

Stepping up with the Career Laddering Initiative

According to Mr Walt Disney, “You can design and create, and build the most wonderful place in the world. But it takes people to make the dream a reality.” What he says is perfectly true in retailing, an industry that is driven tremendously by service orientation and high customer interaction.

Retailers go from being transactional to emotional so as to keep up with their changing customer preferences and to differentiate themselves in a crowded marketplace. They build communities and forge deep bonds with their customers through their brand value proposition and service delivery.

In delivering their companies’ brand intents, retail front-liners are, in essence, the faces, voices and hands of their companies at every touch point. They are the ones with whom the customers interact with and from whom they form their opinions. In short, they can make or break the retail business with the way they serve.

So, it is important that retailers do their best to recruit, develop, empower, engage and retain effective retail front-liners.

The challenge lies in finding the right people.

Most retailers lament the lack of manpower in a tight labour market, poor calibre of skills and high employee turnover. As a result, some are going high-tech instead of high-touch by exploring technology to address their manpower challenges.

But by being more high-tech at the store level, retailers end up resembling online stores. They are not playing up the competitive advantage of their offline stores to satisfy customers’ hedonic needs on-site, or to promote impulse buying and instant gratification.

On the supply side of manpower, the workforce does not perceive retailing as a choice career given the low job image, shift work, long hours, laborious nature of work, demanding customers and relatively lower compensation. Hence, the pool of available manpower remains small.

Given this scenario, what can retailers



do to attract more people to consider joining the retail profession, especially at the shop-floor level? Apart from the usual schemes of recruitment, compensation and training, they should consider adopting a Career Laddering Initiative to educate, engage and evolve people in their retail profession.

Career Laddering Initiative refers to equipping employees with the right mindset, skills, knowledge and engagement to grow in their chosen profession.

At the outset, it states the required competencies for the specified job holders for their current and the next expanded jobs. This provides clarity and allows the job holders to assume ownership in planning, developing and performing at the required level based on their own needs and pace.

Once these job-holders have achieved mastery in their current job competencies, they can proceed to develop at the next expanded job competencies. By developing their capabilities ahead of time, they not only benefit from better performance, they can better seize opportunities when they arise — a case where capabilities meets opportunities. Knowing their next expanded job provides a sense of purpose and direction as they are aware of their career path.

Next, relevant vocational contents and essential skills are developed based on the job competencies.

The materials and learning activities are employment-driven and mirror the performance demands of real work situations. They are co-created by the line managers and the training department. Experienced line managers serve as master coaches to mentor and facilitate staff development.

In summary, Career Laddering Initiative is about up-skilling employees

within their workplace. It empowers the employees to expand and broaden their skills based on their needs and pace. It promotes relevant and contextualized learning and development using the company’s own experienced people and contexts. It ensures a pipeline of qualified employees.

Steps to implementing Career Laddering Initiative

1. Determine core competencies first, then individual competencies

Core competencies refer to the combination of pooled knowledge and technical capacities of a business that allows it to be competitive in the marketplace. With core competencies, a business can produce its superior product/solution and expand into new end-markets. Core competencies allow retailers to know what they are really good at and use these critical capabilities to excel.

Based on these core competencies, individual competencies are identified.

Instead of trying to get a person to fit into the company, core competencies provide the answer to “what do we need” and “what types of individual competencies” are required?

To do this, retailers must first identify the core competencies that make their business unique and successful. Next, they need to specify a job type, for example, retail front-liners, and determine the job competencies for its current and ‘next expanded’ jobs. The core competencies must be pervasive in the job competencies for alignment.

2. Craft role description instead of job description

Job description outlines the required tasks. It looks like a to-do list with limited scope of exploration. Hence, it may not promote front-liners’ engagement.

Role description, on the other hand, outlines the role expected of the job holder and provides space for him/her to figure out the right tasks to perform to fulfil his/her role. There is room for creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship and promotes a sense of achievement and pride.

Since front-liners typically spend long hours in the stores, working through the retail process and interacting with customers, they possess much of the relevant knowledge at the shop-floor. Retailers should therefore empower them to leverage their shop-floor knowledge to create and execute customer-centric tasks to fulfil their roles. In this way, working on the shop floor becomes fun due to the exploratory work.

3. Develop vocational contents and essential skills

Vocational contents refer to the technical know-how required to perform the job, while essential skills refer to company-specific know-how, such as core values orientation and culture.

4. Conduct learning needs analysis

Use the job competencies to assess the job-holders on their performance. Identify any performance gaps and co-create personal development plans, with learning activities, timeline and targets to improve future performance.

5. Implement mentorship

Assign experienced front-liners as mentors to the newly hired or junior front-liners as part of continuous performance coaching. This promotes just-in-time intervention and correction.

6. Conduct stay interviews

To facilitate better retention, conduct quarterly informal stay interviews to gain a better insight as to how front-liners are feeling about their work, especially their joy and pain. Management can then provide continuous motivation and, hence, improvement.

Career Laddering Initiative presents a different value proposition to job seekers than just routine work and compensation. With its alignment to core competencies, it is business-driven. Front-liners know how they are contributing to their companies' business through the roles that they assume. They are clear on what is expected of them, now and at their next expanded job level, and are empowered to develop at their own pace.

With skills upgrading, they are equipped to perform better and, as a result, feel better about themselves. With frequent checks via stay interviews, their workplace and challenges are often addressed.

With these changes, retail front-line positions may appear to be more enticing. That, in turn, may enable retailers to have the people they need to build their retail success not just online but also offline — right within the stores themselves. **ra**