



Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining Seasonal Retail Staff

smart seasonal workforce strategies for uncertain times



'Tis the season to prepare for retail's biggest quarter.

Traditionally, retailers see an uptick in hiring around key consumer shopping seasons — especially the annual winter holiday rush — moving into high gear for Black Friday, Cyber Monday, and the ensuing shopping frenzy. In the past, they've relied on historical data and trends to plan their seasonal workforce strategies. Due to COVID-19, however, retailers find themselves in uncharted territory as the holiday season approaches.

The retail environment has changed dramatically over the past several months. Online shopping continues to surge, supply chains are strained, the economy is hurting, and consumer attitudes about the safety of in-person shopping vary widely by region. The threat of a second wave of COVID-19 only adds to the uncertainty. Despite all this upheaval, Jack Kleinhenz, chief economist for the National Retail Federation, believes consumers will find room in their budgets for holiday spending.¹

Given these extraordinary circumstances, how can your business effectively recruit, hire, and retain seasonal staff to meet customer demand while managing costs, compliance, and health and safety guidelines? After all, your people are critical to delivering an exceptional shopping experience — whether in store, online, or through hybrid purchase models.

This paper presents practical advice for developing seasonal workforce strategies that engage employees, delight customers, and drive business goals.

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Developing effective seasonal workforce strategies

As COVID-19 changes consumer behavior and reshapes the retail landscape, how can you make sure your organization is ready to meet seasonal workforce demands? There are eight key questions related to recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and day-to-day management that you should consider as you develop your seasonal workforce strategy. The answers will better prepare your organization to take on seasonal staffing challenges as you navigate the pandemic and gradually adjust to the new normal.

1. How many employees will you need this season?

Do you know how many seasonal employees you need to bring on board? Government-mandated health and safety restrictions, shifting customer behavior, and new operating policies and procedures have undoubtedly changed the way you do business. As a result, analyzing last year's traffic and sales numbers won't be all that helpful for determining adequate staff coverage during the upcoming season.

If you're operating at 50% capacity, will you limit the number of customers you allow in the store to accommodate more employees — or vice versa? Will you need a greeter at the door to enforce capacity limits, social distancing, and face-covering mandates? Will you require staff dedicated to processing returns or fulfilling buy-online-pick-up-in-store (BOPIS) orders? Will you maintain reduced store hours through the holiday season, or will you extend your hours to accommodate high-risk populations? All of these factors will impact the number of employees required for each shift — and how much temporary hiring you'll need to do.

Consider what kind of shopping experience you want to deliver. Consumers are likely to prefer an in-and-out shopping experience this holiday season, so it may be a good idea to have associates on hand to direct shoppers to what they need.² If you offer BOPIS or curbside pickup, you'll need shopping assistants to collect and package items. With BOPIS orders surging 208% in April compared to 2019 and 59% of consumers likely to use curbside pickup after the coronavirus outbreak subsides,³ the need for people to fill these roles may even extend beyond seasonal demands.

Dealing with spikes in demand, ongoing safety concerns, and a pandemic-weary public could take a toll on employees — especially those working long hours during the holiday rush. Therefore, keep employee engagement in mind when forecasting coverage needs. Walmart hired more than 300,000 associates in the U.S. starting in March 2020, most of them temporary workers, to help relieve some of the burden placed on current store workers during the early days of the coronavirus outbreak.⁴ The same strategy may make sense if stores get overwhelmed with in-store shoppers and order fulfillment demands during seasonal peaks.

See [Emerging Stronger](#) for practical forecasting and scheduling insights to help you adapt in uncertain times.





2. Which sources of seasonal talent were most successful in past years?

If you've hired seasonal talent before, where did the top talent come from — past employees, referrals, job boards, LinkedIn, or other sources? It's important to cast a wide net in the search for qualified seasonal workers who also meet the ongoing, everyday needs of the business.

During the pandemic, employees' willingness and ability to return to work continue to be changing and unpredictable, which may increase the need for seasonal hiring. At the same time, with some retailers keeping stores closed and focusing on e-commerce, there are many associates who are still out of work and may be seeking other opportunities. In spring 2020, Lowe's hired an additional 100,000 seasonal associates, many of whom had been laid off or furloughed from other retail sectors, to meet a higher-than-usual demand when stay-at-home orders were in effect.⁵

The COVID-19 crisis has also highlighted the need to focus on building [workforce resilience](#) — the ability to “flex” your staff up and down as demand fluctuates and business needs evolve. Relying on spreadsheets and HR system records to contact prior employees can be slow and inefficient, putting you at a disadvantage during peak hiring seasons when competition for talent is fierce. Automated [Former Employee Relationship Management](#) tools make it easy to keep in touch with former employees, increasing the effectiveness of existing seasonal (re)hiring programs. Engaging and rehiring former employees not only saves on recruitment, onboarding, and training costs, but it ensures that you're bringing on talent you know and trust to deliver a great customer experience.

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3. Are you making it easy for candidates to apply for seasonal jobs?

With lingering uncertainty around unemployment and economic recovery, it's difficult to predict what competition for seasonal hires will be like this year. Be prepared by offering a [candidate experience](#) that makes you stand out from other employers. Create job listings that include a clear description of the role and timeframe, so candidates can tell right away if the position is a good fit for their qualifications and schedule.

Even more important, make sure your online job applications are quick and easy to complete. If your process is long and complicated, requiring too many clicks and responses, the drop-off percentage will increase and you'll lose out on good candidates. This means you shouldn't require candidates to re-input all their resume information into your application. Instead, take advantage of automated tools that can pull information from candidates' resumes or auto-populate the application from their LinkedIn profiles. Plus, because many retail job seekers apply from their smartphones, make sure your job application experience works seamlessly across all devices.





4. Is your onboarding process working for today — and the future?

Getting new seasonal hires up to speed and productive through effective onboarding is critical to keep pace with spikes in demand. Don't let your HR team get bogged down processing paper and chasing down seasonal hires for information. An [automated onboarding process](#) helps new employees feel welcome and become effective contributors quickly for a great employee experience from day one.

Leveraging lessons learned during phased reopening, many retailers are preparing for staffing challenges by [cross-training](#) seasonal employees in multiple roles or functions as part of the onboarding process. Cross-training gives you greater flexibility in managing the workforce — especially when you can have fewer team members scheduled at one time due to reduced occupancy mandates. Looking ahead, it's also an effective strategy for creating an agile reserve workforce that's prepared to deliver great service on short notice.

A cross-trained seasonal workforce lets you share labor across different roles within your stores — even during a single shift — to provide a safe, efficient shopping experience for customers. For example, a cross-trained seasonal associate could be deployed as a greeter/entrance monitor from 8:00 – 10:00 a.m., as a fitting room attendant from 10:15 a.m. – noon, and then as a cashier handling purchases and returns during the lunch rush from 12:15 – 2:00 p.m. Depending on the distance between locations and prevailing health and safety protocols for limiting exposure, you could also choose to deploy your cross-trained employees across multiple stores.

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5. Are your managers prepared to manage the “new” seasonal workforce?

The events of 2020 have taught businesses that relying only on current, scheduled employees makes it more difficult to quickly flex the workforce to meet evolving needs or respond to unexpected circumstances. If your goal is to build a strong reserve talent network to support your continuity plans, make an effort to engage your seasonal employees and treat them as valuable members of the team, so they'll be open to returning in future high-volume periods.

Optimize the seasonal employee experience with [official reviews, regular and informal check-ins, and opportunities to feel heard and appreciated](#). Performance reviews should be specifically tailored to your seasonal workforce to keep them engaged and doing their best work during your busiest periods. Equip your managers with the tools, data and insights they need to make coaching and check-ins as effective as possible. And make sure seasonal hires have well-defined goals and standards, so expectations are clear from the start.



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6. How will you handle day-to-day task management for seasonal employees?

In a busy retail environment complicated by COVID-19, your top priority is delivering a safe, comfortable, and efficient shopping experience. But you also need to complete the many tasks outlined by regional managers and the corporate team to help your store operate at peak efficiency. Since the pandemic hit, these tasks have expanded to include cleaning of counters and point-of-sale devices, changing of masks and gloves, quarantining of returns and fitting room items, and more. In some cases, tasks like curbside pickup need to be executed in greater volume than ever before. This means you need to adjust your labor standards to account for the additional time required to complete each task in order to accurately forecast staffing requirements.

Without real-time visibility into the tasks your team, including seasonal employees, is performing, corporate, regional, and store managers can't accurately assess the impact of the work scheduled from week to week. With a heightened focus on [task management](#), your managers will always know where things stand. Advanced tools enable managers to forecast, prioritize, and assign work; validate that tasks are completed on target and on time; and make informed decisions that boost employee engagement, customer satisfaction, and the bottom line.

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7. Do you have a compliance strategy for seasonal workers?

Compliance regulations don't just affect your year-round employees. Seasonal workers are subject to many of the same rules, although there are some exceptions. It's critically important to be aware of all applicable regulations so you can properly incorporate compliance into your seasonal workforce strategy.

For example, seasonal employees who work 120 days or less in a year may not count as full-time employees when determining whether a company is a large employer (one with 50 or more full-time-equivalent employees on average). This classification has significant implications for labor laws and regulations such as the Family and Medical Leave Act.





Under certain circumstances, full-time seasonal workers may be eligible for healthcare coverage under the Affordable Care Act, where eligibility is determined by the number of hours worked month to month. While the ACA provides flexibility for businesses that rely on seasonal workers during peak periods, it's critical to understand the law and how it applies to your seasonal hires in order to minimize the risk of noncompliance.

8. What's your end-of-season plan?

No matter what the upcoming holiday season has in store for your retail business, seasonal employees can help you maintain service levels and keep customers happy. But when the pre-holiday shopping rush and the post-holiday sales and returns are over, what will you do with your seasonal workforce?

You may choose to keep your best seasonal associates on as permanent employees since they've already been trained and their performance has been proven. After the 2018 holiday season, 40% of Target's seasonal employees stayed on in permanent positions.⁶ If COVID-19 precautions remain in place until a vaccine is widely available, you may want to retain some seasonal associates to fill gaps and help with additional tasks.

Even if you flex down your staff after the holidays, chances are you'll need to add seasonal workers during busy times throughout the year. Having an off-boarding system with tailored exit strategies can lead to a better experience for the employees who are leaving. By nurturing relationships with former seasonal employees year round, you can build a trusted talent network that makes it simple and cost-effective to rehire workers who can add immediate value.

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Embrace the new seasonal model

Now more than ever, a seasonal workforce gives you the flexibility to respond to both forecasted and unexpected changes in demand. Strategic utilization of seasonal employees can help your organization build workforce resilience to successfully ride out uncertain times and seize opportunities as we emerge into a new retail landscape. Armed with the right tools and technology to recruit, hire, onboard, manage, and engage top seasonal talent, your business will be well-positioned to flex staffing to meet changing needs, adapt to future challenges, and thrive in an unpredictable world.



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