



EMPOWERING STORE ASSOCIATES: HOW CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY CAN UNLEASH WORKERS' FULL POTENTIAL



INTRODUCTION

Frontline workers are busier than ever, and retailers need to balance both personal and technological benefits if they want to attract and retain top talent.

The modern store employee needs to be a highly skilled specialist as well as a highly efficient operator. As a result, they need top-tier tools and training that allow them to live up to their full potential. But this is only half of the equation: if retailers want to keep these high performers within their organizations, they need to invest in incentives and progression opportunities that allow them to thrive in today's competitive labor environment.

While these imperatives are especially critical for brands looking to recruit younger employees, they are increasingly relevant to employee demographics.

"We know that Gen Z really wants to have a purposeful connection with their work and with their career," said Alfred Ishak, Senior Director of Research and Integration/People Development at **Human8** in an interview with *Retail TouchPoints*. "Well, we want that too. **We always want to hire and employ people that want it to be more than a job**, and who want to feel like this fulfills some of that need for purpose in their life. After all, they're spending so much time with their employer."

Keeping associates fulfilled in their jobs, and therefore working to their fullest potential, is an ever-evolving task. Retailers need to plan out their strategy in both the short and long term, while considering ways to:

- **Drive recruitment and retention:** Retailers should strive to make jobs an attractive career, not a dead-end job. They can do so by creating a culture that supports its workers as well as offering pay and other benefits commensurate with the expectations of the modern retail workforce;
- **Enable training and upskilling:** The best associates are well-educated and empowered to work to their fullest, and the right training tools can help build loyalty over time by developing a wide range of skills. Retailers can't hold back on training for fear of losing these skilled workers to competitors;
- **Integrate mobile tools into the workday:** Associates carry their own computers in their pockets. Learning to utilize the power of these devices, as well as more specialized mobile tools, can activate seamless cross-channel customer experiences; and
- **Utilize technology to streamline operations:** From in-store robotics to powerful communication tools, retailers have access to a number of technologies that can free associates from drudgery and let them focus on revenue-driving and customer-facing tasks.



ASSOCIATES LOOK FOR BOTH PERSONAL AND FINANCIAL PERKS

Environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues are often seen as a customer-facing part of the business, but they also can offer retailers a recruiting and retention advantage. Members of Gen Z in particular want to work for companies that reflect their own values, and recruiting the leaders of tomorrow means truly living up to those standards today.

However, it's not enough to fund a few "green" investments and consider the work done. Each individual store should be integrated into its community. Participating in local charities, whether by providing manpower or funding, and adding value to the community in other ways, can create visible signs to potential employees that a retailer supports local causes and organizations and can help them create greater meaning in their jobs, according to Ishak.

"We need to create an avenue to fulfill that meaning and that purpose," said Ishak. "Diversity, equity, inclusion, access — those are all topics that are obviously very much at the forefront these days, but also have long been a concern of younger professionals and folks that are entering the workforce. **We try to prioritize those issues in ways that are meaningful for us in our business and that are earnest and real.**"

Of course, competitive pay and other benefits also are an important part of attracting and retaining great workers. Major retailers have been improving what associates earn for years, and top retailers are regularly working to reward good workers financially as well as ethically and spiritually.

"We put great effort into ensuring that our benefits package resonates with employees' needs," said Kelley Kurtzman, SVP of Consumer Field Sales at **Verizon** in an interview with *Retail TouchPoints*. "Aside from a competitive salary, we offer health insurance beginning their first day, tuition assistance, stock program, paid time off and more. **Our benefits package reflects a focus on wholeness as an individual, not simply as an employee.**"



REGULAR TRAINING SHOULD LOOK BEYOND BASIC SKILLS

Training has come a long way since the era of the day-one introductory training course. Electronic training methods are commonplace, and upskilling has been recognized as a key part of maintaining long-term associate loyalty. Where retailers can continue to advance their training policies is looking beyond familiarizing workers with the latest promotions and policies (though that is still valuable).

Retailers looking for an example of how their associates can benefit from training outside their day-to-day duties can learn from what Kurtzman and the Verizon team did during the lockdowns of 2020, when in-store duties were at a minimum.

“We also believe in a continuous culture of learning, and are constantly looking for opportunities for our employees to grow and develop in their current roles and in future roles within the company,” said Kurtzman. “I am especially proud of a scenario that happened as a result of the pandemic, when we temporarily closed a number of our retail stores. **We redeployed more than 10,000 retail employees to other functions where they worked for weeks or even for months.** This unique situation exposed these employees to roles and functions that they may have never considered. Though many went back to their original roles, some stayed in their new roles.”

But retailers shouldn’t be afraid to equip their associates with leadership skills that can lead to other opportunities. This can help prepare future managers and higher-level leaders, so the payoffs in terms of loyalty and upskilling easily outweigh the risk that they’ll take those skills elsewhere.

“We go through this struggle, this tension, where you have to equip your employees to be successful at their current role and under the current conditions, and at times those trainings might be tedious or mundane,” said Ishak. “**You also need to offer leadership and soft skill training — professional development opportunities to allow there to be visible career progression available to all employees,** no matter what their level or what their specialty is. Finding that balance, I think, is tough. It comes down to [the question]: are you willing to invest in the future of your employees, knowing that that future might not be with you? To me, the answer should plainly be yes.”

MOBILE TOOLS: ESSENTIAL IN MODERN ENVIRONMENTS

The modern store associate can't function to their fullest potential without a mobile device. From wayfinding to help with stocking shelves to looking up information for customers, mobile technology is the backbone of a best-in-class associate experience. Mobile capabilities are especially key for retailers with large SKU counts, but all companies can benefit from using this technology to improve customer service.

"In a time when brands increasingly use their digital presence for full inventory offerings and physical stores having only key items, it's imperative that brands ensure that they have the right items on shelves," said Nick Kramer, Leader of Applied Solutions at **SSA & Company** in an interview with *Retail TouchPoints*. "The information part is where the store associates come in. **Consumers expect store associates to be experts on the product, providing insights and information they can't find themselves, but that's asking a lot of an hourly-wage employee.** Using mobile devices can help them provide information quickly and to stay connected with each other while on the move. This allows them to pull in other associates and to provide the consumer an informed, hands-on experience."

Building and managing a fully mobile-equipped team can seem daunting, but much of the cost can be defrayed by tapping into the phones they carry at all times. This is particularly important for Verizon, where smartphones are both a powerful tool for associates and an important product option for customers. Kurtzman noted that associates "will often use the devices that customers are most interested in to be able to personally communicate the experience that they can expect."

ENABLING OMNICHANNEL EXCELLENCE

The modern store associate is helping customers both in-store and online, and mobile technology plays an important role in enabling both approaches. Kurtzman laid out a pair of mobile tools Verizon store associates can use to help customers both in-person and online:

- **View Together** lets workers and customers complete transactions together while putting the customer in control of submitting their order by leveraging Verizon's seamless authentication process;
- **Video Calling** uses POS tablets to power secure video calls, powered by **BlueJeans**, to allow workers to remotely walk customers through any process and even show off in-store items. During the pilot, customers who interacted via Video Calling were **four times** as likely to buy from the sales rep on the same day of the call.



MOBILE DEVICES DRIVE MODERN ASSOCIATE SUCCESS

By Duane Peck, Head of Industry Marketing,
Retail & Consumer Goods at Slack

To engage and retain frontline workers in an ever-changing industry, continuous learning and development are crucial. Smartphones and mobile devices hold the promise of transforming onboarding and training from a tedious obligation into an engaging, interactive process. Using a platform such as Slack, associates can easily access a wealth of interactive resources, learning at their own pace and rapidly applying new skills in real-world scenarios. This not only boosts knowledge retention but also empowers store associates in their daily roles.

Consider the power of productivity tools that help drive associates' daily tasks and workflows. As one example, an associate could quickly pull up a tutorial on a new product or refresh their memory on customer service protocols, all without leaving a simple interface on their smartphone. Integration with other technology can also help automate routine tasks and free associates to focus on delivering an exceptional customer experience. Beyond the time efficiencies, automation also helps to reduce human error. Imagine a mobile platform that is seamlessly integrated with your other management and commerce systems to automatically schedule staff shifts or notify the appropriate employees about upcoming inventory shortages.

Providing the right tools can make all the difference for retailers looking to retain frontline workers and build long-term loyalty. Productivity tools also enable executive leaders and store managers to recognize individual achievements, boost overall morale and create a greater sense of community across the organization. Using a platform such as Slack, associates can use dedicated channels to share ideas, celebrate success and receive recognition for their hard work. An associate could share a successful sales tip in a company-wide channel and receive almost instant recognition from their peers, managers and even corporate executives. This not only boosts camaraderie but also instills a sense of pride in their work, all while helping to level up the skills of their frontline peers.

The combination of mobile technology with productivity platforms that drive automation can create an engaging and efficient work environment. If we empower associates with the right resources, we can improve their productivity and job satisfaction, retaining valuable talent in a competitive landscape.





MORE ROBUST IN-STORE TECHNOLOGY CARRIES OTHER BENEFITS

In-store automation is the next frontier for associate empowerment. While there has been some concern that automated technology will lead to job cuts, it seems more likely that robots and similar technologies will instead be used to free up associates' time for more valuable tasks. For instance, **Walmart plans to introduce automation** at nearly **two-thirds** of its stores by 2026 while maintaining or even growing its associate count.

Robots can help in a number of ways. In 2019, **Ahold-Delhaize rolled out 500 "Marty" robots** to patrol aisles for spills and out-of-stock items. While these robots can't handle the tasks themselves, they enable associates to handle potential problems more quickly and efficiently. In 2023, **Kum & Go is introducing more than 400 robots** to keep locations tidy.

Retailers that aren't suited for robots can still benefit from the right kinds of new technology by focusing on what will best empower and assist their associates. For example...

"To communicate uniformly with our teams across the country, we use smart boards in the back of each store as a communication hub," said Kurtzman. "These electronic boards can display everything from sales metrics and daily reminders to leadership messages and recognition. This is a great way for employees to prioritize what's most important while remaining connected to everything that's happening. Our smart boards are powered by a content management system that we use across our channels."

Technology is only going to continue playing a greater role in stores as it becomes more advanced, but it's unlikely to ever replace associates altogether. Cashierless locations have their place, but the right combination of people and machines can offer a better experience than either could provide alone — for both customers and employees.

LEARN MORE...



Slack is on a mission to make people's working lives simpler, more pleasant and more productive. It is the productivity platform for customer companies that improves performance by empowering everyone with no-code automation, making search and knowledge sharing seamless, and keeping teams connected and engaged as they move work forward together. As part of Salesforce, Slack is deeply integrated into the Salesforce Customer 360, supercharging productivity across sales, service and marketing teams. To learn more and get started with Slack for free, visit slack.com or connect with us @SlackHQ.



Retail TouchPoints and *Design:Retail* give all members of the retail world access to a vibrant community that combines insights, inspiration and opportunities to interact with their peers. We sit at the intersection of the art and science of retail strategy, providing granular data, high-value commentary, and aspirational success stories to help readers optimize customer experiences across all channels. Touching all facets of the retail ecosystem, including store experience and design, workforce management, digital marketing and engagement, and omnichannel optimization, our editorial content, multi-media resources and events take timely news and trends and transform them into tactical takeaways that meet the unique needs and priorities of our executive readers.

info@retailtouchpoints.com



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryan Wassel, News Editor

Bryan covers the retail industry at large, with a focus on contextual marketing, technological innovation and omnichannel developments.