

April 5, 2021

## Interview Transcript

This interview was recorded on March 10, 2021 between an interviewer in British Columbia, Canada and a narrator in Oregon in the United States. It was conducted via Zoom and the topic of the interview is working during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

**C:** How long have you been working at your current job?

**A:** About nine years.

**C:** And could you tell me what a typical day at work is like, if there is such a thing?

**A:** It depends where I'm scheduled in the warehouse, but a typical day could be: cashiering at a register, or monitoring self-checkout machines, or working in side departments like tobacco or membership where you do specific tasks related to those side departments.

**C:** Great. And how does a typical workday during COVID-19 compare to what it was like before?

**A:** Huh (pause). Well, there's not a whole lot of difference between the overall structure of things. They've attempted to implement some restrictions as far as social distancing, spacing between people inside the store, which has been somewhat successful and somewhat precarious as far as trying to force people to do things that are new to them. (2:00) I would say the biggest change are the physical markings in the store. There's marks on the floor for keeping distance, there's physical barriers between the cash register and a customer, clear plastic shields dividing people, but overall, the store is relatively the same as to what it was before the pandemic.

**C:** Right. When you said that the measures that have been taken have been somewhat successful, could you maybe expand on that?

**A:** Yeah, it's taken time to get people to adjust so probably the most obvious, biggest change is the fact that customers have to wear masks. So, people wear masks now, it's a requirement, they check at the door, and if you don't have one at the door, they provide one for you. So, you immediately – the visual difference is that you see people wearing masks. And then you see a lot of markings around the store, reminders, “please social distance,” “six feet apart.” What else? Yeah, the physical plastic barriers, the clear shields in front of the cash registers, those are a big example of something that's changed, that they've implemented. But all of these took time to implement so at the beginning of the pandemic it wasn't that overnight they implemented all of these policies at once. It was little by little that these changes came about and now they're pretty much standard and we've stuck with them, I'd say, for about the last nine months.

**C:** (03:56) Just because you were talking about what things were like at the beginning, that actually fits well into the next question. I wanted you to just think back on 2020 as a whole and – just the whole year – and think about what moments or events you think of first. And you could take a moment to do that if you want, but I was curious what pops into your mind first.

**A:** The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Oregon was a janitor that worked at a school in Portland. That same day – there had been some, obviously news stories that the pandemic might be coming, it might be something serious, we're not really sure what's going on. When that first case was recorded in Oregon, I was working that day and I remember, I believe the news reported it in the afternoon and it was probably the busiest day that I've ever seen at work. People rushed in to buy supplies to ostensibly – to quarantine for I don't know how long of a time but people were prepared to stay home. So, they were buying everything that they could to stay home, in the event that this pandemic was going to be ongoing. So, we sold out of bottled water, toilet paper, paper towels, cleaning products, rubbing alcohol: a lot of the basic necessities that you would use and have come to be known of as quintessential items to have during the pandemic. That's probably the day that stands out the most, was that first Friday that there was a confirmed case. And I remember, I was trying to leave work and I'd already been asked to stay about (06:04) – well I wasn't asked to stay, I was expected to stay 10 minutes over – and told my manager that "I'm off, I've put in my eight hours, I'm ready to go home," and my manager got upset and said, "well, it's crazy here," you know, "you can't go yet," and I said, "I'm a free person. I'll leave when I want to leave. I've put in my shift; you can't keep me here," and we got into a little bit of an argument. But I remember thinking, Well, this is probably going to be the new normal, this kind of rush and people coming in, and us expected to bend over backwards for the new reality. So that was the first big night of COVID-19 at work, and after that, the whole weekend was busy and things have been different ever since.

**C:** Yeah, when you say that you remember thinking ok, this is going to be the new normal, like, that day, do you think that was true? Do you think it ended up being, you know, kind of what you expected it to be after that point?

**A:** No, it wasn't exactly same volume of people that were there. That was similar to the kind of rush that we see when there could be a weather event, or a snowstorm, or any kind of emergency, fires in the summer. You see a big rush, where people come in, they stock up, they head home. And this happened, and it was different in that we were busy for several days. But then there were shortages, ongoing, of certain items – certain products, like water and toilet paper, I'd say for five or six weeks after that. (08:00) But the volume of people decreased. But the shipments and the products that people were looking for, it was very specific products: it was rubbing alcohol, it was toilet paper, it was bottled water, even products that – the bottled water was one of the surprising ones. People were buying up essentials to be able to stay home, as if there was going to be a natural disaster and not a pandemic. So, you had people stocking up on things – meat, for example. There was a certain time where there was a huge shortage of meat and there were rumours that the meat plants weren't going to be open anymore – and so we sold out of beef and pork. But it wasn't that the – the volume of people that came in on that first Friday was definitely unique to that particular time period, compared to – in the future, people were more spread out, it wasn't necessarily a rush to come in, but when people did come in, they were stocking up. And that was also when the limitations began for how much people could buy of certain products, whereas that hasn't happened before. So, with bottled water you could only buy one or two cases, same with toilet paper, paper towels – a lot of essential products were rationed when we had these shortages.

**C:** And how did people react to that, to the rationing of certain things?

**A:** (laughs) I had many experiences with people that were adamant about the fact that the rations weren't a bad idea, but that they had a good excuse to not follow the rules of the rations. (10:03) They said, Yeah I understand that there's a limit on these things but I'm also buying for my mother, I'm also buying for my brother, I'm also buying for family members, friends, different people that can't come here. And we had to explain to people over and over again that the limit was the limit, and everybody could bring in a certain excuse but that didn't mean that we could (laughs) somehow break from the rationing protocols.

**C:** I wanted to just jump back for a second, just in terms of describing early days with really large volume. You said there's a lot of people, but can you describe what that actually looked like?

**A:** Yeah, it's ironic that people are worried about this pandemic and yet they're packing into a store and doing all the things that we've come to know as dangerous during the pandemic. Hundreds, thousands maybe, of people coming in, elbow-to-elbow, waiting for a shipment of toilet paper to come in off of a delivery truck, no social distancing, things like that. So, it was interesting, looking back now, to think that people were less concerned about the dangers of being around other people as they were about stocking up on goods. And we did have people who did seem like they were trying to hoard certain items, they were hoarding – I don't know if it was to make a profit, to sell them on the black market, or if it was just to have them for their own, self assurance that they could survive on their own. (12:01) But people were stocking up and crowding in, and it was hectic and busy. It's very different from the reality that we're in now in March 2021 of people recognizing that you shouldn't be crowding in groups indoors among many people.

**C:** What were the lineups like?

**A:** (sigh) On that particular Friday that we were talking about, the lines were probably the longest I've ever seen them. On a busy day the lines are probably – I mean, on a very busy weekend day it's five or six long, people backed up on all the registers that are open. On that particular day I remember seeing it was probably 12 to 15 shopping cars back, to the point that they were snaking through the different aisles, that there wasn't enough space to form a straight line, so they wrapped around tables and different display items, which is not something you'd normally see.

**C:** So, just thinking of the timeline. So, we've been sort of talking about just – well, how would you classify, sort of the beginning, where would you sort of put the start and the end of that period?

**A:** The period of – the beginning of what?

**C:** The beginning of things being really busy and intense and with the characteristics that you've described?

**A:** If I remember correctly, it lasted only a few weeks, maybe three weeks, and it dwindled. (14:04) The beginning was the first rush. And I think that was when the message sort of began to

catch up with the social behaviour of people, where they saw on the news, Hey, it could be dangerous to go out and be around many people. And so, in the first days it was extremely busy and then people started to realize that if they're going to go out, they need to make a decision to go out, do their shopping and be done with it, and not go out and expose themselves for long periods of time to many people. I would say that lasted probably three weeks, and that was the beginning – uh, the uncertainty – we had more of an understanding after probably about a month, of what was happening, about the risks and the dangers and what we need to do to stay safe. But I will say that the mask policy wasn't implemented until some time after that. So, we were working and being exposed to these huge crowds, and of course there wasn't a mask mandate or mask policy in the store until some time later. When we were exposed to the most people that was when there was no mask requirement.

**C:** So, then what's the next moment that stands out in your mind, in terms of looking back on the year?

**A:** I remember probably six weeks in since that Friday, where we had the big rush where the first case was confirmed in Oregon. (16:03) I remember the masks had been mandated for a week or two, and I was cashiering at a register – and this was before we had the shields put up and nowadays when we have the shields up it's quite hard to hear people and communicate with people. But I remember I was wearing a mask – at first it was, the policy was that all the employees had to wear the masks and then sometime later everyone who entered the store had to wear a mask and we had probably just hit the point where everyone was expected to wear a mask. And I had a middle-aged woman come through my line and she was a little bit flustered by the whole experience, she was uncomfortable being around all these people and shopping in public and everything and she sighed, and she said "I just wonder when this is all going to be over." And I remember thinking – and then I just said it, that, "well, the doctors on TV say 12 to 16 months before we'll be done with this," and she got visibly upset that I'd said 12 to 16 months and she said "are you serious?" and I said, "well, that's what they're saying on the news. I don't know." And that was like, an indicator for me, because I remember thinking at the time, Well, this seems like some serious changes that are taking place, and I get the feeling that the general public hasn't come to terms with that yet. So that was the next marker for me in my head, [it] was, we were just at the early stages of the pandemic and people were already saying, When is this going to be over? And obviously like, if someone asked me, I would say, "well, this is what we're doing now I don't know when it's going to be over but the news, the doctors on the news are saying 12 to 16 months." (18:07) Lo and behold, yeah, it's been that long now.

**C:** When do you think people actually started to accept it?

**A:** Uh yeah, I wouldn't say that everyone's accepted it yet. I was on my way to work probably about three months ago – this would have been December 2020 – and I saw a truck with messages painted on the back something like, "no new normal, don't believe all the propaganda," et cetera, et cetera. It was basically somebody who didn't believe in the restrictions or who didn't believe in the pandemic, or a little bit of both of those. So there's – overall I would say it was a shift that happened, and there was a political element to it, where, if you were a Democrat, or more on the liberal side of politics you were more willing to accept the restrictions. And if you were sympathetic to Trump or Republican politics you were definitely not taking the restrictions

so seriously, or not accepting the mask mandates, or resisting generally the changes that were happening. So, there has been a shift overall that I've seen over time, where people that are more liberal, they accepted it at the beginning, but people who are more conservative, I would say probably six to eight months into the pandemic. (20:02) Maybe people started to accept the dangers, maybe they recognized that the danger is a real threat to them and the people that they know, and that's when conservative people accepted it. Whereas, politically, people who were more liberal were willing to accept it early on, based on medical recommendations and the political recommendations of the Democratic party.

**C:** When did you first realize that it – when did you first notice that political element?

**A:** I mean, before we had our first case in Oregon, you already saw the presidential administration, the Trump administration casting doubt on the seriousness or the dangers of it, and so it was early, very early on, before it was even something that frightened people to go shopping, it was already being politicized. So, it was politicized before we even had our first case. I imagine that by the time we had our first case, a lot of the people that were coming in, rushing into stock up on goods probably were more liberal or progressive based on the fact that it took a much longer time to even get conservative people or Republicans to wear masks, to take it seriously, to respect the changes that had happened you know, in public, like at the store – the restrictions that were in place. (21:57)

**C:** Could you tell me more about implementing the mask measures and how people responded to that?

**A:** Uh, yeah. It was – it wasn't an easy change. From what I understand, we've been quite lucky to be in a more liberal city because people were more accepting of the medical restrictions or the guidelines. So, most of the people that were coming in, they began to bring their own masks, you saw people with homemade masks you saw – we were selling, obviously, masks. But I would say that, interestingly enough, it wasn't like the majority of people were wearing the masks that we sold. It wasn't exactly like a profitable industry for the store. People were finding masks, wearing masks, whether they were cloth, whether they were bandanas, homemade, whatever they were – people found ways to make or wear masks. And then the people that didn't, they would be told when entering the business that, “we have a mask policy, you have to wear a mask.” And I remember one or two times where my position was actually at the entrance door, and people would come up – this was when we already had a – a few weeks into the mask mandate – people would play, kind of ignorant card, where they would say, “well, I don't have one. I don't know what to do.” But the store had a policy of having individually wrapped masks in plastic bags that we would hand out to people. So, if you didn't have a mask you were given one at the door and you were told, please bring a mask next time. (24:04) And the vast majority of people complied. And it was very rare that somebody didn't comply, and if they didn't comply it became a situation where a supervisor or a manager would have to get involved, explain to them that this is the policy, just like any other restrictions we have about wearing certain clothing in the store, whatever, and people followed it. That being said, there's still people that somehow manage to make it into the store with or without masks, and by the time I encounter them at a register, I see them not wearing their mask or their mask is around their neck, or whatever it is, and we have to remind, probably, I would say, one in every hundred people – “please put your mask over your

nose,” or, “please wear your mask properly,” or, “excuse me, why don't you have a mask.” And you do encounter – for example, just a few weeks ago I saw a man with a “Make America Great Again” hat, a Trump hat (laughs) coming through, and he was really trying to avoid having to put a mask on, and it took several supervisors and a manager talking to him to convince him that he had to put a mask on. And it wasn't until a Trump-sympathetic supervisor talked to him and explained to him that he also hates the masks but it's the private business policy, that the customer finally agreed to put on a mask, and purchased his things and left. So, we're still – up to this day, we're still dealing with people who are resistant to the mask policy, and the changes that have happened. But the vast majority of people accept the changes and go along with it, and maybe, even if we see somebody with their mask around their neck, or whatever it is, we remind them that they need to wear it properly and there's very little resistance, they agree and comply, when we ask them to wear it properly. (26:14)

**C:** I'm going to ask a kind of, a different kind of question now. What's your impression, overall, of how this year has affected the people that you work with? And by that, I mean, broadly: it could mean your coworkers, but also the people that you see every day, the public.

**A:** (Clears throat) To speak about my coworkers, I was just having a conversation the other day with some coworkers that were talking about upping their doses of antidepressants and – anyway, pharmaceutical drugs that they're taking, And I was surprised that the people that were saying it were actually – I had no idea that they were taking pharmaceutical antidepressants, but this came up casually, in a conversation. And it's become more acceptable to talk about those things, about the stress and anxiety that people are feeling during this time. I know that generally speaking people have felt more on edge and definitely just the stress levels of working in that environment have increased exponentially. I have some coworkers that I haven't seen since March 2020 because they have health conditions and they don't feel safe coming to work. (28:02) I have other coworkers that have taken off, you know, six months, especially older coworkers that took off six months. They came back – they still don't necessarily feel safe but they don't have a way to survive without coming to work. So, the effect on the workers themselves, it's definitely something you see and people talk about, and it's unfortunate that people feel a certain amount of pressure to try to survive and show up to work while at the same time being fearful and anxious and stressed about the risks of working with the public every day. And then – I guess I don't understand how I can answer the second part of the question about customers, if you could reiterate.

**C:** Yeah, I mean, more the question is just something for you to respond to, in whatever comes into your mind. Just if it made you think of any particular encounters or just what you see of people, do you have an impression of how people have changed or is it sort of just more or less the same?

**A:** Yeah, I've seen – as far as the public goes, customers that I'm not interacting with for an extended amount of time – it does feel like there's a certain level of anxiety, stress, just tension that people are bringing with them. (30:00) They feel uncomfortable being in public or they feel uneasy interacting with other people, and I don't know how long it's been since they've gone out and done social activities, or been out shopping. But for some people – I've had people come up that live in the mountains and they say, “yeah, sorry I didn't know about the new rules, I haven't

been here in four months and I didn't know that these were the new policies,” and I get the feeling that they really have been keeping to themselves. So, there's definitely an isolation that people have, and I'm probably in a position to encounter these people for some of their first interactions outside of their home, when they go shopping for their necessities. So, people are stressed and anxious and tense and – I mean, these are the people that are concerned, that are taking the pandemic seriously. And then on the other hand, there's the small minority of people that either don't believe in the dangers of the pandemic, or don't accept it, or whatever it might be. And for them it's almost like an oppositional mentality where they're out to prove that they're not afraid, that they're not interested in accepting changes and they want to show the people around them in public that this is not something to be worried about. So, there's definitely two different categories there. And I would say there's also the middle ground of people that just are trying to get by, accepting that there's restrictions, trying to be safe and hopefully having – getting by without necessarily having higher levels of stress or anxiety about it. (32:14)

**C:** Do you think – or rather, has the way that you think about your work changed, at all?

**A:** Absolutely. I watched an interview with George Clooney and he was talking about we need to have more respect for the people that we take for granted, like nurses and grocery store workers and bus drivers and things like that. And I would say that, as the shutdowns began in 2020, and as we were deemed to be essential workers, there was a certain kind of pride that myself and my coworkers took in that: that we knew that there was no alternative, that we had to be there. And there was a certain level of respect, I think, especially politically speaking, from people who were more liberal, more progressive, that were very grateful, that thanked us more, that showed their gratitude, especially at the beginning, "thank you for being here, thank you for doing what you do." (33:57) And it almost felt like the kind of gratitude you might get when being a hospital worker or a fireman or something like that, where you help or save people. And it sort of felt like that for a certain amount of time, and that's quickly faded. (laughs) But there was a short period of time, I'd say maybe three months at the beginning where this idea of us being "essential" was held up as something heroic, and there were billboards around town – "thank you to the essential workers" – and commercials on TV that thanked the people on the frontlines. And it was quite short lived, especially with the re-openings, and now trying to force the economy to restart, now I guess everyone is an essential worker, to keep the economy going. And we don't necessarily get the same respect, because if all businesses are made to reopen then we're put at risk just like everyone else is put at risk and it doesn't feel that different. But there was a period of time, I would say in spring of 2020, where we recognized that we were essential. And there was a certain amount of power that we felt as working people that realized, if not for us, if not for us showing up and putting our lives at risk, then people wouldn't have the necessities that they need to survive.

**C:** I remember you posting [on social media] a meme or a clip back in March about being an essential worker, do you remember what I'm talking about? (36:05)

**A:** Yes, the wrestler, yes.

**C:** Yeah. Do you think you could describe that? (laughs) Talk about it?

**A:** There was a (laughs) – there was a wrestler on WWE [World Wrestling Entertainment] who was obviously one of the bad characters, the bad guys and he was walking down the platform, towards the ring, and all the fans were, you know, booing and yelling at him, and shouting insults. And he had his chin up very high and he was very confident and he was just brushing aside – even like literally brushing aside the insults, physically, by like brushing off his shoulder as people were yelling at him, just ignoring all of the insults he was encountering. And somebody had taken this video of this wrestler and put text on it and said "me as an essential worker going into my essential job" and I felt like I could totally relate to that, because, on the one hand we're being told how important and great it is that we're on the frontlines, and then you know, five minutes later we're being insulted and yelled at and treated poorly by customers and management and everyone else. So, there was a certain kind of irony to it, that I know a lot of my coworkers could relate – and I showed it to some of my coworkers and we all had a good laugh. Everyone I showed it to thought it was just hilarious.

**C:** When you said, you said before this question that now everyone is an essential worker, what did you mean by that? (38:00)

**A:** I mean that the priority of the economy has gotten to a point where – we've gotten to a point economically where the priority of business as usual is more important than the shutdowns, so whether or not its safe to open, whether or not we have the protocols in place to even try to restrict the spread of the virus, there's so many businesses that are being made to reopen. For example, right now you have people that work in restaurants and bars in Oregon that are unvaccinated but are being told to go back to work, you know despite the fact that it's such a highly contagious disease that they're being exposed to and it's a dangerous workplace that they're in. So, as we reopen all the businesses that have been closed, it's almost as if the positions that were closed down before are also essential to the economy or to Wall Street or whatever and if they remain closed down then the economy can't function the way it has and so this is like a – what am I trying to say? This is like a – it's a point where we all become precarious and expendable. We all have to keep working despite the dangers to our personal health. (39:55)

**C:** So, considering that we are, as you've said, we're in a period where there's this push towards things reopening and things not necessarily going back to normal but getting back to some type of public life, in this moment what do you want people to remember about this year, or hope people remember about this year?

**A:** As a worker at my job, I hope people have respect for the tasks and the labour that goes into providing the basic services that people depend on, whether it's transportation or agriculture, or grocery work or whatever it might be. I think people can quickly forget that the reason that they're able to live comfortable lives is because of the dedication of working-class people that are there every day, 40 hours a week, almost every week of the year providing that service. And I think that people take a lot of that for granted. And the pandemic, for a short period of time, showed that that was something that was essential. And now as we return to normal, I hope that people don't forget that the sacrifices and the hard work that people put in on the front line – whether it's picking the vegetables, or stocking the vegetables or anything else along the line for providing food to society – it's something that people need and it's not a job that we should take for granted.

C: That was all of my questions. I just wanted to ask if there's anything else that you think is important or want to add or highlight.

A: No, I don't think so.