



Moving Up

How Retail Businesses Can Help Frontline Workers Advance

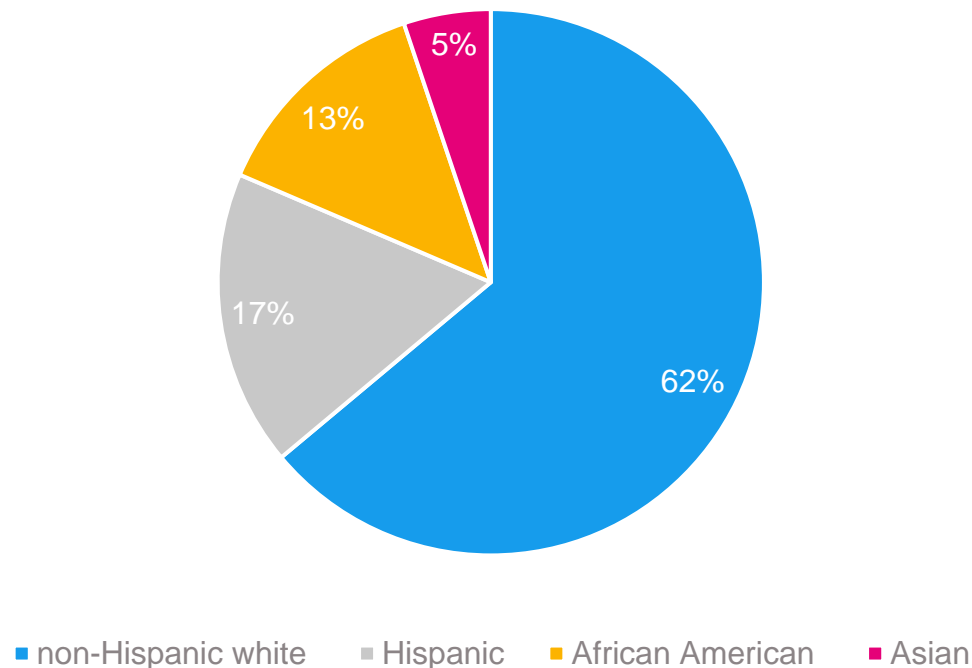
Nearly two-thirds of all Americans get their start in
frontline retail jobs.

These entry-level jobs start out with low wages, but
with the right support, they can offer a pathway to a
middle-class life because of the breadth and depth of
retail careers

Frontline workers are diverse

They roughly mirror the American working population in terms of race and ethnicity

Race and ethnicity



The median age is
40

Men slightly
outnumber women
3 to 2

Most frontline workers have **completed at least some education** beyond high school, and **about a quarter** hold a postsecondary degree or credential.

Frontline retail jobs are evolving

Traditional brick and mortar retail jobs:

- Store cashiers
- Salesclerks

E-commerce related jobs:

- E-commerce stock clerks
- Warehouse packers
- Delivery drivers
- Call-center staff

Frontline retail workers can advance in different ways

Lateral moves

enable workers to work substantially more hours, earn more, acquire new skills, or further develop existing skills.

External career transitions

allow workers to make transitions to high-value career opportunities outside of retail.

Specialization

helps some workers unlock advancement opportunities by deepening their expertise in product knowledge or sales.

Internal career changes

occur when workers switch to other kinds of career pathways that pay more.

Management

pathways permit frontline workers to move up the chain to supervisor, assistant manager or general manager positions.

Retailers use deliberate strategies to help frontline workers advance and strengthen their business's performance

- Set up systems to understand people and pathways
- Elevate and plan for advancement opportunities
- Provide meaningful training opportunities
- Tailor educational assistance

Understand people and pathways

Innovative retailers lead from the top

- Regularly assess pain points in the talent pipeline, set accountability goals, and conduct ongoing analysis to understand the effectiveness of advancement and other people strategies
- Map out career pathways and ways to advance
- Clearly define competencies, behaviors, and experiences needed to advance
- Get to know frontline workers through analysis of HR data, engagement surveys, Glassdoor data review, roundtables or discussion groups, culture studies, and in deliberate codesign processes
- Set up flexible HR and payment systems that allow frontline workers to perform different duties, develop various skills, and be paid for those skills

C-Suite Leadership matters: a leadership transition at one retailer led to a complete **redesign of its talent development strategies** to allow associates to move more swiftly through the organization and maximize their potential.

Elevate and plan for advancement opportunities

Leading retailers make sure opportunities are visible and accessible

- Embed information about opportunities to advance into onboarding and standard training
- Train frontline workers on how to look for a job within the company, how to prepare for an interview, and how to have a conversation about advancement with their supervisor
- Use targeted behavioral nudging in preparing frontline workers for promotion, and set aside dedicated time every quarter for managers to discuss career plans with their supervisees
- Assess frontline employees not only on performance but also on potential and interests
- Consolidate all company job opportunities in one centralized online location, make sure it's genuinely accessible to employees, and use strategic push communications to make opportunities more visible
- Develop complementary online tools that allow frontline staff to identify the options that are the best match for them

Companies are now moving to **develop their own apps and websites** as new ways to distribute information. For example, apps can help match frontline employees with opportunities for internal advancement and customized training content.

Provide meaningful training opportunities

Training can take many forms, but ideally it is accessible, helps diversify skills, and translates into tangible opportunity

- Expand access to training beyond workers who have stayed a certain number of years or who are already in a new role to include others interested in learning new skills
- Cross-train workers to help build skills and provide more flexibility to workers and the employer
- Provide access to self-administered, self-paced micro-learning through customized apps or other tools
- Offer more time-intensive training options or more formal apprenticeships for those moving into management roles or more highly skilled positions
- Recognize and reward training completion and demonstration of competencies with certificates, bonuses, or pay bumps

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, one retailer identified 20 different skill assets across four key positions and put in place **a cross-training plan**. This helped build the skillset of frontline workers and helped the business respond more flexibly when workers needed to call in sick.

Tailor educational assistance

Forward-thinking retailers don't think of educational assistance just as a perk to attract talent

- Expand eligibility beyond management to frontline workers
- Align with internal talent development strategy, such as by covering the cost of coursework that advances company priorities or helps in transitions between rungs on the company's career pathways
- Boost retention and engagement in the short term by targeting educational assistance programs to cover the costs of credentials that help workers access higher-paying jobs outside of the business in the medium or long term
- Pay education costs up front rather than providing reimbursement; this boosts participation of frontline workers who have limited personal income and savings

One company recently focused tuition assistance on an eight-course retail management certificate program through a **partnership with a local community college**, with the goal being to help employees discover the career potential of working in the retail industry.

Retailers cannot do this work alone

Other stakeholders can help support advancement for frontline workers

- **Policymakers** can
 - expand the federal resources available for training frontline workers;
 - increase tax benefits for businesses providing educational assistance; and
 - encourage greater transparency on business investment in people.
- **Education and training providers, along with our workforce systems,** can
 - work to align programs better to business needs, develop learners' digital skills.
- **National and local industry groups** (e.g., the Chamber of Commerce and local chambers) can
 - educate the public, policymakers and the public workforce system about opportunities in retail;
 - advocate for advancement as a part of diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies; and
 - provide a platform for sharing and collaborating on promising advancement strategies and disseminate free or low-cost tools and resources.

About this study

These insights come from a qualitative study

To document how leading retailers are thinking about, designing, and implementing approaches to advancement for workers on the frontline, we

- interviewed human resources and learning and development professionals in 16 large retail companies;
- synthesized insights into the talent challenges businesses face, the strategies they use to help workers advance, and the metrics that show if their strategies are working; and
- reviewed literature and spoke to additional experts about what policymakers and other stakeholders should know and do to support businesses in these efforts.

The retailers interviewed for this study were diverse

Total	
Types of frontline jobs	
Sales associate/cashier, etc.	15
Call center/remote customer service	6
Distribution centers	11
Type of advancement	
Lateral	3
Specialization	7
Management	16
Internal pathway change	3
External transition	1
Type of retail	
Electronic and mail-order houses	2
Office supplies, stationery, and gift stores	1
Clothing and clothing accessories stores	2
Sporting goods, hobby, and musical instrument stores	3
Gasoline stations with convenience stores	1
Grocery stores	2
Electronics and appliance stores	1
General merchandise stores, including warehouse clubs and supercenters	3
Home furnishings stores	1

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