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The Omnichannel Battleground: Empowered Employees are key differentiator for Brick-and-Mortar stores

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Abstract

Retailing displayed its significance in India's market with tremendous contribution to the Indian economy. The development in the Indian retail sector has showed the perfect platform to the Indian companies to enter into this sector. The entry of global players in retailing business has created huge challenges to the Indian companies. Progressive retailers in order to respond to the competition, started to realise the need for efficient man power. The Human Resource practices and the employee satisfaction became the primary concern for the market savvy retailers. Retail staffs have long been seen as cost lever that need to be optimised and automated. However, the explosion of channels and a changing customer landscape is forcing retailers to look at every lever differently and treat their physical assets and human resource as a key to providing better service and diving efficiencies. The present study will provide a clear picture on the issues related to the HR practices and its impact on employees. The study will also focus on the various issues faced by the HR department in procuring, retaining, training and motivating the employees of retailing companies.

Keywords

Retailing, HRM, Employees satisfaction and development, Retail technology, Human touch

Introduction

Some years ago, many large retailers could pride themselves on being the benchmark for customer service through dedicated and loyal employees. But can this work today for traditional retailers? That is the big question. While retail stores are co-managed by a combination of store staff, Al robots, intelligent systems and self-service technology, it is essential to note that humans have to be in control for all these technologies to work in tandem. The crux of it all, therefore, is in how retailers train and engage digitally native employees to work together with in-store technology. This is one of the key determinants of the success of a store.

Changing Workforce Dynamics

Retail staffs today demand the same experience as customers. They tend to be loyal to organisations that address their basic professional needs but also provide a fun, organised and safe environment to work. Gone are the days where a staff would spend months to learn processes, toggle between different excel sheets to get information or look at a job sheet to check tasks.

A report 'Big Demands & High Expectations: The Deloitte Millennial Survey', suggests that by the end of 2025, 75 percent of the workforce would comprise of Millennial, and a significant part of the remaining 25 percent made up of Gen Z (https://www.voced.edu.au). The report says that Millennial and Gen Z are naturally tech savvy. Devices and technology have been their companions everyday ever since they were born. Their motivations aren't monetary alone. They care a great deal about social trends, experiences and the ethical quotient of the brands they are associated with.

Keeping the findings of this report in mind, here's what retailers need to think about:

1. Seamless Transition from Day-To-Day Tech to Workplace Tech:

For a generation that has grown up on smartphones and seamless connectivity, it is demotivating to work on archaic systems that are non- intuitive or reflective of life outside work. Retailers must adopt a design-led approach keeping employees at the center of the decision making process and re-imagine the workplace tech instead of quick and easy fixes. There are multiple retailers who migrate from a RF gun or Radio frequency scanner in stores to an android-based device, only to see a different set of problems with the new device.

2. Tech-Enabled On boarding & Training:

Retail in-store attrition is at around about 20 percent 30 percent a year and there are temporary workers due to seasonality, promotions and new launches. Training, therefore, becomes an important part of employees' engagement. As this new workforce is more known for instant and granular consumption of information, and not known very well for human relationships, technologies such as voice-based assistants, AR/VR-based training tools must be imagined and brought into practice. This would not just enthuse the employees, but also result in a huge reduction of cost associated with on-boarding and training.

3. Collaborative Work Environment:

While physical stores continuing to serve the Omnichannel needs of the customer, the range of activities that a store staff performs have grown manifold in the last few years. Apart from

selling, staff spends more time today in activities such as receiving, stockroom/shelf replenishment, picking, packing, manning customer pickup counters, aisle checkout, answering customers' Omnichannel queries etc. All these point to a solution that should help a retail employee work with people across functions and departments. Having a retail employee focused social network and collaborative tools and structuring policies that promote collaboration will ease the work environment.

4. Enabling a Gig Economy at Work:

Global economics today is majorly driven by sharing. With respect to the workforce, employees are looking at alternate means to engage in interesting tasks, and to earn money through them. This is more relevant in a store setting, where employees can pitch in on a busy day (or when their colleagues are on unplanned leaves) and earn money through that. Workforce scheduling and labour management at stores is still a top-down approach at most retailers, with the respective store managers 'pushing' work to the retail employees. Instead, if retailers can make employees bid or qualify for some jobs that will create the right 'pull'.

5. Gamification of Work:

We are already seeing retailers employ this at stores. Developing a scoring mechanism where associates can team up, compete and earn points with productivity numbers are measured against each other and overall organisational KPIs can go a long way in improving the productivity.

6. Transparency in Business Decisions:

Engaging associates in business decisions, and frequently communicating updates and developments specific to a region or a store through platforms such as podcasts, blogs can build the emotional connect between an employee and a retailer. This transparency in decision making has the potential to instil a sense of ownership in each employee, which can then keep them motivated.

In the fight for dominance in the Omnichannel world, employees have the potential to turn the store network into an asset. Customers love coming to stores and an empowered employee can build brand loyalty, help provide the right experience and enable convenience in ways that machines will struggle to do for the next many years to go. Investing into staff to build the right infrastructure for the stores involves investing in people, technology and processes, and re-imagining the store with the customer and the employee as the key stakeholders.

Review of literature

Some of the selected references relating to the present research papers are given below. These have provided the bases for analyzing the HRM practices in retail sector:

Herzberg et al. (1959) developed motivational model for job satisfaction and through research he found that the job related factors can be divided into two categories, Hygiene factors and motivation factors. Hygiene factors can not cause satisfaction but they can change dissatisfaction into no dissatisfaction or short term motivation, whereas motivational factors have long lasting effect as they raise positive feelings towards job and convert no dissatisfaction into satisfaction. In the absence of hygiene factors (that are working conditions, supervision quality and level, the company policy and administration, interpersonal relations, job security, and salary) the employees chances of getting dissatisfied increase.

Susan E. Jackson et al. (1992), in their paper titled "HRM Practices in service based organizations: a role theory perspective" focused on the importance of the human resource management practices especially in the service based industries like retail sectors. The paper highlighted on the emerging issues, challenges ahead for the service organizations in retaining and succeeding in the competitive business.

The supervisors' availability at time of need, ability to interlink employees, stimulate creative thinking and knowledge of worth of open mindedness in view of workers, and ability to communicate with employees, are the basic supervision traits. Results revealed that with good and effective supervision, employees' satisfaction level was high whereas with poorer communication ability, dissatisfaction level among employees was high (Schroffel, 1999).

Another study by Castillo & Cano (2004) on the job satisfaction level among faculty members of colleges showed that if proper attention is given towards interpersonal relationships, recognition and supervision, the level of job satisfaction would rise.

Ashok Som (2006) in his article titled "Bracing for MNC competition through innovative HRM practices: the way ahead for Indian firms" highlighted emerging issues of MNCs in Indian

market. The paper highlighted the prospects and retrospect of the competition and entry of MNCs in retail and other service units.

Derek et al. (2006), in their paper titled "How does employee involvement stack up? The effects of Human resource management policies on performance in a retail form" focused on the need for effective practices in maintaining the employees in the organizations. The paper focused on the problems and prospect that arise in retail firms.

The report of CII (2008) on "Retail in India: Getting organized to drive growth" emphasized on changing practices in retail sector in India. The report gave due importance for the need for organized retailers entry in India. The report also pointed out that effective management of human resources of retail outlets is one of the key considerations for the success of the organized retailers for sustainable growth in India.

The work has been done to understand the relationship between work environment and job satisfaction all around the world in different contexts over the years. The study is gaining more and more importance with the passage of time because of its nature and impact on the society. The findings of a Danish study suggest that a firm can increase its productivity through the improvement of physical dimensions of work environment (internal climate) and may have a positive impact on firms' productivity (Buhai, Cottini, & Nielseny, 2008).

Baah and Amoako (2011) described that the motivational factors (the nature of work, the sense of achievement from their work, the recognition, the responsibility that is granted to them, and opportunities for personal growth and advancement) helps employees to find their worth with respect to value given to them by organization. Further, this can increase motivational level of employees which will ultimately raise internal happiness of employees and that the internal happiness will cause satisfaction. Hygiene factor can only cause external happiness but they are not powerful enough to convert dissatisfaction into satisfaction but still its presence is too much important. According to them the Herzberg Two Factor Theory, both Hygiene and Motivation factors are linked with each other, as Hygiene factors move employee from Job dissatisfaction to No Job dissatisfaction, whereas motivation factors moves employees from no job dissatisfaction to job satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959).

Sell and Cleal (2011) developed a model on job satisfaction by integrating economic variables and work environment variables to study the reaction of employees in hazardous work environment with high monetary benefits and non-hazardous work environment and low monetary benefits. The study showed that different psychosocial and work environment variables like work place, social support has direct impact on job satisfaction and that increase in rewards does not improve the dissatisfaction level among employees.

The study made by Dr. Manisha Kotagire A. (2014) on "Human resource management (HRM) and its productivity" revealed that HRM is vital for determining the productivity of the organizations. The study focused on the components of HRM and concluded that employee retention ratio is directly proportionate to the manner in which the employees are treated, in return for their imparted skills and experience.

Recent advancements and breakthroughs in diverse technological domains are revolutionising the retail customer experience by offering numerous touchpoints. Upon recognising the significance of integrated information and services, retailers have transitioned to an omnichannel approach (Salvietti et al., 2022; Solem et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2018). Omnichannel retailing strategy is a synergistic integration of consumer touchpoints and communication possibilities designed to deliver a cohesive brand experience, regardless of the channel or platform utilised during the sales process (Cummins et al., 2016, p. 4). Omnichannel retailing functions in an environment where omnishoppers possess extensive knowledge, indicating that omnichannel exists within a competitive corporate landscape. Omnichannel clients can readily contemplate or discover alternatives; hence, an omnichannel shop must not only focus on recruiting and retaining customers but also evaluate the potential danger of customer attrition to competitors. Consequently, acknowledging customer interest in alternatives is crucial when executing cross-channel integration (Thaichon et al., 2022).

Research objectives

- Key objective of this study is to study the human resource management practices pursued in the retail sector

- Further study is also aimed at examine and exploring various training and development approaches being adopted in retail horizon in the changing face of omnichannel ecosystem.

Research methodology

Present study is exploratory cum descriptive research. This evaluates and analyses various HRM practices in retail industry by focusing the qualitative approach. Both, site visits and discussion with decision makers and secondary data sources have been consulted for the purpose.

Analysis and discussion

Role of Technology at Brick-and-Mortar Stores

Technology decisions are made with clear decision-making criterion that has stood the test of time even today across industries based on personal experience. The key parameters considering all the important prospects under one roof are:

Customers: Customer Satisfaction, experience, Net Promoter Score

Employees: Serve customers better, customer delight, ease of doing business

Revenue: Increase average ticket number of transactions

Capability: Enter new markets, attract new customers, and create new categories

Human and technology: revolutionising retail, influencing consumption & driving the change together

Technology has revolutionised retail in the last decade or so. It is influencing retail consumption like never before and is driving the change to make the shopping experience faster, more convenient, transparent and reliable. Humanoid Intelligence, Artificial intelligence, Bots, Cloud, Data, Magic Mirrors, Beacons ... every day there are additions to the list of new technologies in the retail industry.

Phygital and Omnichannel retail, digital alterations, cashless self-check-outs are all making life easier at shopping malls and stores. In this technological era, brands which are not paying attention and keeping up with the latest in tech are losing popularity, business and consumers every day.

Retailers are investing huge amounts of capital in developing and implementing IT solutions and software to influence customers' buying behaviour. Some brands are globally transforming themselves into nearly human-less stores.

The first supermarket self-checkout system was installed in 1992 in the Price Chopper Supermarket in Clifton Park, New York by the man who invented the system, Dr. Howard Schneider (https://ravyx.com/evolution-self-checkout-technology/). Amazon's new futuristic convenience store- Amazon Go - has no lines, no waiting time and little-to-no human interaction and is the new talking point of the retail industry (Amazon.com::All Departments https://share.google/uJWkEluTp3qKFZGGq) .

The Human Touch

While replacing manpower with technology is not a new concept in retail, the human touch of the business cannot be completely ignored. People have always been the appeal of the retail industry. Every shopper wants a special treatment in a store. They want to talk to retail staffs who are attentive and well-informed about the product, while helping them choose what suits their requirements the most. Retail staff- apart from providing customers with a positive experience - also plays a vital role in advising on delivery options or even in helping them use tablets in-store to order out-of-stock items. They are trained to offer the highest level of support, along every step of the customer journey.

A report titled Retail Perceptions by Interactions, the retail solutions and experiential marketing unit of retail branding and sourcing firm Daymon, surveyed more than 1,000 adult shoppers, and found that while 84 percent expect retailers to use technology to improve the shopping experience, 62 percent prefer to be greeted in-store by a real person (https://biztechmagazine.com). Successful retailers know and believe that success is never bought from outside, it must be home grown. That is why they prioritize the well-being and work satisfaction of their employees and along with that; they invest their best time and effort in encouraging, supporting and promoting the social needs and aspirations of their people. They facilitate maximum internal communication between employees and management and encourage a very open feedback-based work culture. These retailers' workplace environment is friendly and welcoming, and they lend an ear to every employee who can add value to the existing pool of knowledge. Their interactions are both formal and informal, so much so that, their people feel at home, because they believe, in order to win the hearts of customers, they must first build a home in the hearts of their employees. To build a strong retail brand, retailers need brand ambassadors – employees who are thoroughly engaged, connected and committed. It is retailers' constant endeavour to empower each of their or at least a major chunk of employees to take strategic business decisions. They believe that when their employees are at

their 'authentic best selves' in the workplace, productivity and retention increase. They help their employees unearth their greatest strengths and integrate them into everything they do as they believe that this is essential to their success and the success of their team.

The most crucial aspect of any business is its people. They are the driving force that keeps the wheel churning. Humans are the most important, yet the most complex, facet of any organisation and this also lies true for a retailer. If retailers have a driven, ambitious and dedicated team of employees who align themselves to the company's vision and become an integral part of the brands success, then retailers' life would be very easy.

Technology vs. Humans

Even as technology has started playing a larger role in day-to-day retail operations, the most successful retailers understand that employees are the connecting tissue in retail experience. The risk of not getting the human element right is significant. As per Pricewaterhouse Cooper's CIS survey, 56 percent of shoppers would turn away from their favourite products or brands after bad experiences with brands, and 32 percent would walk out from the store with just one bad experience (https://www.pwc.com>so-you-can).

Technology has revolutionized retail in the last decade or so. Staying up-to-date with technology in the retail industry is essential to stay ahead of the curve. Retail operations are increasingly dependent on information technology but continue to require the 'human touch'. Digital tracking, interactivity and immediacy are important tools, but physical retail remains the lynchpin of a brand's experience and its relationship with its customers. These days, innovations such as smart screens, magic mirrors and iPads enabled with product information are the newest offerings are specifically made to get the customers' attention.

A significant number of successful national and international retailers in India believe that humans empowered by technology can exceed expectations at every point of the customer service model; both online and offline. Technology alone cannot consistently provide good customer service, but technology designed to enhance human experiences can exceed expectations consistently. Technology is used to upgrade the work flow and bring advancement, but the human touch is something that makes selling personal and believable, approachable and there is a trust factor.

Every coin has two sides. Retailers can't deny the fact that technology has become a major necessity for retail operations at stores, but this doesn't mean that the human touch is losing its charm and importance. In fact humans and technology are parallel for successful business operations. Digital tools enable retailers to provide the right information to relevant customers. They help us collect important data which can enhance customer experience, and these tools make the billing experience smoother and faster. Digital tools are more mobile driven which help to target the right customers. Though people may get eliminated at a few stages of the retail shopping experience, the store team is required as they are a key human link to customers. In offline shopping, customers actively seek out the human touch and the satisfaction from human involvement is higher.

What Retailers Need to Do

There is no use of implementing technologies in retail stores just for the sake of it. Technology is a necessity, but it depends entirely on the business and the brand. Retailers musk ask themselves some important questions before making the big move towards investing in tech support one of them being - Is the technology a retailer wants to work with embracing those values that retailer’s brand stands for or is it just them overshadowing?

The most important thing in building and preserving strong customer relationships is trust. If customers do not recognise one’s brand value anymore they will lose their trust and loyalty for one.

The overall reaction to technology in retail is positive from the customer's side with plenty of customers already familiar with technologies like AI or VR. Even though a huge part of customers still cannot call these technologies by name, the expectation of VR and AR assisting them is growing continuously. Paradoxically, it seems like more the technology invades an industry, the higher the premium on maintaining a personal touch in dealing with customers and employees. It's wise to find a balance between technology and humans and let them work alongside each other. The human touch can make a big difference in the current retail environment that has become too transactional, promotional, and robotic. Retailers must think the ways in which an inspired sales team can put a real smile on customers’ face. That is still the best indicator of a job well done.

Building a Future Together

Technology and human touch have a future together - the word that fits here is Phygital. Phygital refers to a retail environment in which physical and digital experiences merge together seamlessly and complement each other in order to offer the consumer a single, positive, integrated experience. While modern consumers are actively looking for Omnichannel experiences, offline shopping remains important for a large number of them - especially families. Some like to hit stores out of habit, while others shop offline simply because they enjoy the activity.

Technology today is helping retailers predict customer preferences, augmented reality enables customers to try on clothes or household/furniture products suitability in a residence, but even as technology has enhanced the shopping experience, consumers often look forward to the human element in their shopping/retail experience. Owing to innovative tools start to gain significance in the in-store space, it is important to understand that employees will continue play the role of connecting the brand to the consumer. Technology will remain central to the retailers' ability to understand and predict customer behaviour but none of this high-tech would be effective and productive without people in true sense. Whether on the front lines or behind the scenes, it takes an army of specialised staff - floor managers and staff, product designers, supply chain specialists, distribution center workers, and more, all operating with the help of technology - to delight customers with products and services. With no ambiguity technology has an impact on every business these days and the retail industry has also come a long way with the implementation of disruptive technology but this is also evident that great customer experience comes from blending technology with a personalised touch. Creativity, personalisation, and emotional connection are unique human skills that ensure customer loyalty, a critical requirement for any business to succeed. While machines are making life simpler, there are many situations which are best handled manually. Having said that, it is inevitable for technology and human touch to reconcile and coexist in the fast-changing world.

Many retailers in India leverage technology in their business to predict customer preferences through shoppers’ purchase pattern, this helps retailers team serve them better. Retailers use geo-tagging technology for customers to understand their requirements and buying patterns in

a particular catchment area. Retailers admit that digital tools are not the ultimate goal. They are the means to help achieve ultimate consumer satisfaction. Brands need to move from being super transactional and address these needs. Technology is the means and not the goal. Humans will continue to dream, and technology would help the retailers to achieve those dreams.

Many retailers strongly admit that technology should be looked at as an enabler that improves the efficiency and reachability for HR or Marketing function in retail. Technology bridges the gap and enables a healthy communication between stores and corporate offices besides aligns customers with retailing setup. The Indian retail industry is still lagging behind in adapting to technological trends. To bring change, the store team will have to be receptive to transformation as their role will become very dynamic. With the technology changing at such a fast pace, there will always be a certain set of customers who would not be comfortable using it. It definitely takes human effort to explain the system or a new technology innovation to a first-time user.

How to prepare one's staff

The expectation from front-end retail staff is huge, so it is necessary to keep them fully prepared and trained. A trained employee is as valuable as a digital and technical medium. To ensure that the employees are fully trained and ready, retailers must ensure:

- Retail staffs have access to the same technologies as customers, such as tablets
- Retail staff has instant access to complete real-time inventory and product information
- They are allowed to access customer information that enables them to provide personalised service
- Holding regular training sessions regarding new products, in-store technologies and services (including those that are only available online)
- Providing staff across board- front-end and back-end with similar capabilities and training
- Enabling retail staff to communicate with consumers digitally - for example, via live chat or text messages

Now vigilant retailers are keen to impart training to their employees by qualified trainers. The focus is on qualitative and quantitative aspects of retail such as how to increase footfall, customer enrolment, sales numbers, ASP (Average Selling Price), ABV (Average Basket Value) and basket size. Also they motivate their staff with gifts and incentives so that they can achieve the company's targets as well as their personal goals.

In-store training focuses on 5 core aspects that drive business:

- Product
- Process
- Development of Self
- Customer Service
- Sales

Class Room Training (CRT) and On-Job Training (OJT) are conducted, with an emphasis on a practical and holistic approach to ensure that the training program provides clear expectations and is effective. It encompasses video-based training, presentations, team building activities, role plays, etc. A refresher training program is planned to further reinforce the learning of the core aspects. To add as aspiration value to the roles, the training also includes discussions with role models and an orientation on career progression in the organisation. Further objective assessments are done before and after the training program to measure the training effectiveness.

Promising retailers believe in in-depth and comprehensive training of their employees in order to provide the best customer experience at the store. The entire staffs are trained on diverse topics for different segments where they train cross functionally regarding compliances, standard operating procedures (SOPs), product knowledge, behaviour training etc., to provide a seamless and flawless experience to the customers. These trainings are done before opening of the store, as well as, as and when new changes are brought in, for instance, a new standard operating procedure, a new software or change of staff's duties etc.

These retailers value their employees' professional and personal development. They believe in developing team bonding and increasing the positivity quotient in individuals and teams. We

conduct multiple levels of team bonding, product, process and motivational trainings. In order to motivate their employees to push themselves forward and strive to develop new skills, these retailers use a perfect blend of internal and external training programs. From the higher management levels to the floor, retailers have designed and applied different training and coaching programs to ensure the growth of their employees. And the retailers do not just focus on their front-line employees; they also focus on the training and development needs of their backend support staff by chalking out a career plan for the employees while imparting successful and career changing programs like. Progressive retailers take training very seriously while making it a fun and interactive session for the employees at the store. The main features of the training program may be an educative session on how to read a customer, to understand their basic requirement. It is about already knowing of what is in the customer's mind, his needs, his purpose of being at the store and gauging his behaviour, and intent and affinity towards the brand. Staff is also trained on how to attend to the customer to increase the level of satisfaction and to deal with complaints. Another key aspect of training is teaching how to cross sell and up sell by throwing light on the products and its features. The product team may explain the highlights and unique selling propositions to the store team.

Conclusion

In an age, when prices can be compared, and orders can be placed via smartphones, there are almost an equal number of customers who still want human interactions in-store. And this cannot be ignored. Empowered human resource is indispensible in this concern. Contemporary retail requires both high-tech and high-touch to survive and thrive in any part of the world and India is no exception.

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