

VocoVo

Connecting teams through the power of voice

Empowering the forgotten frontline



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Introduction

It's been a tough few years for retail. Stores are closing, business rates and rents are rising and 2019 saw the slowest rate of spending growth since 2010. Add to this the further turmoil that Covid-19 has on the industry and the future doesn't look great for high street retail.

But whilst there's been a lot of concern about the death of the high street, little attention has been paid to retail workers who are arguably most impacted by the changes. According to the British Retail Consortium, approximately 85,000 retail jobs were lost from 2018 to 2019 with retail workers more likely to be made redundant and endure a significant period of unemployment than workers in other sectors. And for those workers not impacted by job cuts, the picture is not much better, with violence and abuse against shop workers at record levels.

Retail remains the single largest private sector employer in the UK, with almost three million workers but until Covid-19 hit, arguably retail workers had become the 'Forgotten Frontline.' Yet it is retail workers who continue to deliver on shopper expectations and experience, despite the increasingly volatile retail environment. They have suffered a series of blows to morale, including store closures, job cuts and changes to working hours. But despite this difficult landscape, many remain positive in the face of adversity. They continue to deliver a good customer service and feel empowered, valued, connected and productive, with communication and technology a key driver behind satisfaction.

To find out what retail workers really think about the changing retail landscape, we commissioned independent research company Censuswide to survey 251 UK retail workers from retailers with over 100 stores in May 2020. This report examines how they feel about working in retail, what they do and don't like about their job and the struggles and opportunities of being a 'Forgotten Frontline' worker.



Snapshot of key findings

Retail is not seen as a long-term career.

Most retail workers (96%) don't intend to stay in retail indefinitely, with over half (51%) planning to stay in the sector no longer than three years. Fears over job losses (30%), feeling too pressured (28%) and feeling undervalued by colleagues and managers (25%) are the most cited reasons for wanting to leave the sector.

It's a challenging environment for both retailers and employees



Nearly all (98%) of retail colleagues say their stores are facing challenges.



Improving customer service and keeping colleagues motivated is the biggest challenge (39%)



Nearly all (99%) colleagues have at least one personal concern as a retail worker.



90% of colleagues admit to having experienced a situation where they felt vulnerable at work.



Over a quarter (29%) feel concerned for the safety for their colleagues most of the time.



Yet, less than a third (32%) would call for help if worried for their safety during a shift.

Despite this, workers remain positive about their role

- Over three quarters (76%) feel they are valued by society.
- Nearly three quarters (71%) are satisfied in their current role.
- Two thirds (66%) feel empowered in their role.
- (71%) feel they are as productive as they can be at work.

Pressure on customer service is growing



Over half of workers (54%) feel like customers have more knowledge about products than they do.



Nearly half of retail workers (49%) say customer queries take longer than a minute to answer.



Over a quarter (26%) think that time spent looking for answers is the biggest inefficiency in-store

Working during covid-19 in particular has been a struggle

Just over three quarters (76%) felt their store was prepared to respond to the pandemic. Despite this there have been challenges with nearly half (48%) experiencing verbal abuse and nearly a third (32%) experiencing physical abuse during Covid-19. Half of workers (50%) think maintaining communication with colleagues whilst social distancing is a challenge, followed by re-stocking quickly enough (45%), feeling safe (40%), answering customer queries (40%) and staying positive and engaged (38%).

Better in-store communication could help drive improvements



42% of retail workers still communicate with colleagues in-store in person and 41% use shop floor phones.



85% feel connected to colleagues and part of a team but over half (55%) recognise there is room for improvement.



47% say the ability to communicate more effectively with colleagues would make them more productive.



Setting the scene

It's been a challenging few years for retail, characterised by rising costs, declining sales and an increasingly unpredictable landscape. And 2020 doesn't look to be much better, with it unclear yet how the pandemic will change consumer behaviour and the shopping experience in the long term.

With the sector under increased pressure and uncertainty, it is a worrying time to be working in retail. This is reflected in the research with almost all retail workers surveyed (96%) saying they do not plan to stay in retail indefinitely. Perhaps more worryingly, over half (51%) plan to stay in retail no longer than three years, leaving retailers with just a short window in which to influence their decision.

For retailers, this presents a serious challenge. Staff are vital to retailers' success, working on the frontline and responsible for delivering a good customer service. Retaining the best staff is critical in improving the shopping experience. So why is it that so many retail workers plan to leave the sector?



With a raft of store closures across the UK in recent years, not surprisingly the most cited reason for considering leaving retail in the next two years was job security, with 30% fearful of losing their job. This was followed by feelings of being too pressured (27%), feeling undervalued by colleagues or managers (25%) and a lack of career progression (23%). Other reasons given included not getting paid enough (16%), not enjoying the job (16%) and not feeling part of a team (11%), providing retailers with clear direction over where to drive improvements to help change the perception of retail as a short-term career.



Workers have concerns

It's not just concerns about their job and career that workers are worried about. When asked about their biggest personal concerns as a retail worker, nearly all (99%) listed at least one concern, with the top issues raised including shift patterns and hours (30%), career progression (28%) and difficult customers (24%).

Again pay also featured on the list (22%), followed by abuse from customers (21%), lack of communication between colleagues (21%) and being unable to answer customer questions (21%), indicating a desire from workers to be more connected and empowered.

Challenges are also not confined to just employees, workers recognised that their stores are facing challenges too, with the biggest listed as improving customer service (39%), keeping colleagues motivated and engaged (39%), improving colleagues knowledge (39%) and protecting colleagues from customer abuse (32%). Other notable concerns included reducing queues at the checkout (29%), outdated technology (24%), lack of staff or resources (22%) and reducing theft.

The biggest challenges facing retail stores in 2020



Improving customer service (39%)



Keeping colleagues motivated (39%)



Improving colleagues knowledge (39%)



Protecting workers from customer abuse (32%)

Fears over safety in the workplace

Another factor putting pressure on retail workers is the increasing volume of abuse in stores. According to the British Retail Consortium's annual crime survey, retail violence is growing with 424 incidents of violence and abuse against retail workers taking place every day. Not only can incidents cause staff physical injuries, but a report by City, University of London suggests many workers are experiencing mental health consequences as a result of violent store crime.

Fears over abuse in the workplace are reflected in our own research, with nearly a third of retail workers (32%) suggesting protecting staff from customer abuse was the biggest challenge for stores and one in five (21%) listing abuse from customers as a personal concern.

Concerningly, nine in 10 workers (90%) also admitted to feeling vulnerable at work, with reasons including being outnumbered by customers (37%), working alone (33%), being unable to communicate with security or co-workers (33%) and when customers are unhappy or abusive (32%).

Perhaps more worryingly, three quarters of retail workers (75%) said they have experienced at least one situation where they felt their physical safety was at risk in-store. Furthermore, almost nine in 10 (89%) employees feel concerned for the safety of themselves and their colleagues at work at least once a month and over a quarter (29%) feel concerned for the safety of themselves or their colleagues at least most days at work, with workers feeling concerned an average of 1.9 times a week.

Rising risk from covid-19

Covid-19 has also put an extra strain on retail workers. Nearly half (48%) have experienced verbal abuse during the pandemic and nearly a third (32%) have experienced physical abuse. Abuse is not just limited to staff, with over half of UK retail workers (55%) saying they have experienced verbal altercations between customers, and 49% have witnessed physical altercations between customers during Covid-19.

Over a third (38%) have also experienced store theft during the pandemic. The findings also increase the urgency of the release of the government's long-awaited guidance as to how it intends to protect workers in the retail industry against violence, harassment and abuse. Retail workers urgently need more support to safeguard their personal safety, with a huge proportion of retail workforce expressing that they don't feel safe in the workplace.

Remaining positive in the face of adversity

Despite the challenging landscape in 2020, there is a positive story to tell. Nearly half of retail workers (46%) admit to being satisfied in their role and over a quarter (26%) said they were very satisfied, an impressively high figure for an industry undergoing such turmoil.

Respondents who were not very satisfied, identified areas that would help improve job satisfaction, including enabling a better work / life balance (33%), greater opportunity to get involved in other areas of the business (33%) and more support from management (31%). Other areas for improvement include providing more opportunity to interact with colleagues (29%), more training and development (28%), more resources (27%), more frequent communication with management and head office (25%), clearer career progression (24%) and greater recognition from management or head office (23%).

Satisfaction is also likely to be driven by a sense of pride, with over three quarters (76%) saying they feel valued by society. Not surprisingly, this appreciation has increased further following the Covid-19 pandemic with 84% of retail workers admitting to feeling valued by society since the pandemic.

Furthermore, more than three quarters (76%) of retail workers felt their store was prepared to respond to the Covid-19 outbreak – a positive reflection of the industry's ability to react quickly to an unexpected scenario. Breaking this down further, a quarter of workers (25%) felt their store was very well prepared to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, while over half (51%) felt their store was prepared or somewhat prepared.



Workers are empowered, productive and connected

Further positive news is that two thirds of retail workers (66%) feel empowered in their role and 71% feel they are as productive as they can be at work. This could be down to a sense of connectivity, with the majority (85%) admitting that they feel connected to colleagues at work. However, less than a third (30%) feel very connected and over half (55%) believe there is room for improvement.

Asked what would improve their feeling of empowerment at work, the top responses were:



Clear visibility and access to wider business strategy and goals (48%)



Having access to the right information to enable decision-making (48%)



Access to better technology to enable a good customer experience (45%)



Greater communication with colleagues in the store (35%)

When asked what would make them more productive at work:



The ability to communicate more effectively with colleagues (47%)



Being able to get customers through the checkout quicker (47%)



Greater connectivity with all colleagues across all departments (43%)



Being able to multitask e.g. taking external calls while restocking shelves (40%)

A common thread that runs through all responses is the need for communication, with colleagues and departments across the store, providing retailers with clear direction on how to further boost morale, engagement and productivity.

Encouragingly 91% of retail workers feel that there is enough communication between colleagues and managers in store, with nearly one quarter (24%) suggesting that communication between both was excellent. This indicates that the desire is not for more communication with management, but with wider colleagues and peers to help improve connectivity.



Communication in-store

When asked how they communicate with other colleagues in store, communication in-person in store remained the most popular method (cited by 42% of respondents), followed by the use of shop floor phones (cited by 41% of respondents). Encouragingly, 39% of retail workers admitted to using more mobile communication methods, such as handheld radios or phones, 35% use headsets to communicate with colleagues and 19% use tablets, indicating a trend towards more modern methods of communication.

However, perhaps worryingly given the speed at which technology has moved on, a large number of retail workers are still using old-fashioned communication methods. One in five (20%) still rely on noticeboards and 18% admit to using tannoy systems to communicate with other colleagues.

Common concerns with current communication technology are:



Connectivity issues (36%)



Not having enough devices for all colleagues (34%)



Other challenges include the length of the battery life (22%)

Improving customer service still is key

Even before Coronavirus hit the UK, retailers were already grappling with how to adapt to a shift in consumer purchasing preferences. The internet now enables us to shop wherever we want, compare prices from the shop floor and access product reviews and advice before even speaking to in-store experts. Yet, providing a great customer experience can be the difference between a store's success or failure. Some of the biggest challenges retailers face when it comes to customer service are resolving customer queries quicker; reducing customer queue times and streamlining the in-store experience.

This is reflected in our research with over a third of retail workers (39%) suggesting that improving customer service is the biggest challenge that their store is facing. Almost all retail colleagues (98%) say they feel confident answering customers' questions in-store, yet over half (54%) have felt as though customers have more knowledge about products than they do. This indicates that colleagues are happy to interact and respond to customer queries, but many clearly lack confidence in their understanding of the products in-store, emphasising the need for more training and upskilling.

The pressure is on

The pressure of delivering a good customer service and be responsive to customers could also be leaving retail workers to inadvertently lie to customers, with nearly half of colleagues (43%) admitting to knowingly providing customers with inaccurate information just to provide an answer.

Such reactions could also be driven by time pressures, with nearly half of retail workers (49%) saying it typically takes them longer than a minute to answer customer queries and nearly one fifth (19%) saying it takes more than three minutes.

Common inefficiencies in retail teams

Delays in responding are down to a multitude of factors, with workers saying the biggest challenges they face when trying to answer customer queries are:



Multiple customers requiring attention at the same time (45%)



Too many products to know about/info to remember (42%)



It takes too long to find the right information (34%)



Other factors include a lack of access to the required information (32%), being unable to find the right person to help (31%) and a lack of product knowledge (27%), again reinforcing the need to be constantly connected to colleagues to source information.

Retail workers' inability to provide accurate and timely information is not just a frustration for customers, but for workers too. Over a quarter of retail workers (26%) suggest that the time spent trying to find out information for customers is the biggest cause of colleagues inefficiency in their store, as well as time spent searching for colleagues with required knowledge (26%). Other sources of inefficiency include the time spent checking the stock room or warehouse for products (23%) and the inability to multi-task on the job (20%).

Only 4% felt that colleagues inefficiencies were caused by inefficient deployment of resources in-store, suggesting that the improvements can be driven more through tools and technology to aid colleagues to source information quicker, rather than changes to colleague roles or responsibilities. With the right technology, retailers can set up remote expert groups in-store, so that customers can be immediately directed to those who are more knowledgeable in the area they need help on.

Driving improvements

When asked what they think would enable them to deliver a better service in-store, the following three solutions were identified as the best ways to empower retail workers to deliver a better customer service:



Better training on products and queries (40%)



Improved communication with co-workers (39%)



Access to technology to improve efficiency (38%)

Other areas for improvement include the ability to confidently answer customer questions (cited by 34% of respondents), a contradiction to the fact that the majority of retail workers said they felt confident answering customer queries in-store. Again this suggests the issue is not the ability to respond, it's being able to respond with the right information.

Instant access to product information and stock levels (32%), the ability to make or receive work-related calls while performing other tasks (31%) and being more present and visible on the shop floor (30%) were also listed as ways of enabling a better service.



Conclusion

To say the last few years have been challenging for the retail sector is to put it mildly. Retailers have faced a plethora of challenges, both outside and inside of the store environment. However, whilst times have been tough, a hidden army of retail heroes has risen to the forefront which has been tackling the challenges silently from the frontline.

Retail workers face growing levels of abuse, higher demands from customers and increasingly challenging working conditions. Yet, despite this, workers remain positive, productive and generally satisfied in their roles.

However, without change, retailers run the risk of this committed workforce leaving the industry. The majority don't see retail as a long term career, so in order to retain high calibre workers for the long term, retailers need to ensure they're providing retail colleagues with the tools and support they need to feel empowered, connected, productive and valued.

Many colleagues are also left fearing for their personal safety and that of their colleagues on a daily basis. Simply put, a huge proportion of retail workers don't feel safe in the workplace and this is an issue that needs to be made a priority for retailers. These fears are exacerbated by the current Covid-19 situation and the struggles of communicating with colleagues during social distancing. The shop floor can quite often feel like a lonely place in some retail environments and now more so than ever. Retailers need to look towards communications technology to empower their frontline workers, increase safety and ensure that staff feel connected, regardless of the scenario.

It's time to recognise the contribution of all those working on the retail frontline. By creating and supporting a happy, connected and informed workforce, retailers can reap the benefits and deliver a frictionless shopping experience for customers for years to come.

VocoVo

About VoCoVo

Established in 2016, VoCoVo enables businesses to release the power of voice. Currently used by 30 tier 1 global retailers and active in 6,000 stores with 83,000 users, VoCoVo's solutions drive actionable insights that empower retailers to improve employee communication and make better decisions that enhance customer experience and drive profitability.

Based in the Cotswolds, VoCoVo is growing fast with customers across the UK, Europe, Australia, Canada and America. In 2019 the company became a winner of the Deloitte Technology Fast 50 Award and a finalist in the Santander Growing Business of the Year Award.



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