

For Brick-And-Mortar Retailers, Employee Empowerment Must Be A Top Priority



Forbes Technology Council COUNCIL POST | Membership (Fee-Based)

Dec 23, 2022, 09:45am EST



GETTY

“Don’t let perfect be the enemy of good” is an old adage that rings true in most walks of life. But in the increasingly competitive world of brick-and-mortar retail, “good” often isn’t good enough.

Competing with other in-person stores and the growing colossus of e-commerce, physical retail brands can’t afford to minimize ambitions or be satisfied with results that are solid but not special. To succeed in a crowded market, perfection—or something close—has to be the aim.

In the context of in-person retail, the perfect store is many things, but it’s always rooted in the people who operate it. A location might have incredible design, appealing products and innovative merchandising—but if it doesn’t also have a friendly, motivated and highly skilled workforce, the customer experience will suffer.

That’s why, in the pursuit of perfection, retailers should prioritize the frontline staff in their stores. This requires a focus on employee engagement, communication and collaboration, coupled with a tech-forward approach to employee empowerment that encompasses the latest advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and automation.

MORE FROM [FORBES ADVISOR](#)

Best Travel Insurance Companies

By [Amy Danise](#) Editor



Best Covid-19 Travel Insurance Plans

By [Amy Danise](#) Editor



Increased Retail Workplace Digitization

It would be fair to say that brick-and-mortar retail is facing a staffing crisis. According to recent research, **two-thirds of frontline workers** say their jobs are understaffed, while **three-quarters** feel excessively worn out after work. For store leaders, this is a major problem. When employee well-being drops, so does productivity, customer service, sales—and of course, workforce retention—as we’ve seen with the Great Resignation and now “quiet quitting.”

These challenges aren’t lost on brick-and-mortar retailers, **who increasingly see technology** as the solution to staffing and operational challenges. Having advanced rapidly in recent years, next-generation digital workplace solutions for frontline workers, called Frontline Employee Experience Platforms (FEXP), can alleviate employee stress by streamlining workflows, automating manual tasks and hosting not only training but also workplace communications.



Digital retail apps have emerged as particularly powerful tools when it comes to training. This allows frontline staff to learn on the job with gamified, bite-sized micro-lessons delivered directly to their smart device.

The Scourge Of Silos

Retailers in search of the “perfect store” can’t just **lean into new technologies** and empower staff with digital tools. This future-focused mentality is commendable, but only if the execution matches the vision.

Too often, disparate digital solutions are pushed out to employees in a haphazard, fragmented manner. Not only does this lessen the performance-enhancing potential of the store’s tech investments, but it also results in systems operating in silos, something that can have a counterproductive effect on employee well-being.

When a team member uses an inventory management tool to assist with a customer inquiry, for instance, only to be interrupted by a digital training program demanding that they complete a quiz, they’re at risk of feeling overwhelmed. When that sort of thing happens over and over again, the threat of burnout becomes very real.

Employee care isn’t the only concern when it comes to digital overload. With the digitized nature of modern brick-and-mortar shopping, retailers have a host of systems gathering data on staff workflows, store operations, customer experiences and more. Collected, stored and analyzed intelligently, this information can be used to glean game-changing insights, like why certain products sell best at certain times. Unless digital solutions and platforms are integrated so that data can be pooled together for analysis, these insights are likely to be lost.

Advances In AI Automation

If a retailer’s sights are set on striving for perfection, getting the most out of its data is paramount. That’s especially true as advances in AI, a technology reliant on data, begin to unlock new ways for stores to elevate operations and better serve customers. Simply put, if a brick-and-mortar store isn’t leveraging AI-driven automation in some way in 2022, it is not performing as well as it could be.

Take employee learning and development. With an injection of automation, retail leaders can take elevate staff training practices. AI can act as a virtual coach that recommends courses tailored to individual employees’ strengths or, more pertinently, weaknesses. This saves time for store leaders while team members receive the most relevant, individualized training possible. With AI automation, low performers can be converted to high performers and improve the overall store experience.

The Rise Of Phygital Retailing

Retail is undergoing the most significant transformation since the dawn of the internet. **Phygital retailing** is where the physical brick-and-mortar store meets social and digital. Now, consumers are being fed ads in their social channels where they can purchase that amazing pair of shoes with one click. They have the option to make their purchases today by buying them online and picking them up at their nearest store. They can also purchase online and return it in the store instead of by mail—saving money and offering more sales conversions to the store they return the item at. With this new demand for customer flexibility and the bridging of the digital and physical world, store associates need to know how to handle every situation. Having information in the palm of their hands is critical to creating a great customer experience.

The Path To Perfection

The challenges facing today’s brick-and-mortar retail leaders are varied and complex. Fundamentally, they come back to the well-being and performance of frontline store associates and managers.

For many stores, the answer is digitization. It’s important to recognize that deploying dozens of platforms and solutions, each promising to optimize workflows and enhance communication, can actually stifle the collection and utilization of data needed to unlock innovation and drive real operational improvements.

Instead, retail brands should seek out unified systems that streamline the experience for frontline workers and gather integrated data streams that touch every corner of a store’s operations. With the addition of AI to elevate employee training, enhance workflows and turn information into insights, this strategy enables retailer leaders to truly empower their teams—and in doing so, put their stores on the path to the “perfect store.”

[Forbes Technology Council](#) is an invitation-only community for world-class CIOs, CTOs and technology executives. [Do I qualify?](#)