

VocoVo

eBook

Smart tech, smart people

Empowering employees in the retail landscape of the future



While technology comes with a wealth of benefits, smart technology is only truly 'smart' if it supports and empowers the people using it. This is particularly true in the retail sector. Technology can never replace the human touch – the adaptability, engagement, and empathy that consumers value so highly. However, the adoption of smart technology can enhance the skills of retail teams, better connecting them with each other, their customers, managers at head office, and other smart devices across the store.

Rather than doing the same work faster and with fewer people, smart tech can lift up entire teams by enabling them to have a real impact on efficiency and customer experience. At the same time, individual employees feel safer and more supported at work with intuitive, responsive technology by their side.

But to achieve this, it's vital that the role of people in tomorrow's retail landscape is clearly defined. Why? Because fears and uncertainties still surround the use of smart technology. Employees must be reassured that smart technology is an aid rather than a replacement to their roles. After all, both humans and technology work better together.

This eBook explores the central role of people in the rollout and success of smart technology, and in delivering the seamless in-store experiences customers have come to expect. Supported by recent findings from VoCoVo's Retail, Disconnected research, which surveyed 1,003 in-store employees and 258 senior retail decision makers that had over 100 stores across the UK, North America, and Germany, it will highlight the importance of training and championing employees so they can confidently leverage the benefits of smart tech for a truly connected retail future.

People at the heart of retail's next normal

85% of senior decision makers

consider the role of human employees on the shop floor important in the years to come.

This is great news for the retail workforce. Far from being a threat to their existence, smart technology will continue to augment employees, helping them to work smarter and create more meaningful connections with their colleagues, customers, and communities. The latest innovations in retail communication technology are enabling colleagues to seamlessly interact with each other, rapidly gathering the right information to elevate the customer experience and build greater loyalty and trust.

Connected smart technology also improves task efficiency on the shop floor by helping employees make the most of their time. As the retail sector faces greater resource constraints than ever before, colleagues should be empowered to focus their efforts on what they do best – providing high-quality customer service. For example, to multitask effectively, colleagues need to be able to work

hands-free, performing manual shop floor tasks, answering questions, and taking directions quickly, all the while remaining visible to the customer whenever they need them. This is why hands-free headsets have proved so useful to retailers, enhancing colleagues' capabilities and leading to important time and cost savings.

Consumers have been keen to see more integrated, complementary human-technology partnerships in retail for a while. VoCoVo's Retail Reunited research from spring 2021 found that more than half of consumers (**55%**) prefer a mix of human interaction and fully automated experiences. One in five (**20%**) UK shoppers favour staff-only experiences, compared to only **15%** of US shoppers, suggesting that British consumers particularly value traditional customer service features. However, a physical-digital hybrid model seems the clear preference across both regions. In the retail landscape of the future, the digital and human touch is likely to combine further to enhance the retail experience of both shoppers and employees.



Mind the gap

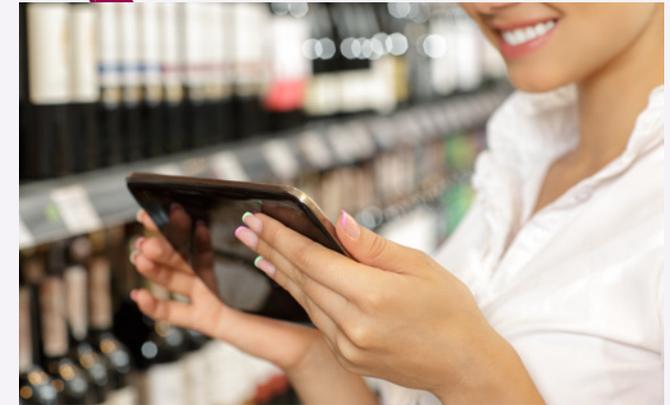
34% of retail workers are worried that smart technology will eventually replace them in their store.



Colleagues still aren't entirely confident about their role on tomorrow's shop floor. Some are questioning whether there will be a place for them in the future, especially as technological innovations gather pace. This highlights a level of disconnect that needs addressing when it comes to the future of retail and colleagues' place in that vision.

34% represents a significant proportion of the current retail workforce, especially as the labour crisis continues to bite. If the retail sector is to survive and thrive in the years to come, the people at its heart need to feel secure in their roles, otherwise top performers will take their experience elsewhere.

Retail decision makers need to get to the root of the problem. Why do many frontline employees fear advances in smart tech? Sensationalist media headlines about robots replacing humans are likely to play a role. But there is also a potential disconnect between the technology that retailers are choosing to implement and the specific needs of colleagues on the shop floor. **63%** of retailers are planning to implement more smart solutions in the next year – yet almost a third (**30%**) of retail workers feel their head office doesn't understand their challenges. If retailers blindly roll out the latest tech without carefully considering how it will empower their people, even the 'smartest' solutions will fail to have the desired impact.



Retailers must take this opportunity to better educate themselves on what their staff really need. By listening to their employees on the challenges they are facing, they can make accurate decisions on the technology needed in store to ensure high adoption and maximum return on investment. Honest dialogue and transparent communication between colleagues and head office is mutually beneficial – and it's a win-win for the consumer, too.

Setting up colleagues for smart tech success

79% of senior decision makers

are confident in the effectiveness of training offered to their store workers to allow them to adopt smart technology.

When setting up colleagues for success, both education and reassurance are key. Head office teams need to explain to employees that smart devices are there to enhance, not threaten, their positions. The most effective way to do this is to provide them with the right tools and training to confidently use the smart devices and leverage all their benefits. This training should be ongoing and on-the-job – without sacrificing customer experience.

Currently, confidence is running high amongst senior decision makers, who feel the smart tech training offered to their employees is effective. However, this confidence may well be misplaced. Almost a third (**30%**) of colleagues say they haven't yet received sufficient training to confidently use the tech that has been implemented. This suggests that retailers must now prioritise more effective, engaging, and relevant training programmes.



Smart tech is only as smart as people make it. This is why employee training is so important. Comprehensive and regular training in the use of digital solutions empowers employees to become better at what they do, seamlessly communicating and realising new efficiencies. With the right training, employees can be fully supported in delivering a better customer experience, which in turn makes them feel more satisfied and happier in their job.

Championing people in the smart future of retail

People need to be at the heart of any retail strategy. The latest innovations in communication technology can both empower and support staff by making them better connected, helping them to focus on their shoppers whilst also feeling part of a dynamic team.

However, technology shouldn't do all the work. It is also up to retailers themselves to recognise and reward the efforts of their staff when adopting new digital solutions. After all, employees may be a lot more receptive to smart tech than decision makers think. Over a third (36%) of retail workers would like to see more smart technology implemented in their stores, suggesting that further implementation would be welcomed by many on the shop floor. This is why employee surveys and feedback mechanisms are so helpful. By continually keeping their ears close to the ground, retail decision makers can gather and respond to valuable employee feedback, ensuring that any new technology that is being implemented meets the needs of workers on the shop floor, but is also being met with enthusiasm from those who will be using it.

To build on the number of staff keen for smarter tech in their stores, employee recognition should also take centre stage. Naming an employee of the month is an excellent way to appreciate and reward team members for their hard work and dedication to mastering new tech. It can also spur greater work from other employees in the store, improving the team's overall output. In addition, implementing store champions to celebrate and advocate for the use of smart tech will help to raise morale within teams, encouraging best practice and easing the transition for any colleagues or customers wary of the change.



While it may seem a big long-term investment to implement, manage, and train on smart tech solutions, it's important to take a future-oriented approach. The needs and wants of both retail consumers and employees are fast evolving, and taking the necessary steps today towards the connected future of human-technology partnerships will certainly pay dividends in the months and years ahead.

Smart technology is a great asset in retail – but only when it's used correctly. It needs to work seamlessly alongside human colleagues, empowering them to do their best work every day in the knowledge that they're supported in everything they do. When both people and technology are allowed to be genuinely 'smart', retailers can achieve their vision of truly connected stores that inspire customer loyalty and retention.

VoCoVo

About VoCoVo

Established in 2016, VoCoVo drives transformation in retail communications to maximise operational efficiency and enhance customer experience for leading global retailers. Now connecting over 250,000 associates in 21 countries through voice, their retail-ready hardware, software, and smart integrations power store teams across Grocery, Home & DIY, and Fashion.

VoCoVo is growing fast and is trusted by household names in the UK, Europe, Australia, and North America. The company has a list of accolades, from regional Business of the Year and Innovation awards to 5th place in the Sunday Times Tech Track 100.

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