

TALKING

SHOP

500 store
colleagues on
the realities of
working in retail

RWRC[^]
BY ASCENTIAL

In association with

 **ZEBRA**

REFLEXIS

INTRODUCTION

The role of retail's frontline staff has changed dramatically since Covid-19 hit. Working hours have been upended, new safety protocols introduced and how they work and communicate with both shoppers and colleagues has been overhauled. While store staff have been lauded as heroes working tirelessly to serve the nation, the pressure is taking its toll on many.

With so much said and written about how retail leaders are grappling with the relentless and unpredictable change in the industry, we have asked those on the front line how they are coping.

RWRC, in partnership with Reflexis, now part of Zebra Technologies, has surveyed 500 store staff to lift the lid on their fears, motivations and aspirations at this most tumultuous of times.

And not all of it makes for pretty reading. The research results highlighted on page 4 lay bare the scale of the challenge facing retail leaders today when it comes to engaging their colleagues.

This makes *Talking Shop* a must read for any leaders searching for solutions to these very real issues.

Read on to find case studies from retailers meeting the challenge right now and insights from experts looking ahead.

By understanding how retail's frontline staff are viewing the world right now, leaders can begin to truly engage their most valuable asset. And what could be more important than that?

METHODOLOGY

RWRC surveyed 500 store colleagues, including shop floor staff, store managers and regional and area managers, in September/October 2020 with the help of retailTRUST. All answers are anonymous but we drilled down into job roles, gender, age and sector of retail to give a picture of how different subsets of store workers are feeling and responding to the current situation and working environment. The free and confidential retailTRUST helpline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, on 0808 801 0808 or by emailing helpline@retailtrust.org.uk

retailTRUST 

RWRC: TALKING SHOP

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VIEWPOINT



PRASHANTH PALAKURTHI

CHIEF EXECUTIVE, REFLEXIS, NOW PART OF ZEBRA TECHNOLOGIES

As the leader of an organisation that has focused on simplifying and improving the working lives of frontline retail employees for the past 20 years, it brings me enormous pleasure to sponsor this landmark research.

2020 has been a year that few of us could have foreseen just 12 months ago; while retail has been in a period of intense transformation for some years, Covid-19 has both accelerated and redirected that process.

It is safe to say that the impact of the pandemic on the retail sector will be significant and permanent.

There are almost 3 million people in the UK employed in the retail sector and these changes will have a far-reaching impact on each of them.

The majority of that 3 million are employed in store and field teams operating on the edge, and the goal of this research is to give that majority a voice and let them share how they are feeling about the state of retail today.

The insights in this report capture a unique point in the evolution of the retail sector.

As leaders, our responsibility is to now listen and learn from this insight and use it to guide our decision making as we look towards a post-Covid world.

With more than 6 million store and field employees using our software, we are uniquely positioned to understand their needs and help our customers unleash the power of their employees.

Retail stores are at the nexus of organisational strategy, execution and customer demand; motivated and engaged teams create exceptional shopping experiences and loved brands. However, operational complexity gets in the way of this and creates friction in the employee's day and the customer's experience.

As we move forward as part of the wider Zebra Technologies family, our vision is to have every asset and worker on the edge visible, connected and fully optimised.

We believe the retailers that find innovative ways to bring together data, connectivity, mobile devices and their employees will be the ones that not only survive the transformation, but thrive and lead it.



The impact of the pandemic on retail will be significant and permanent



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AT A GLANCE: THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE



believe retail to be a poor career choice and the top reason cited is abuse from customers



believe they have access to the tech needed to do their job effectively



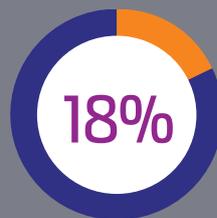
rate morale at their company as poor or very poor



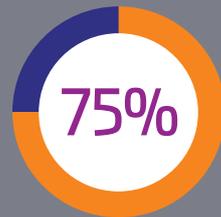
say communication has been ineffective from the head office during the pandemic



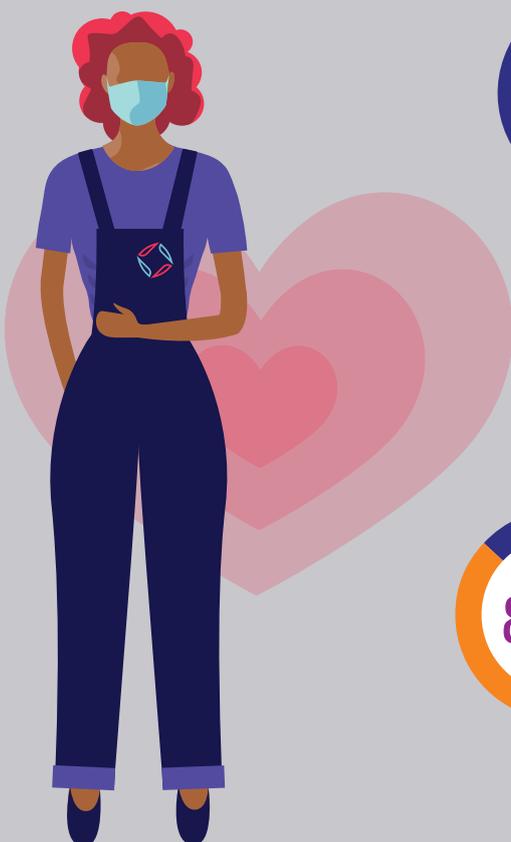
feel insecure in their jobs



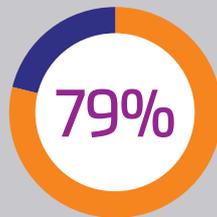
think that stores will not exist in five years' time



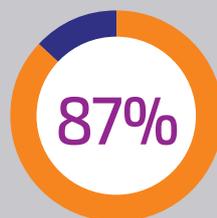
say their jobs have become more complex since the coronavirus crisis hit in March



say leaders in their organisation recognise the contribution they make



think their employer cares about their wellbeing



believe diversity and inclusion is taken seriously at their business

WELLBEING ON THE FRONT LINE

Frontline workers in retail stores have seen monumental changes since the onset of the coronavirus crisis, with far-reaching new rules to adhere to and additional tasks to carry out. Added to this is a sense that their livelihoods are constantly under threat, as firms are laying off staff and shuttering stores. More than 125,000 jobs were lost in the year to August and almost 14,000 stores closed permanently, according to the Centre for Retail Research. And all against a backdrop of having to balance, in many cases, family and caring commitments. And let's not forget the stress of putting themselves at risk of catching a deadly virus day in, day out.

But how has all this change, and the stresses that come with it, impacted retail staff? And do they feel supported to manage this adjustment?

Added job complexity

More than three-quarters (75%) of all 500 store workers surveyed by Retail Week say their jobs have become more complex since Covid-19 hit the UK in March. Changes introduced have brought the most complexity to senior store management roles, with 96% of regional managers and 95% of area managers stating their job is more complicated following the pandemic.

New safety measures, both for customers and staff themselves, are the biggest contributors to this feeling of complexity, according to our survey.

For example, Aldi has adopted an automated traffic light system for entry into store, while others such as Tesco and Next brought in one-way systems. Retailers across the spectrum have installed perspex screens to separate workers and customers, as well as additional cleaning and sanitising.

Almost 14% of all staff say they have been asked to take on additional responsibilities.

Retailers have leant on store staff to do more, from servicing fast-growing online demand from stores to managing queues.

An Iceland spokesperson told Retail Week: "Colleagues have needed to be able to complete all in-store activities, rather than just their normal focus; our colleagues are more multi-skilled than ever."

It's a similar story at M&S. "We've got our colleagues working across the store much more than we ever did before," M&S stores director Helen Milford told Retail Week's Building Tomorrow's Retail Workforce virtual event. "Before the pandemic people had much more fixed roles."

M&S store staff have been acting as door hosts to manage queues and inform customers about the new shopping protocol.

Dixons Carphone store staff have been operating its contactless drive-thru click and collect, delivering orders to customers' cars since lockdown began. The electricals retailer also launched its ShopLive platform in April, which features virtual consultations where in-store colleagues talk through products with online customers.

Workers in health and beauty feel they have been asked to take on extra responsibilities, more so than in any other sector, with 29% saying they have had new tasks added to their workload, compared with the 14% average.

Health and beauty has seen much change since the crisis hit, with face-to-face consultation services currently banned. Boots, for example, has brought in video consultations with No7 beauty advisers, GPs and pharmacists.

Prashanth Palakurthi, chief executive of Reflexis Systems, now part of Zebra Technologies, says: "Life in stores is becoming much more complex and retailers





can eliminate some of that complexity by using technology to empower frontline staff. Workforce management systems can better plan where workers should be, inform workers on the best action to take, facilitate collaboration and share best practice.

“However, these solutions must be integrated and easily accessible for workers to truly simplify things and ultimately improve the shopper experience.”

Recognition and morale

The good news is that the majority of store workers feel as though their hard work and willingness to adapt to changes is appreciated by management, with 66% saying leaders in their organisation recognise the contribution they make.

However, there is a marked difference between how senior store managers feel they are recognised to those who work on the shop floor. While 84% of area managers feel their employer effectively or very effectively recognises the contribution made by staff, this falls to 67% at store manager level and just 61% on the shop floor.

It is a similar story when it comes to staff mood. Worryingly, 37% of all workers say morale at their company is poor or very poor, and this sentiment is felt most keenly among

the most junior staff, with 44% of store colleagues claiming team spirit is poor or very poor. Interestingly, no area or regional managers describe morale as very poor but 12% of shop floor staff did. This suggests there is a concerning disconnect, perhaps due to the fact field staff are not witnessing how low morale in stores is getting. Retail leaders need to address this and ensure shop floor colleagues feel well supported.

Morale is stronger in some retail sectors than others. More than half of home and DIY (52%) and sports and leisure (52%) workers say team spirit is very good. These are both sectors that have proven resilient since Covid-19 hit, with sales holding up as consumers look to get fit and give their homes a makeover.

By contrast, less than a quarter of workers in the struggling department store sector (18%) say morale is very good at their company. This could be down to staff feeling nervous about their jobs amid a spate of store closures and redundancies.

Across all of retail, 24% of all staff say they feel insecure in their jobs, but this figure rose to 41% of department store staff.

And it's no surprise as big operators in the sector are facing well-documented struggles. Debenhams has permanently closed more than 20 stores since the start of the pandemic, making shop floor redundancies, removing the roles of sales manager, visual merchandise manager and selling support manager, while department sector leader John Lewis has also faced challenges, forcing them to close eight stores.

Workers in the fashion sector – another area where demand has been hampered during the pandemic, particularly in stores

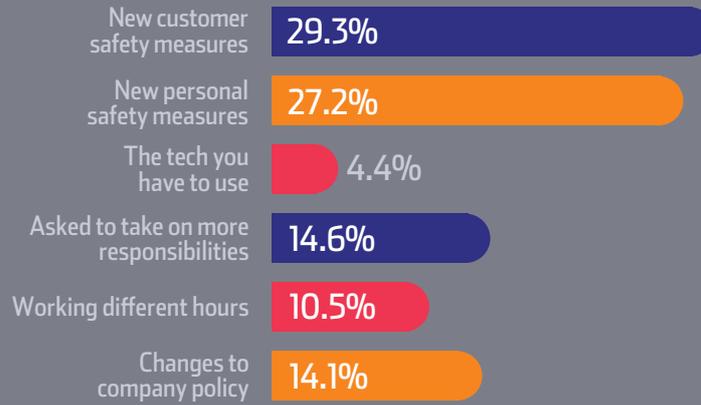


To preserve an industry that gives so much back to local communities, we must focus on the wellbeing of those who work in it

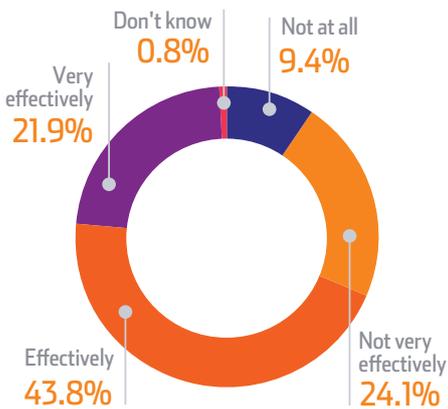
PAULA COUGHLAN, CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, DIXONS CARPHONE



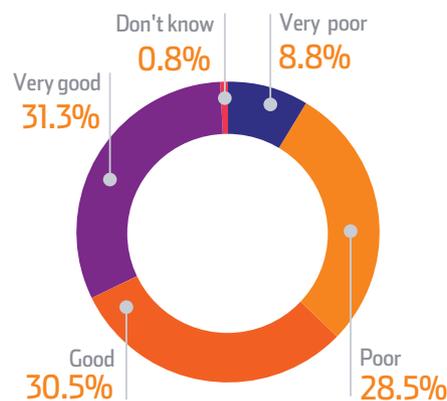
WHAT HAS MADE YOUR ROLE MORE COMPLEX?



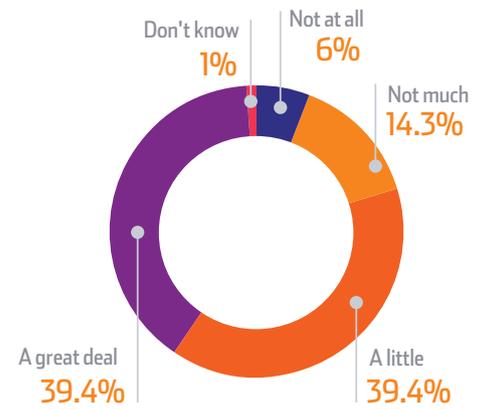
HOW EFFECTIVELY DO YOU THINK YOUR EMPLOYER RECOGNISES THE CONTRIBUTIONS MADE BY EMPLOYEES?



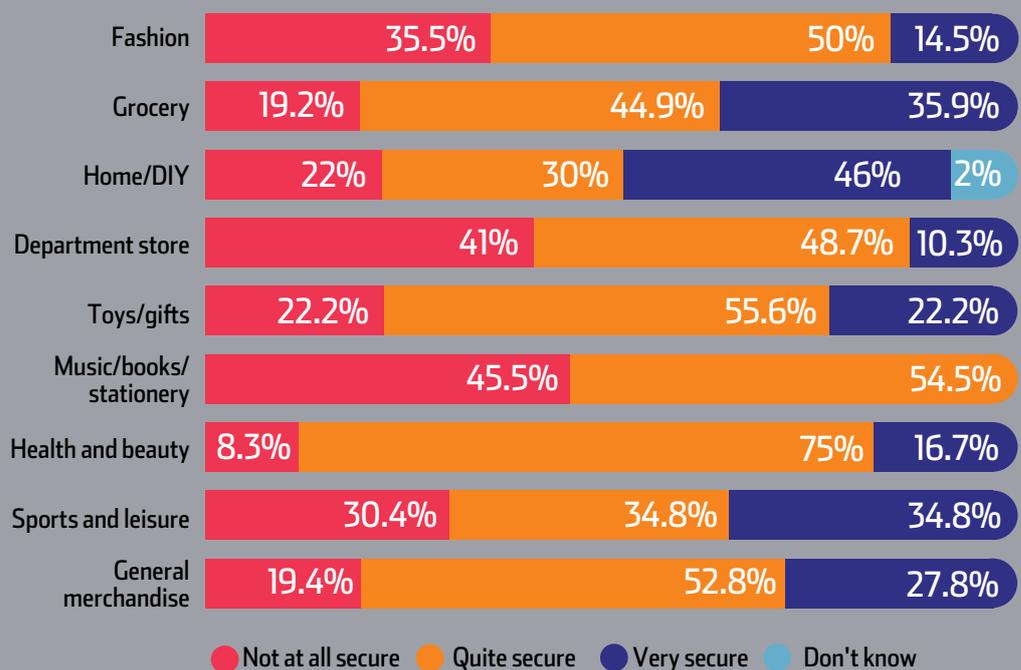
IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE MORALE AT YOUR COMPANY?



THINKING ABOUT THE IMPACT OF COVID-19, TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU THINK YOUR EMPLOYER CARES ABOUT YOUR HEALTH AND WELL BEING?



HOW SECURE DO YOU FEEL IN YOUR JOB RIGHT NOW?



BEST PRACTICE:

HOW SUPERDRUG IS SUPPORTING STAFF THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

Superdrug is proving its commitment to making sure staff feel supported during this health and financial crisis.

With money worries high for some employees at a time where they or family members may have lost their jobs or been unable to work, the health and beauty retailer rolled out a £40m package to relieve pressure. It strived to make sure it assuaged colleagues' fears by introducing a helpline for staff to have any questions or concerns they have answered, available seven days a week.

Focusing on protecting employees' mental health, it launched a campaign called 'Stronger together, even when we're apart' to "tackle any feelings of isolation and loneliness that could have an impact on mental health", according to Superdrug's customer and people director Joanne Mackie (pictured below).

All managers received training in how to spot mental health issues and are encouraged to check in with team members every week, and the role of wellbeing ambassadors was created as a way of sharing advice.

Superdrug has gone to great efforts to help make employees across the business feel supported and offered access to resources to support their health even if they were on furlough. Through its blog post series, 'Friends on Furlough', employees could share experiences and join conversations while away from the business.



– are also feeling nervous about job security. Just 15% of store staff in the sector say they feel very secure about their jobs compared with 36% of grocery staff and 46% of home and DIY employees. This is unsurprising given the number of fashion retailers that have had to make large-scale redundancies or gone out of business all together.

However, it's middle management across all sectors feeling the most anxious, with 32% of area managers indicating feeling "not very secure", perhaps reflecting the trend within retail to cut middle management positions, with Morrisons and M&S among those to have reduced such roles over the past year. However, there have also been new roles created for home deliveries and front-of-store marshals.

Protecting wellbeing

Many in society are fearful about the mental wellbeing fallout of the pandemic. The Centre for Mental Health predicts as many as 10 million people in the UK – almost a fifth of the population – will need mental health support as a direct consequence.

Focusing on the role of retail leaders, there is positive news in that just 6% of staff believe their employer does not care about their wellbeing at all. However, only 39% think their company cares a great deal.

The home and DIY and health and beauty sectors rank highly with employees for support offered, with more than half in these areas claiming their employer cares a great deal about their health and wellbeing.

The lowest-ranking staff believe employers care about them the least, with 27% of shop floor staff saying their company either does not care at all or cares very little, compared with 11% of regional managers who think likewise.

This highlights the importance of making sure retailers communicate effectively with colleagues throughout the organisation to make sure their concerns are heard and appropriate support is offered. This is a difficult time for all in society, but particularly in the hard-hit retail sector.

As Paula Coughlan, chief people officer at Dixons Carphone, says: "Retail is facing one of the most challenging periods in the sector's history. To preserve an industry that gives so much back to local communities, we must focus on the health and wellbeing of those who work in it. They are the lifeblood of retail and the driving force behind an industry that powers our economy."

14%

**OF STAFF HAVE
TAKEN ON
ADDITIONAL
RESPONSIBILITIES
FOLLOWING THE
ONSET OF COVID-19**

37%

**OF ALL WORKERS SAY
MORALE AT THEIR
COMPANY IS POOR**

IN-STORE COMMS AND THE POWER OF TECH

Technology of all descriptions is playing a greater role in how staff across retail work, and that is particularly relevant in shops.

However, according to RWRC's exclusive survey, just 51% of staff believe they have access to the tech needed to do their job effectively often or all the time.

The biggest area where staff members believe they would benefit from additional technology is in stock availability and ordering, with 24% of all store colleagues citing this as their top tech priority.

Stock stresses

It is easy to understand why. Stock availability is a big bugbear for shoppers – nobody wants to make the trip to a store only to find what they wanted is out of stock – and searching for items in the stockroom is time-consuming for shop floor workers.

Several retailers have rolled out technology that instantaneously lets staff know stock levels in store.

M&S provides staff with devices that arm them with product information, from style recommendations to availability levels. In the future, it plans to use AI to track, manage and replenish stock levels, which will send a notification to the stockroom as soon as an item is running low on the shop floor.

H&M puts the power in its customers' hands when it comes to identifying stock levels. Using the H&M app, shoppers can scan a QR code on the product label and find out how many items are in stock and in which sizes.

Better communication

It is hard to imagine how retail chiefs would have communicated the fast-changing guidelines around Covid-19 without the current level of technology we have.

Communication between leaders and those on the front line has been critical in these testing times, when situations were changing from one day to the next, from ways of working and safety guidelines to whether stores could open at all.

However, almost a quarter of all store workers (23%) believe communication from the head office has been ineffective. And it appears distance is not the major issue, as 22% of all staff also think that



51% OF STAFF BELIEVE THEY HAVE ACCESS TO THE TECH NEEDED TO DO THEIR JOB EFFECTIVELY

BEST PRACTICE:

HOW LUSH COMMUNICATES UPDATED COVID-19 INFORMATION TO ITS STORE MANAGERS

Store managers above all other roles in the survey have more faith in technology to improve communication from the head office. Some 16% claim digital tools could enhance comms, placing it behind only stock availability and ordering (25%) and training and learning (19%), in terms of the retail areas that technology could help improve.

Health and beauty retailer Lush has embraced digital communication specifically for its store managers. Through the use of an app, the head office can give instant actions to all of its stores or get real-time responses to surveys sent out to managers asking, for example, for local updates about restrictions.

Lush communications and operations manager for North America Carmen Ip told *Essential Retail* in May: "At the moment with things happening so quickly, we are finding ourselves evolving our messages daily, even sometimes hourly. Rather than send emails every couple of hours, we can just update the message within our Covid folders."

Lush is also using the comms platform for training purposes, an area that 18% of store staff surveyed say could be improved by technology. The webinar-hosting function, Lush says, is particularly useful in preparing store managers for reopening shops and ensuring the right safety protocols are followed.

23%

THINK COMMUNICATION WITHIN THEIR PLACE OF WORK IS INEFFECTIVE

72%

OF STORE WORKERS BELIEVE THE FUTURE OF RETAIL WILL BE MORE EXPERIENCE FOCUSED

communication within their place of work is ineffective.

Transmission seems at its weakest to those on the shop floor, with 29% of workers there describing head-office comms as "not very effective" and 31% feeling downbeat about the effectiveness of in-store comms.

Technology could be the answer, as 14% of workers from across retail say communication from head or regional offices could be improved in their organisation by tech. Store workers believe technology could play a broad role, with 18% of all workers saying it could enhance training and learning, 14% stating it could help access to rotas and scheduling, and 12% saying it could improve access to documentation.

M&S has embraced digital communication tools to better connect with its stores during the pandemic and provides all store workers with a device that gives access to a wealth of information, from vital head-office messages to shared reports.

Stores director Milford says: "Our support officers [staff] have really worked hard to connect to stores through [Microsoft] Teams and it has been brilliant to create a new way of working. Only last week we delivered our peak conferences all through Teams to reach over 850 locations."

Reflexis Systems' Palakurthi says retailers need to adopt modern ways of keeping in touch with staff. "How employees communicate outside of work has changed radically and retailers need to catch up. They need simple and intuitive tools that allow employees to communicate with the head office and each other in real time and through secure mobile channels. This ensures they have the right information and can do what's right for customers."

What's in store for the future?

How stores will evolve in the future is subject to much debate. The views of those who actually work in stores are as pertinent to this debate as that of any futurist or industry observer.

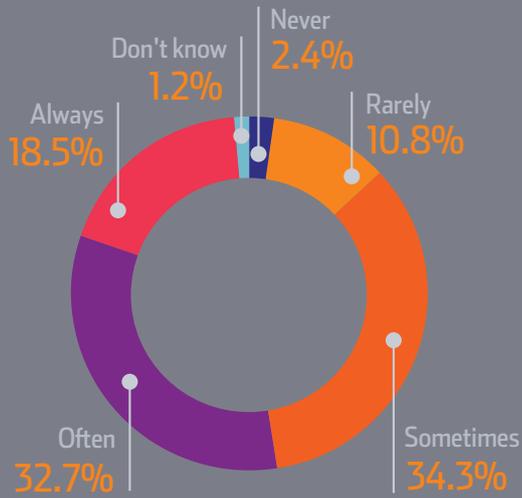
It's stark to see that 18% of all staff believe stores won't exist in five years' time. This view is particularly prevalent among young retail staff, with more than a third (36%) of 16- to 25-year-olds subscribing to this school of thought.

This perhaps illustrates the importance of online shopping to this age group.

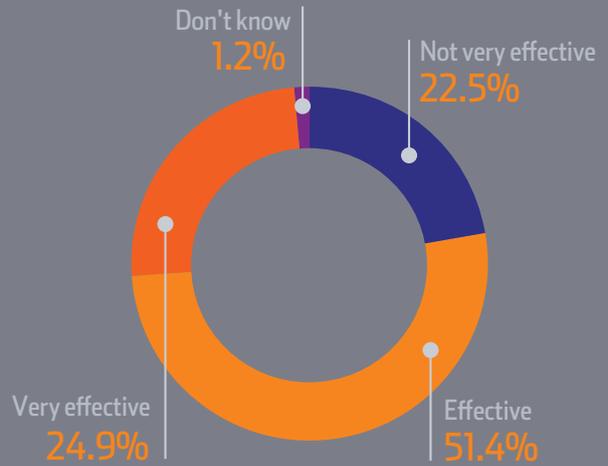
During the first UK lockdown, this demographic received an average



DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY THAT HELPS YOU DO YOUR JOB BETTER?



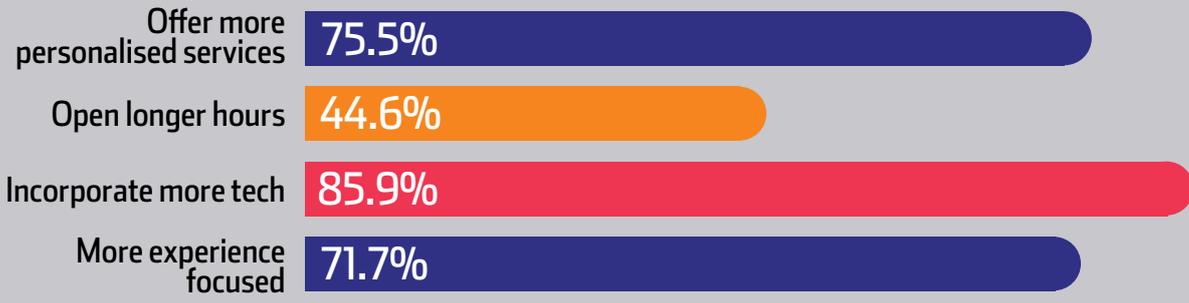
HOW EFFECTIVE ARE COMMUNICATIONS FROM YOUR HEAD OFFICE TO YOUR PLACE OF WORK?



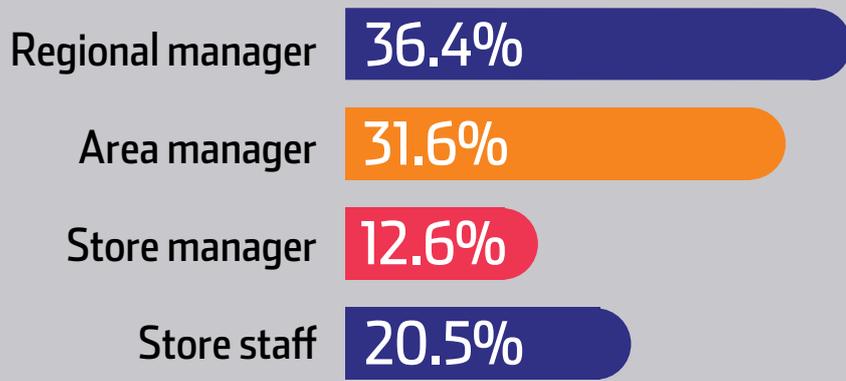
WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT AREAS OF YOUR WORK THAT COULD MOST BE IMPROVED BY TECH?



WHAT DO YOU THINK THE FUTURE OF STORES WILL LOOK LIKE?

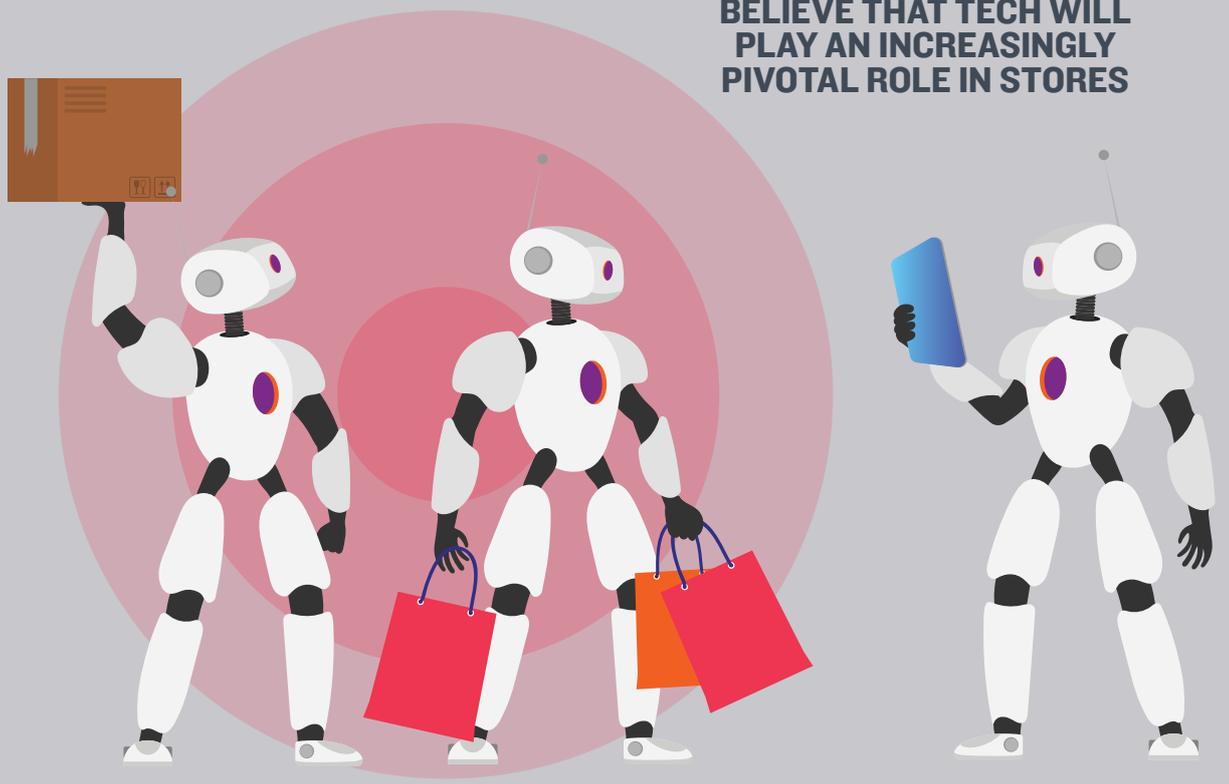


PERCENTAGE OF STAFF, BROKEN DOWN BY POSITION, WHO BELIEVE STORES WILL NOT EXIST IN FIVE YEARS



86%

BELIEVE THAT TECH WILL PLAY AN INCREASINGLY PIVOTAL ROLE IN STORES





With almost a fifth of respondents believing that stores won't exist in five years' time, leaders must engage staff on the power of physical retail



of 50% more deliveries than the over-55s (the age group most confident that stores would still exist in five years' time in our survey), according to research by collection locker provider InPost.

Worryingly, those in the more senior store positions were most pessimistic about the future of bricks-and-mortar retail.

More than a third (36%) of regional managers believe the store will be obsolete in five years' time, a sentiment echoed by 32% of area managers.

This presents leadership with a challenge to better engage middle managers on the power of physical retail, which still accounts for the vast majority of retail sales.

For the majority who think stores do have a future, 86% believe that tech will play an increasingly pivotal role. It is store managers that most subscribe to this view, with 91% betting on a more tech-enabled shopping experience.

With M&S bringing in AI to help replenish stock, Asda trialling the use of cleaning robots and grocers across the UK experimenting with checkout-free stores, it's no surprise that workers feel this way.

Data-driven personalisation

More than three-quarters (76%) of retail staff also believe that there will be more personalised services in store.

This is already a big focus for retailers both in terms of creating personalised experiences

based on data and product personalisation: Nike and Adidas have long offered shoppers the opportunity to customise their trainers.

Boots has made personalisation a big part of its strategy. It's working with Microsoft to use data from its loyalty scheme, ecommerce operation and stores to create a more personalised experience that will include product recommendations.

Palakurthi says: "The rise of hyper-localisation and digitalisation is transforming stores. The kinds of roles and skills the retail workforce needs are shifting in order to deliver this new, connected customer experience. This means retailers need to be ready and able to retrain, reskill and redeploy store managers and associates for this new intelligent retail environment."

Meanwhile, despite the new safety requirements currently preventing in-store theatre and demos, almost three-quarters (72%) of store workers believe the future of retail will be more experience-focused.

This view was particularly prevalent in the home and DIY and toys and gift sectors.

If this prediction is realised, it will be good news for the many retail businesses that have backed the experience it offers in stores to maintain relevance and fight back against online rivals.

After all, shopping is about more than just buying what we need – it provides entertainment and inspiration, and remains one of the nation's favourite pastimes.

MAKING RETAIL A MORE ATTRACTIVE CAREER CHOICE



Retail has long suffered with an image problem, seen by many as a job rather than a career.

This is borne out in our research—a huge 40% believe retail to be a poor career choice. Even more concerning is that the more senior store managers have the most negative perception of retail, with 16% of area managers rating it as a very poor career choice, far higher than the 9% average.

Some sectors are more negative than others, with department stores and fashion workers the most critical of retail as a career. This may reflect the difficulty experienced in those sectors at the moment, with stores sales plummeting not just during the pandemic but for a number of years.

However, as two areas of retail that are very service-oriented and should attract

people who are passionate about the products they sell, this is worrying to hear.

The main factor driving this downbeat view makes for grim reading: the top reason most employees (21%) cite is abuse from customers.

Stamping out abuse

Customer aggression has surged since the onset of the coronavirus crisis. According to union Usdaw, 62% of shop workers reported being verbally abused in the first month of lockdown restrictions, and more than a quarter (29%) say they were threatened.

The British Retail Consortium reports that every day 150 threats to cough and spit at staff occur, and hearing the phrase “I’ll give you coronavirus” is now a part of life for many store workers.

Even more concerning is that 4% of workers told Usdaw they had been physically assaulted in that first month.

Retail workers throughout this pandemic are going above and beyond their expected duties to ensure the nation has what it needs and they put themselves at risk every day to serve customers. Trying to keep others safe by enforcing social distancing or asking shoppers to wear face masks have become triggers for aggressive customer behaviour in some instances.

Some retailers are being proactive and taking a stand to protect workers against this unacceptable behaviour and many, including Iceland and Co-op, have said they are not prepared to put their staff at risk by asking them to enforce the wearing of face masks while shopping in their stores. A number of organisations have joined together to push for better protection by law for shop workers (see panel, right).

Accentuating the positives

Retail was – and still is – a big driver of social mobility where workers can progress from the shop floor to the boardroom. Former Tesco supremo Sir Terry Leahy, Fat Face chief executive Liz Evans and ex-Asda boss Andy Clarke are three well-known retailer leaders who did just that.

But with more than 125,000 job losses in the year to August, and thousands of store closures, it looks far from secure as a career option, so more needs to be done to make retail more attractive to would-be employees.

Retailers should focus on improving the key areas that seem to be putting people off. After customer abuse, working weekends (18%) and unattractive pay and benefits (14%) were the most cited negative feedback about retail careers.

For many workers, flexible hours actually fit well into their lifestyle. Some, such as students, may actively want to work weekends. Management should engage with colleagues where possible to ensure working patterns suit individuals, making flexibility the positive it should be, and adopt technology that makes planning easier.

This is an area Superdrug has focused on during the pandemic. Managers were asked to have conversations with store and distribution staff to find out what hours and times worked for them during this

40%

**OF STAFF BELIEVE
RETAIL TO BE A POOR
CAREER CHOICE**

21%

**CITE ABUSE FROM
CUSTOMERS AS THEIR
MAIN DISLIKE ABOUT
WORKING IN RETAIL**

BEST PRACTICE:

HOW CO-OP PROTECTS ITS STORE STAFF

Crime against staff is an issue that Co-op has never shied away from tackling. And, making it known that its stores reported a 140% year-on-year surge in crime in the first few months of the first lockdown, the grocer is doubling down on efforts to protect workers.

Co-op has been pushing the government to introduce new legislation to offer store workers more protection and, along with Nationwide Building Society and Network Rail, has invested in a high-profile customer-facing campaign #TogetherAgainstViolence to highlight the abuse staff can face.

Co-op Food chief executive Jo Whitfield says: "Violence and abuse against shop workers have reached intolerable levels. We urgently need a reset in society to help protect people who are simply going to work. Our customer-facing key workers form a vital part of everyday British life and have worked tirelessly over the past seven months to keep the nation going. We will continue to push the government to provide greater legal protection for shop workers."

Such vocal support is essential in keeping morale high, so that workers know their employer does not believe that dealing with violence is "part of the job".

Co-op pledged a £70m investment in crime prevention and colleague safety measures. This includes providing store workers with headsets to communicate with other staff members and body cams so the company can monitor – and potentially prosecute – abusive customers. Counselling is offered to workers who have been on the receiving end of abuse.





difficult period when, for example, many parents had additional childcare pressures. Superdrug said it tried to accommodate these requirements as best it could.

Technology such as workforce schedulers can help management to find solutions that work for employees. Maintaining that flexibility when we emerge from the pandemic could help retailers attract and retain staff.

Reflexis' Palakurthi says: "As consumers we rarely think about the impact that 'any time' shopping has on store workers, but the survey highlights that this remains one of the most challenging parts of a retail career. Providing employees with tools to access and manage their shifts can help them feel more in control and ultimately boost morale. Data-driven workforce scheduling that harnesses AI takes away the burden of time-consuming administrative tasks, such as approving shift swaps, from the store manager, meaning they can be more agile and spend more time on tasks that really add value to the customer."

The remuneration issue

Pay is another big issue for store staff, but declining margins may make offering more competitive remuneration difficult for retailers. While some retailers, such as Lush, Majestic, Aldi and Lidl, are committed to paying employees the real living wage, others find it difficult to do so in the current environment.

Waterstones managing director James Daunt was clear last year when responding to an online petition demanding a wage increase for staff that the business was "frankly not profitable enough".

There are ways retailers can offer rewards without obliterating their bottom line, such as bonuses based on business performance.

John Lewis' annual bonus scheme is renowned, while Frasers Group boss Mike Ashley introduced a new incentive scheme that places its staff in line for a £100m payout if the company's share price rises to at least £10 in the next four years from its current £3.64 price.

In an innovative move that recognises the financial pressure some of its staff may be under, health specialist Holland & Barrett is allowing its workforce to access their earned wage whenever they need it, meaning they no longer having to wait until the end of the month to get paid.

It has launched 'Earned Wage Access' in partnership with tech company Wagestream, which believes its platform can reduce the "financial anxiety and stress associated with unexpected expenses, a situation that can be exacerbated by the monthly pay cycle".

Wagestream chief executive Peter Briffett says the process does not impact the cashflow of the business, and Holland & Barrett's head of pay and benefits Tricia Foster says the new service "will give our colleagues that additional support net that is so necessary during a challenging time for all, as well as drive recruitment across the business by showcasing our flexibility and support as a wellness employer".

Promoting and enhancing some of the things that people love about working in the sector is another way to attract and retain staff. Being part of a team and meeting new people ranks highest with workers across

store job functions. Retailers naturally seek outgoing people who love to help others so highlighting their friendly staff and team dynamic can help boost recruitment.

Retailers such as Tesco, Ao.com and Co-op use real staff in their adverts, making their friendly, highly engaged employees a selling point. This can attract both customers and, in turn, potential employees.

Diversity matters

Diversity is being examined in all industries as the movement for inclusivity has become mainstream. At a time when many corporations rightly get called out for paying lip service to diversity, an overwhelming 87% of workers on retail's front line believe diversity and inclusion is taken seriously at their business. This is particularly true at regional manager level, where 73% of respondents say their employer takes it "very seriously".

M&S boss Steve Rowe and Co-op boss Steve Murrells have vowed to take radical action to ensure their businesses are diverse, representative and inclusive.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter campaign, which has galvanised people around the world, Co-op pledged to become "anti-racist", take action to close the ethnicity pay gap and make sure customers and colleagues from ethnically diverse groups are heard.

Meanwhile, Rowe pledged a "much overdue review of our approach to diversity and inclusion". M&S is overhauling how and where it recruits, the ranges it carries and store layouts to better represent all shoppers.

There are many great reasons to work in retail stores. The work can be rewarding, the products sold can inspire passion, and many companies in the sector strive not only to serve the nation, but to do good as well.

It is the staff on the front line who are truly the face of retail and, as this report highlights, these workers that play such a pivotal role have real concerns about working conditions, job security and being armed with the right tools to do their jobs well. Retail leaders must listen and act to ensure they preserve one of the greatest assets at their disposal – the frontline staff that the nation came together to applaud just a few months ago.

87%

SAY DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IS TAKEN SERIOUSLY AT THEIR WORKPLACE

BEST PRACTICE:

WHY BEAVERBROOKS IS RETAIL'S TOP EMPLOYER

Jeweller Beaverbrooks has taken the title of retail's best place to work for the past two years at the Retail Week Awards and ranks as the highest mid-sized retailer on *The Sunday Times* Best Companies to Work For 2020 list.

The family-owned business wins plaudits because of how it communicates with staff. The retailer believes that happy, driven, accountable colleagues help drive strong performance and transparency is key. It makes sure that all colleagues have quality time with managers, where not just performance but also personal issues are discussed, and leaders are trained to identify issues and alleviate stress.

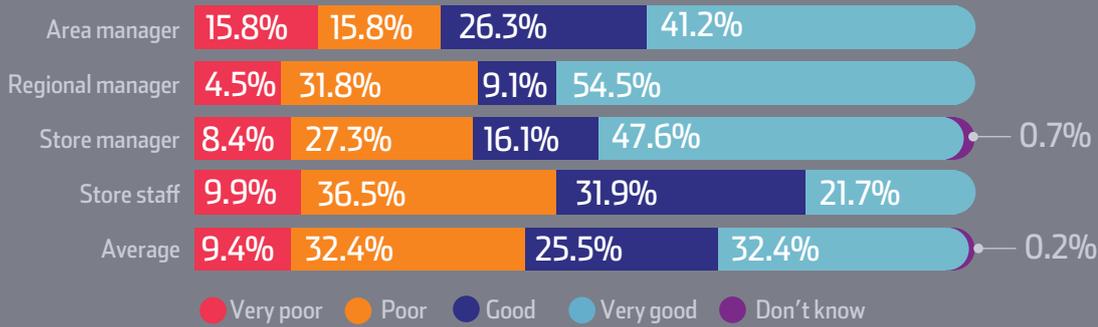
Financial reward is an important part of Beaverbrooks' strategy and, given that unattractive pay and benefits is one of the top three reasons that retail staff dislike their job, this is a wise move. It offers a variety of rewards, such as bonuses based on overall business growth alongside individual sales targets for store staff and management teams. To celebrate its centenary year last year, every employee was given £100 tax-free.

The retailer is committed to promoting managers internally and has developed two programmes: one for store colleagues and a newly introduced programme for office colleagues. Opening up opportunities for progression is paying off as Beaverbrooks has an impressive level of retention in the high-churn retail industry – 49% of its employees have more than five years of service under their belts, 32% have 10 years and 20% have been with the company for more than 15 years.

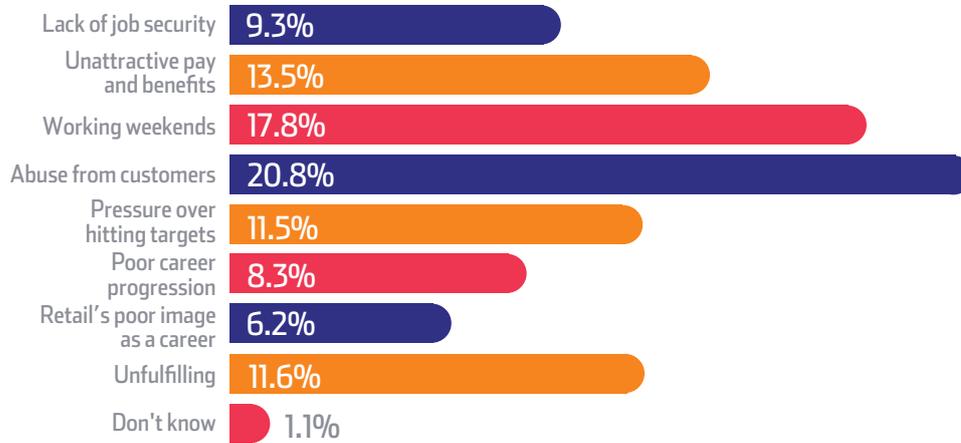
Beaverbrooks MD Anna Blackburn and chair Mark Adlestone



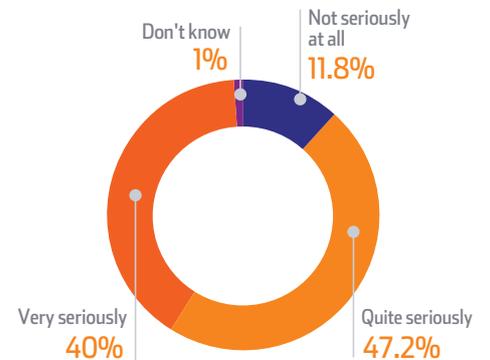
HOW DO STORE COLLEAGUES RATE RETAIL AS A CAREER CHOICE?



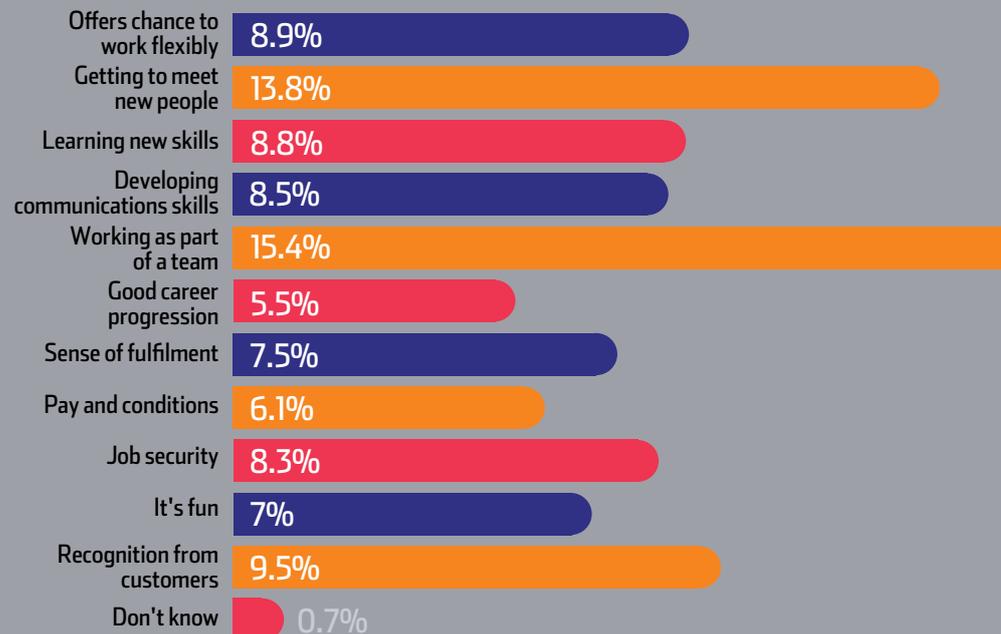
WHAT DO YOU MOST DISLIKE ABOUT WORKING IN RETAIL?



TO WHAT EXTENT IS DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION BEING TAKEN SERIOUSLY IN YOUR BUSINESS?



WHAT DO YOU LIKE MOST ABOUT WORKING IN RETAIL?





THE FUTURE OF THE STORE ASSOCIATE

The store is rapidly evolving and technology is transforming how it functions. It is also changing the role of the store associate and, in the future, this will lead to new roles emerging.

AI and other technologies are already taking away some of the more mundane tasks within a store worker's remit, from stock-taking to scanning at the checkout.

This migration will only continue over the next five to 10 years, and will inevitably lead to fewer shop floor jobs. However, tech is unlikely to fulfil the desire for interaction that drives many shoppers to visit stores. It's more likely store jobs that do remain will become far more customer-focused.

Rather than carrying out some of the day-to-day shopkeeping tasks, the store assistant's

role will be about building relationships and will be far more consultative. Think of a sales person at a car dealership; they meet and greet the customers, determine what they are looking for and focus on matching their demands and making a sale.

Tech's supporting role

However, technology will play its part in helping the store associate better understand customer desires.

Tom Cheesewright, applied futurist and author of *Future-Proof Your Business*, believes that mixed-reality headsets – which blend the physical and digital worlds – think a more advanced version of Google Glass – will break into the mainstream in the years to come. By using analytic capabilities, store



staff will be able to establish the products an individual customer would like.

Such technology will also enable store staff to identify high-value customers and ensure they give them VIP service.

True product specialists

With one-to-one relationships pivotal in this vision of the future, customer expectations will be higher than ever.

Store workers will need to become true product experts. Of course, headset technology or apps on smart devices can help arm shop assistants with information, but reading out information will not suffice in this new service-oriented retail world.

Retail stores should hire or train product – and even brand – specialists who not only know all there is to know about items, but whose knowledge extends to helping with aftersale care, such as fixing glitches, much like the staff at Apple's Genius Bar.

In-store specialists may not be feasible for all retailers, particularly in smaller-footprint stores, but technology could bring them in front of shoppers at the touch of a button. Futurist and IBM external advisor

Shivvy Jervis, founder of forecasting lab FutureScape 248, explains that customers could simply hold up a smartphone and trigger an augmented experience that could bring a designated company-wide product specialist with unparalleled knowledge in front of them.

The desire for specialist knowledge and even advice on how to fix and maximise previous purchases goes beyond just devices and appliances. Fashion retailers could have tailors in store who can repair garments, as H&M has installed in its new-concept stores.

Shoppers crave not just different experiences but also individual products, so in-store design specialists could help create and customise items.

Fewer staff and the emergence of true specialists will lead to a flattened hierarchy in stores and fewer managerial positions, such as department managers, will be required. However, the level of expertise required for a store associate position will mean applicants will need passion, qualifications and skills, and the role will carry a higher kudos and salary expectation than it does currently.

STORE OF THE FUTURE JOBS



HEAD OF VIP

In this new tech-enabled retail world, high-value customers will be identified to staff as soon as they enter a store. A head of VIP in store would offer a concierge service to such customers and ensure sales are maximised from these big spenders.



VIRTUAL SPECIALIST

Super specialists, who truly know everything there is to know about a product and brand, would be made available to customers virtually via augmented reality. These specialists could work in any store in the world, beaming into customers wherever they are needed at the touch of a button.



SAFETY ASSOCIATE

Door hosts who highlight safety procedures to customers as they enter stores have become a common sight since the beginning of lockdown. Safety requirements will need to be updated throughout the course of the pandemic and these have to be communicated to customers and staff, and actioned. A specialist role may be needed in all stores in the medium term.



LIVESTREAMER

Livestreaming – shopping events via social media channels – is driving huge sales volumes in China and is expected to make its way to the Western world. In-store specialists who have a blend of product expertise and presenting skills could be introduced to maximise the potential of livestreaming.



With passion and expertise required, store associate roles will carry kudos



IN-STORE LOGISTICS MANAGER

Stores will increasingly become fulfilment hubs as online growth accelerates. A specialist role would be required to manage the complex logistical issues of managing in-bound deliveries, space requirements and front-of-house delivery.



The hybrid store

The ecommerce step change witnessed since the lockdown has converted a whole tranche of new shoppers to online, a situation that means the growth of online shopping will continue exponentially.

It is inevitable that this will lead to fewer stores, but those that remain will need to integrate more with online.

Staff could give advice and sell to shoppers online. Dixons Carphone and John Lewis both launched virtual consultations during Covid-19, where in-store experts showcased and recommended products and answered questions to help facilitate sales. This kind of service is expected to grow across retail to help bring a human touch and expert knowledge to the vast audience now shopping online.

Livestreaming – through which people can shop via live video demonstrations broadcast on social media – could also become a feature of stores. The shopping method has exploded in China and is expected to drive \$3bn in sales this year, according to Credit Suisse.

The concept is already making its way into the Western world and is being trialled by brands; for example, L’Oréal-owned brand Urban Decay carried out livestream makeup tutorials with Canadian drag queen Sofonda Cox, with a range of discounts and giveaways offered during the event.

The growth of this engagement method could stimulate a new in-store role of livestreamer: part shop assistant/part social media influencer who creates interesting ways to demonstrate products and sell live to a digital audience.

We have seen the surging popularity of click-and-collect as a fulfilment method for a number of years – more than half of John Lewis online orders are collected in stores – and growth in the channel shows no signs of abating. Stores will increasingly operate as fulfilment hubs, not just for collection but as locations from which to fulfil home delivery. There will be a greater volume of deliveries to deal with and these will be fulfilled in multiple ways, including with ground drones, Cheesewright predicts. Logistics specialists will be needed at the store level to manage the complexity of this task.

Simon Hedaux, co-founder at ReThink Productivity, says: “We are already helping retailers understand how their operating models are being transformed and quantifying the workload changes for colleagues, so they can resource their stores effectively as the hybrid store develops.”

Technology may lead to fewer jobs in retail, but those roles will be more diverse and specialist. Far from mundane, the emergence of such roles can help invigorate retail’s reputation as an exciting employer and attract a broader range of talent to the industry.



5 KEY TAKEAWAYS

The results of our exclusive store worker survey paint a stark picture of how frontline workers are feeling right now.

They are worried for their jobs, suffering from low morale and do not see retail as a good career choice.

However, it is within retail leaders' power to help address these issues by truly understanding their workforce and taking the actions outlined in this report, summarised below.

- 1 MAKE SURE STORE WORKERS FEEL VALUED** and are galvanised for a challenging peak trading period. Management should regularly communicate their appreciation, highlighting when individuals have gone the extra mile, and consider introducing special rewards – from discounts to days off.
- 2 HAVE A HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY** and provide staff with the support they need during what is a challenging time for everyone. Train all line managers to identify issues and offer appropriate support, and provide staff with the resource for self-care.
- 3 COMMUNICATION IS CRITICAL** during this time when stores are dealing with unprecedented levels of change, yet almost a quarter of workers believe company communication has been ineffective. Ensure important updates reach all colleagues and make sure your company is using the tools, channels and messaging that cuts through.
- 4 TECH IS LETTING STORE STAFF DOWN**, with stock availability information and in-store communication the top areas where workers feel they need tech support. Take heed of these concerns and find new tools or ways to make such tasks easier for hard-pressed shop workers.
- 5 LEADERS MUST MAKE WORKING IN RETAIL MORE ATTRACTIVE.** Take a zero-tolerance approach to abuse in stores and ensure staff are protected through extra security measures. Try to be flexible by scheduling working hours around employees' other commitments if possible. Such actions can help to avoid churn.

LOVE THIS REPORT?

Why not book in one of our experts to present the findings to your team, examining what they mean for you and your business?  Contact Isobel Chillman on: isobel.chillman@ascential.com



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