

The crucial role of frontline retail workers in shaping customer experience

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As businesses across the globe work towards making culture and employee wellbeing an integral part of their organisations, the retail industry should consider this when it comes to their retail employees



Serena Ho, head of consumer market at BDO South Africa Inc. Image supplied

Let discuss the important role of retail employees in powering the engine of economic growth and sustainability for the retail sector.

At first glance, a retail job might seem like a straightforward exchange of goods/services for a payment consideration. However, delve a bit deeper, and it becomes evident that frontline retail workers are the crucial cog in shaping the customer experience, driving sales, and ultimately contributing to the broader economy in ways that go far beyond the confines of their job descriptions.

It is clear – even with the rise of digital self-serve tools – that your frontline employees are the true custodians of your customer’s shopping experience. Even with the advent of online shopping, sales from online shopping approximates only 5% of total retail sales.

This is why one of the most impactful steps any organisation can take to prevent revenue being lost to poor customer experience is to enable their frontline teams to deliver a great experience in a friendly and engaging way.



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How your frontline employees are trained in terms of packing goods at the checkout point and the manner in which he/she/they engages with the customer can create either a positive or negative customer experience.

But how do you do this when estimates show that the average staff retail turnover rate is 60.5% in the US and 57.3% in the UK, meaning that more than 1 in 2 members of staff will leave a company within the year?

Before we can find the solution we must understand why these turnover rates are so high.

Lack of training and skills development

A retail position is often the first port of call for school leavers. With its accessibility and widespread presence, retail offers a much easier entry point into the workforce for those fresh out of school who want to earn income and gain valuable work experience.

The hard reality though, for many young employees entering the retail workforce, is that they may not get the appropriate skills development and training. The retail industry is fast-paced to say the least, and often the first thing to be forgotten is the correct training. This can leave important frontline workers feeling under-prepared and unsupported as they take on their new roles.

A culture misfire

By focusing on the demands of the retail environment such as customers and fast service, retailers sometimes tend to forget about nourishing the culture within the company. In some retail settings, this culture misfire and a lack of open communication can create an unintended disconnected and impersonal work environment.

Without a well-defined company culture, employees could start to question their value, leading to a lower sense of loyalty and commitment. This emotional disconnect, coupled with the demanding nature of retail work, could potentially become a driving force behind a higher staff turnover as employees seek a different workplace that does focus on culture where they can feel appreciated, supported, and aligned with the company's mission.

Lack of leadership

In many retail environments there may be an absence of effective leadership which can become one of the key contributors to an unhappy employee.

When retail leaders fail to provide clear direction, support, and mentorship, employees could start to feel adrift and undervalued. Add to that a lack of communication and guidance which can lead to uncertainty about job expectations and

limited opportunities for professional growth and the only option for many is to look for opportunities where they are guided and mentored effectively and with a sense of purpose for long-term career aspirations.

Empowering employees to do their best work

It is essential that retailers shift the way they view their employees and realise that an empowered employee experience lies at the core of an optimal customer experience.

The pressing need for the industry to prioritise comprehensive training initiatives is not simply a choice but a strategic imperative for the success of the entire retail organisation.

In-depth familiarity with the products or services allows employees to confidently engage with customers, answer queries, and make informed recommendations that add value to the overall shopping experience.

Ongoing skills development ensures that employees can stay agile and adaptable in an incredibly fast-paced industry with skills that can contribute to the innovative strategies that keep retail businesses competitive.

In terms of culture, prioritising employee well-being, leading open communication, and establishing a supportive environment where individuals can grow both personally and professionally creates a more stable and fulfilling work environment, reducing turnover and cultivating a workforce that is invested.

Retailers must significantly shift their leadership approach to create a positive and productive work environment. Clear, transparent, and open communication between leadership and employees establishes trust, provides guidance, and ensures everyone is aligned with organisational goals.

Managers must be trained with the tools and skills needed to lead effectively, communicate empathetically, and navigate challenges positively and with a sense of collaboration and teamwork.

Pathways for career advancement within the organisation must also become a priority. Establishing mentorship programmes, offering skill-building opportunities, and providing clear trajectories for professional growth instils a sense of purpose for employees.

The task that should now be keeping retail leaders up at night is not only how to retain frontline workers, but how to positively empower the individuals who are in charge of driving that crucial customer experience.

These employees are the face of your business, the voice of your business and the barrier between success or failure. It is time to recognise that and work with them to give them the tools necessary to fortify the foundation of a robust and resilient retail economy.

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