



Train well, retain better: keeping your best people onboard

Various experts in retail and training agree that investing in staff development can help ensure career longevity.

By Jay Garcia.

Retail staff members can be a vital asset or a worrisome burden, depending on how well they perform their given tasks. This competence is often driven by their skills and experience, which is why their training is paramount to their success. Organisations that invest in their people are not only rewarded through their increased capabilities, but also show their staff that the company values their development, which can boost morale and performance, and help staff retention.

Communication is a two-way street

Leadership and communications expert Renee Giarrusso says she believes businesses need to adopt a top-down approach to staff development to achieve lasting results.

"A lot of companies start it at frontline, but it's got to start at the top and cascade down because that builds culture," she said.

According to Ms Giarrusso, top-down leadership lets managers lead by example, while allowing team members to develop the necessary skills and behaviours to grow within the company.

"If someone from head office is coming out and spending time with their managers in the stores and equipping them for that next step, then they're creating future

leaders," she said. "Those store managers aren't just on the floor, they're going over and above, being more visionary and leading more."

Ms Giarrusso says that while it's important for staff to build functional skills such as sales, customer service and leadership, the most important skill is that of communication. "It's about open and honest communication with ongoing feedback," she said.

To create a culture of ongoing feedback, Ms Giarrusso advocates regular coaching for staff. "I really believe, if a manager is coaching their team, then their teams tend to think for themselves more, which empowers them, and lets the leader or manager leverage their time to do what matters most," she said. "Coaching is all about asking and empowering – not telling."

"Emotional intelligence" is also paramount in effective leadership and creating cohesion within a team. Ms Giarrusso says this means leaders need to be self-aware while having a clear understanding of other people's strengths and needs.

"It's about knowing your own 'trigger points' and, therefore, picking up on other people's as well," she said. "It's not just about being technically brilliant, but having emotional intelligence."

Leveraging a staff member's skills means managers need to recognise talent and 'buddy up' those individuals with those who

aren't as proficient to create a strength-based team. According to Ms Giarrusso, this helps build a bond within the team, creating a common drive to learn and succeed together.

Due to the nature of retail and the hours staff members work, Ms Giarrusso says training must be regular and modular to create lasting improvement.

"I have a saying: make development a journey, not an event," she said. "Even if people go off to do courses and come back into the store, they should sit down and discuss what they're going to action, how they're going to make that stick, and how their leaders can help drive that with their staff."

Building up a team of skilled people means having a combination of formal and informal training that is ongoing and interactive. Managers should also consider internal workshops, podcasts, online videos and other readily accessible resources that can boost the development of staff members.

While training and development are important to retaining staff within a business, motivation and engagement ensure a company's success and the ongoing happiness of staff members.

"A lot of managers just tap into competency and skill," Ms Giarrusso said. "But my thing is to find out what lights your team up individually. If you're satisfying

that, leveraging their strengths and getting them to do the things that light them up, they're much more likely to have a spring in their step."

The way people interact with retailers is in constant flux, so businesses need to futureproof themselves and grow with market demands.

"We're in such a disruptive time with the challenges of online, so I think people these days have to be agile and able to maintain a competitive edge in this digital age," Ms Giarrusso said.

Everyone could use a little outside help

As a provider of in-store experts for retailers, Strikeforce AMC says it believes staff development should focus on genuine product expertise, stemming from a passion for the industry.

Strikeforce AMC CEO Matt Lloyd said: "Shoppers are increasingly savvy and informed, therefore the ability to discuss quality, provenance and sustainability, as well as key features and benefits, is a huge opportunity.

"Retail and shopper marketing agencies such as ourselves are able to improve retail-staff product knowledge by coaching on the products and brands we represent. Retailers that operate store staff, and third-party agencies that provide commoditised labour in stores, are outmoded.

“Second, opportunity comes from brand owners and retailers working closely with us to develop a pipeline of talent that will gain solid experience of sales, merchandising, field and client-account management, and then pipeline into retailer and brand-owner partners directly. Calibrating our competency training, performance evaluation and learning/development in line with our partners means we’re a tailor-made feeder of quality-aligned resources to our partners.”

In Mr Lloyd’s view, nothing can surpass one-to-one training sessions when it comes to retail training. But he also understands the limitations in terms of time, resources and access. “We adopt a multifaceted approach that includes online learning and ‘work-with’ accompaniments, as well as traditional classroom-based group learning,” he said.

While Strikeforce AMC is not a retailer, it still faces many of the same challenges with regard to keeping staff engaged, particularly around peak and trough seasons.

“We maintain motivation through regular communications from CEO to line managers,” Mr Lloyd said. “We give early foresight where possible to future engagements for any casual workers. Where relevant, we will use incentives to drive business performance and retain motivation.”

The training and development of retail staff can be as varied as the people that make up the industry, so there’s no set formula for how much time and resources retailers should dedicate to staff development.

“Here at Strikeforce AMC, we believe every employee deserves a tailored personal development plan,” Mr Lloyd said. “A plan that, following a mutual discussion, picks up on the competency and skills gaps of individuals in their current role, while preparing them for their next identified role.”

He says training must be seen as a day-to-day occurrence if any lasting change is to happen, and that if training is going to take place regularly while creating meaningful results, KPI (key performance indicator) managers should be introduced to monitor and motivate staff.

With both the market and consumers becoming more complex, Mr Lloyd says training and development must also

become more innovative in terms of delivery, incorporating technology such as online classrooms, videoconferences and podcasts.

“We believe there will be more emphasis on staff being able to deliver a strong shopper experience that will drive footfall into stores,” he said. “Not just strong operational experience, such as cleanliness, politeness and product availability, but also knowledge and expertise in products, together with making the shopping trip a value-adding experience.”

Create an end-to-end solution

CEO of the Australian Supply Chain Institute Dr Pieter Nagel said: “Retailers are basically massive supply chains. They don’t really make anything, but they make things available to the market. Their business model is based on a supply-chain structure. The supply chain is therefore one of the key areas retailers should focus on. It’s a well-known fact that a significant amount of retail activity is supply-chain related.”

In looking at the training and development of key retail skills, Dr Nagel admits it is a complex and dynamic area, as the industry is widespread and incorporates many elements.

“Training is over a wide spectrum of these dimensions, but from a supply-chain point of view, I think there’s a clear requirement in the retail world for their supply-chain staff to have a real understanding of how and where they fit into this chain,” he said. “They are basically a cornerstone in this whole network between the client and the suppliers of whatever they provide – say, groceries, clothes and so on.

“In terms of key focus, I think senior executives should have a very clear understanding of the supply chain because of the potential it has to bring both efficiencies and increased service levels to their business – let alone significant competitive advantage. There’s a huge range of benefits that retailers can get by understanding and managing their supply chain properly.”

As different staff members have different time and access constraints, training should accommodate different working profiles within the industry,

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particularly as senior executives generally have less time to attend physical (as opposed to virtual) classes.

“There’s a strong trend in the industry, in the educational space, to do ‘blended learning’, which is something I think could fit in very well with these executives, whereby they may attend some class sessions and some online sessions, combined with self-study options,” Dr Nagel said.

“Since we focus primarily on senior-level executives, we facilitate in-house sessions, enhanced by guided learning. We’re currently working with a retailer whereby the executives will not leave their office building. We go there and provide facilitation and coaching throughout the learning experience. There’s a mixture of different learning mechanisms and those are the ones that we find work well.”

Dr Nagel says staff training and retention go hand in hand, since staff members feel better appreciated and engaged when they know the company is investing in their growth.

“It’s clear that companies that want to keep their staff should have a staff-development program,” he said. “Companies can’t rely on just recruiting people from wherever they can because people will just go wherever and whenever they want to go. There is no loyalty in such an employment model.

“If companies want to build their own expertise in-house and give their staff opportunities, they should have structured staff- and career-development programs, so that staff know where they stand and can see the commitment from the company.”

Staff retention, to a large extent, means building loyalty across an organisation, from frontline to the executive suite. Training and development programs not only help build competence within an organisation, but ensure commitment from individual staff members.

“The way companies can do this is by taking ownership of staff development – staff won’t necessarily commit to such development by themselves,” Dr Nagel said. “It’s a very costly exercise, and when people do personally invest in themselves, they do not necessarily invest their future career in the company they’re working for. Companies should have a strong commitment to internal career development.”

Creating an internal development plan for staff doesn’t mean all training aspects need to be handled within the organisation, according to Dr Nagel.

“There’s a huge opportunity for retailers to partner with organisations like ourselves, and there are certain elements of training that can be externalised, maybe to a university, through some sort of partnership, so that their internal programs can be enhanced with external contributing elements,” he said.

Blended learning incorporates traditional elements of education, such as classroom sessions and lectures, with newer methods made possible through technology, such as online resources and remote learning. Dr Nagel says this multifaceted approach to training is gaining traction within education and is a strong method for retailers to incorporate.

“Part of the program is that they do a lot in their own time,” he said. “I think the future is very much one of blended learning. There are sufficient technologies available and one can put a lot of the traditional class learning resources online.”

Having a wealth of information and training modules readily available means education is no longer confined to the classroom or to traditional schooling hours.

“Universities are doing the same, whereby they’re building libraries of interviews and such, which students can then download, assess and look at in their own time,” Dr Nagel said.

“The future is much more reliant on technology than on education that can only be provided in traditional classroom environments. Retailers are in an ideal position now to have internal career-development programs that can then be combined with partners like us, where our guided learning sessions can be accessed effortlessly and right to people’s desks.” •