

Part-time workers worth more than the minimum

by Michael_Kinsman

It has always been a bit curious the way most employers treat part-time workers like second-class citizens.

Part-time positions rarely pay well and most are at or just above the minimum wage. Even in jobs where full-time and part-time workers perform the same tasks, full-time workers are often paid more.

Fifteen years ago, I spoke to a chief executive about his part-time workers. The head of this retail chain explained that he needed part-time workers and structured jobs that would attract the best part-timers he could find.

At the time, he had a retail chain of 190 stores.

"When customers walk into our stores, they don't know whether the person serving them is a part-time worker or a full-time worker," he said. "All they know is how they are treated."

So this chief executive got creative. He raised the salaries of part-time workers much higher than the pay for other part-time workers. If his workers put in more than 20 hours a week, they were entitled to medical, dental and vision benefits and qualified for vacation time and participation in a 401(k) program.

I asked this chief executive how he could afford to pay his part-time workers so lavishly.

"We can't afford not to do it," he said.

Today, that chief executive - Howard Schultz of Starbucks - runs an international company with something like 15,500 stores, a total that seems to grow daily.

The point is that Schultz and his management team had a vision that they could create an extraordinary company going against the grain.

Starbucks became successful with a staff of largely part-time workers. The Seattle-based company made an

effort to compensate its part-time workers with the best wages and best benefits of any retailer. Consequently, it attracted many of the best part-time workers to be found.

"When you really peel the skin off, the only sustainable thing companies have is the relationships they have with their customers and employees," Schultz said. "It makes sense we should pay attention to that."

The business model of Starbucks depends on a solid part-time work force. And the company is not alone in that.

But how often do you find retailers willing to pay higher salaries to part-time workers or offer them job benefits.

There might have been a time in our history when part-time work was just for students or housewives trying to supplement the household income. But part-time jobs long ago entered the mainstream. Some people hold two part-time jobs because they can't find a full-time position. Others like the flexibility and some only have limited time for work.

But don't these part-time workers ever get sick? Don't they ever retire?

Then why don't they have access to health benefits and pension plans?

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