million workers relative to the number of jobs. That is completely flipped.



Tammy Feaster, Spherion Staffing Services Winchester location owner

Feaster: I have seen an influx [of businesses looking to hire temp workers] in Virginia. We have companies that are coming to the front and saying, “We need to get contract workers in to get essential business out.” Our recruiting strategies have changed quite a bit in the last few weeks, such as [moving] from in-person to virtual [interviews]. We [work with] a huge medical supply distributor [in Virginia] that does medical kits for surgeries. Those are items that have to be out within timely manners.

VB: What has changed with the staffing process?

Stevenson: The reality is this [crisis] will lift in eight to 12 weeks. And so people have to start thinking about the relaunch plan. Both small businesses and enterprise businesses not only are going to have to rehire entire stores — in some cases, it's almost entire companies. That sort of shift is something that we have never seen, at least in my lifetime, where people are having to say, "Hey, I'm going to have to go rehire 25,000 workers across the country for just my business."

We [offer] one-way-based videos leveraging cognitive gains and AI to do candidate assessment [to] replace the interview or make it virtual, like via Zoom. You get a text with a link and it takes you to a one-way video where you answer a handful of questions. Then based on the AI and your performance, it assesses you on a series of sort of attitudinal-based characteristics that help them determine whether you might be a fit for that particular role. The AI is looking for common answers or words ... [that show employers] these are the types of attitudes or characteristics people need.

We will now be forced to use technology to really help drive candidate assessment. Because, again, if you're a major chain and you're having to rehire tens of thousands of employees, you frankly don't even have the store managers to be able to do that at the moment. It's going to accelerate something that would have happened organically over the next few years. And I think where it can happen is in hourly [jobs]. It's a little bit tougher than white collar, but in hourly it absolutely can happen.

Feaster: We're only having one to two [people] within our office within a time period. If you need 10 contractors in the door, you can't necessarily just have them come in and apply. We've had to go virtual. That way we can reduce the amount of people that are just coming through the office as we normally would do if it was just an average day. [Before COVID-19], we would interview all day, every day. In this case, we're only trying to look at essential workers that are coming in and qualifying for the essential positions.

I'm seeing an influx in [people] that want to come into the office that obviously have been laid off. But we were only looking at what positions we have open and trying to selectively recruit for those, so that way we don't have, you know, 50 people lining up at the doors. We also would always accept walk-ins. We've gone to appointment-only so we can manage the flow of who comes in and out of the office and make sure that we can assist our clients as the orders are coming in.

VB: How will this crisis change staffing in the long term?

Stevenson: With AI, we will largely be able to eliminate the need for location managers having to spend up to an hour a day looking through applications. First phase might be to use the technology to basically assess and get down to the handful of absolutely best candidates. And then you do a final interview, and as you start to get more comfortable with the technology, you recognize that actually you may not be interviewed at all.

Feaster: I think it's going to go back to the way that it was. I don't think that this is going to change how we do recruiting and the vetting process of applicants. I do think that it's going to put maybe some new tactics in place on how to onboard a little bit quicker. I can't speak for warehouses and distribution [centers] that might have really changed the way they're going to do business. But I think from a staffing standpoint, we're going to be busier than ever. I do think that when the market does open that this is going to be one of the quickest and effective ways to get back into employment for many people because I think that we're going to be faced against a lot of changes.