Hiring + Professional Development

You can think of them as three steps in a single process. If the end goal of hiring is to find employees who not only do their jobs well but also add value and grow with your company, then "finding the best people" means also thinking through how to train and professionally develop your staff over time.

You're already wearing a lot of hats, so it's no surprise that you and many other small retail business owners don't always have the time and resources to devote to hiring, training, and developing your staff in strategic ways. While not always easy to implement, investments in these three aspects of managing your workforce can pay huge dividends. Helping your employees develop the skills they need to succeed and grow within your business can help you develop a productive, happy, and loyal staff who build a happy and satisfied customer base.

Hiring + Professional Development: The Business Case

What's the impact of hiring, training, and professional development on my bottom line?

Finding and keeping qualified workers is an acute challenge for small businesses, especially in metropolitan areas experiencing very tight labor markets and historically low unemployment, which makes it hard to find and retain talent. On average, approximately half of all hourly workers leave their jobs within the first 120 days. The high turnover rate at retail small businesses can come with significant costs to you, including declines in productivity, lost customers, and time and resources spent trying to find and train a new hire. You can distinguish your business and avoid one of the biggest problems in retail—disproportionately high rates of turnover—by improving your hiring, training, and professional development practices.

Evidence shows retention rates for businesses are linked to growth opportunities. In fact, a 2017 report from the consulting firm FSG listed entry-level employee training, mentorship, and

the creation of career pathways as essential parts of effective employee retention strategies. In the wake of the Recession, more than half of surveyed employees reported that opportunities for advancement were more important to them than any other aspect of their job, including compensation and benefits, when deciding whether to stay or leave a company.

Making changes to the way you hire, train, and professionally develop your staff can offer significant business advantages, including:

- Helping you identify reliable new staff members who embody your company culture;
- Ensuring employees have sufficient knowledge and skills to do their jobs well;
- Improving employees' ability to take on new or additional tasks;
- Boosting staff morale, cohesion, and job satisfaction;
- Aligning employee goals more closely with company goals; and
- Getting added value out of a more highly skilled and self-motivated staff.

Hiring: How to Get Started

Where do I begin?

1. **Know what's required.** Make sure your practices regarding hiring and managing your employees are in line with the law. Check out the U.S. Small Business Administration's guidance, "Hire and Manage Employees," which offers clear, easily navigable information on basic state and federal labor laws.

2. **Identify any "pain points" that are causing low employee morale and productivity, high turnover, or steep costs to your business.** Think through your existing practices for hiring, training, and providing professional development opportunities for workers. Below are a few initial questions to identify areas for improvement:
    - Is high turnover causing my business to lose money?
    - Am I finding it hard to attract employees with the skills my business needs?
    - Have I struggled to hire employees who add to the "culture" of my business?
    - Are my employees finding it difficult to fulfill their job duties?
    - Do I spend too much time explaining tasks and retraining current staff members?
    - Are performance and task expectations clear?
    - Are my employees provided with frequent feedback on job performance?
    - What does a "career ladder" look like for employees within my company, if there is

one?
- Do I make available and communicate with my staff ways to grow within the business or develop new skills?

How do I hire the best people for my business?

As you well know, being a small business owner, finding reliable, talented workers is one of the toughest challenges in operating your business. You can reduce headaches and costs by following some of the HR best practices laid out below:

- **Know the key employee attributes that make your work successful.** Understand what skills and attributes are needed in your business. What do your best workers do that you want everyone to be able to do? Do you need outgoing people, do you need experts in what you sell, or do you need fast workers? Knowing what makes workers successful enables you to better hire for those key attributes.
- **Be transparent about salaries.** If you don't already, consider making public the salary or hourly wage for an open position. [You can increase your chances](#) of finding candidates who are genuinely interested in the role by presenting a realistic picture of what they can expect from the position.
- **Be transparent about the work.** Be clear from the beginning what the job entails. Given you run a small business, your employees may need to help a customer pick out the best jewelry for Valentine's Day—and also clean, remove trash, make displays, and stand on their feet for 8 hours a day. Be clear about the best and worst parts of the job from the application and onwards so you can get people who understand what is needed to succeed.
- **Ask for referrals from your current, most trusted staff.** Another consistent way of bringing talented, reliable people on board is to ask your existing employees for referrals. Searching for the right hire among a group of people already vetted by your current staff will significantly increase your chances of getting great people in the door. This method is a great way to engage your employees in building your business, and will show staff that you value their input. Sometimes, referrals can lead to less racial and gender diversity among your employees, so be sure to keep this in mind and have a plan in place to mitigate any such challenges should they arise.
- **Ask early on where employees see themselves in the future.** Learning about employees' goals upfront not only helps you find forward-thinking employees looking to stay with the business long-term, but will also give you insight into the ways your staff members want to grow. Most businesses with successful hiring practices say they ask applicants about

their ambitions within the company and beyond in the interview process. While there may be few opportunities for internal advancement, this conversation can help inform training and provide insight into how an employee may fit best within the business' needs.

Helpful Resources

Hiring

- The Society for Human Resource Management's "Resources and Tools" section offers sample interview questions, job descriptions, and downloadable employee
- See "Interviewing for Employability Skills" from the U.S. Department of Education for more guidance and sample questions to help you find the right hire.

- **Build a strong company culture.** Your company's culture consists of the behaviors, attitudes, practices, and overall vision you're fostering within it. Think of it as a set of core values that you hold. When your employees' values align with those of your business, and these values are reinforced by company policy, employees are more likely to feel motivated in their work and less likely to leave for other opportunities. When looking for culture add, consider the following best practices:
  - *Define your culture and make it clear to your staff.*
    Take some time to think through what you value, including characteristics you prioritize in your workers and yourself—such as integrity, responsibility, and reliability—and aspects of your business that distinguish you from competitors. Examples include superior customer service, high-quality products, or environmental sustainability. Engage your employees in this process too, to help collaboratively shape what culture can and should look like at your business. Experts stress the effectiveness of writing out a values statement or company mission to share with staff. For more advice on solidifying your values within your business, see "Build a Strategic Framework Through Strategic Planning" from The Balance, which includes guidance on and examples of values and mission statements.
  - *Evaluate the extent to which your hiring process makes clear your company culture.*
    Companies with high retention rates make their values clear during interviews with prospective employees. Determine how effectively you communicate your company culture during your hiring process by including information about your values as a company in job postings, talking about your business culture during interviews, and demonstrating the culture through your interactions with prospective hires.

- **Increase productivity and reduce turnover through effective onboarding.** Effective onboarding processes do more than just familiarize your new hire to their work environment and responsibilities: they reaffirm your company culture and the value of working at your business. When done effectively, onboarding leads to higher performance, greater job satisfaction, and lower turnover, among other benefits. The most successful onboarding procedures accomplish four main tasks:
    - Giving new hires confidence in performing their job duties; Making clear what's expected from them in their role;Introducing and integrating them into the team of staff members; and Demonstrating the culture of your business and how best to work within it.

For advice on onboarding effectively, see the Start-Up Study Group's A Step-by-Step Guide to Onboarding New Hires, or the Inc.com article, "3 Ways to Supercharge Your Onboarding Process."

How do I design a strong onboarding process?

Expert tips for designing a strong onboarding process that sets your employees up for success include:

- **Keep your onboarding materials consistent with your company culture.** If you have formal materials that you use when onboarding new staff, make sure they're consistent with the culture you want to foster at your business. For example, if your materials include photos, these images should feature the racial and ethnic, gender, age, and other diversity you celebrate at your company. Indeed, your onboarding should include company culture and values so employees understand what drives the company from day one.
- **Prepare all documents in advance.** Having all necessary paperwork printed, organized and ready to present to your new hire not only takes care of important compliance issues upfront; it also assures new staff members that you've prepared in advance for bringing them on board. For more information on required paperwork, see Fit Small Business's list of New Employee Forms.
- **Plan a simple assignment or project for your employee to tackle on their first day or throughout the first week.** Taking this critical step will help your employee get immersed in the business right away while getting acquainted with your systems and building confidence.

Professional Development: How to Get Started

Where do I begin?

Before you make any changes to the way your business operates, take some time to reflect on your current practices and identify opportunities for improvements and cost-savings.

1. **Know what's required.** Make sure your practices regarding hiring and managing your employees are in line with the law. Check out the U.S. Small Business Administration's guidance, "Hire and Manage Employees," which offers clear, easily navigable information on basic state and federal labor laws.

2. **Identify any "pain points" that are causing low employee morale and productivity, high turnover, or steep costs to your business.** Think through your existing practices for hiring, training, and providing professional development opportunities for workers. Below are a few initial questions to identify areas for improvement:
   - Is high turnover causing my business to lose money?Am I finding it hard to attract employees with the skills my business needs?Have I struggled to hire employees who fit the "culture" of my business?Are my employees finding it difficult to fulfill their job duties?Do I spend too much time explaining tasks and retraining current staff members?Are performance and task expectations clear?Are my employees provided with frequent feedback on job performance?What does a "career ladder" look like for employees within my company, if there is one?Do I make available and communicate with my staff ways to grow within the business or develop new skills?

3. **Get employee feedback.** Consider asking your staff about the effectiveness of your onboarding and training activities, as well as professional development opportunities. If you'd like guidance in gauging employee satisfaction with their job training and growth opportunities, check out these "20 simple Employee Engagement survey questions you should ask" from Culture Amp, and these questions to select from for a post-training evaluation survey from TalentLMS.

4. **Assess your employees' existing skillsets.** When thinking about how to prepare new staff members for their jobs, or to keep and promote existing workers, it's helpful to get a sense of the range of skills your workers bring to the table. This process will help you discover new ways your employees can add value to your business, while also identifying skills your workers are looking to improve or develop.

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How can I ensure my employees develop the skills they need in an efficient, cost-effective way?

When you think of training employees, you probably think of the first few days after they're hired. But training doesn't just happen when employees start. Organizing ongoing training activities can be an effective way to hone skills, boost productivity, and keep employees engaged at work. Key factors to keep in mind when designing or evaluating your training programs are:

- **Flexibility.** Not all employees learn in the same way, so try to be flexible and take into account learning differences wherever you can. Consider pairing written training materials with hands-on learning and shadowing.
- **Clarity.** Successful retail trainings drive home what's a "best practice" in the industry or at

your company, versus what is an absolute requirement. Make sure your employees know where your practices and policies are flexible and when strict rules apply. Standardizing your training content and process will be key here. What do employees need to know to be successful? How can we make sure they learn each skill in the time allotted and have time to practice and improve?

- **Follow up.** Training should not be a one-time exercise. Studies have found that most people forget nearly 80 percent of what they've learned within one month if there aren't [follow-on activities to reinforce the information](#). If you can, [revisit core skills and job duties](#)with your staff often, making sure that they're capable and knowledgeable in their work.

For more tips on effective training, see "[The Small Retailer's Guide to Successful Staff Training](#)."

You can also reduce costs and avoid some of the main challenges associated with training with the following practices:

- **Implement on-the-job training.** Before incurring costs for formal training elsewhere, think about ways to boost your initial, in-house training and onboarding activities. Consider starting a one-on-one mentorship program for workers to learn from managers or other staff members who have skills they want. Making sure trainers themselves are well-trained will be key to setting standards for high performance. Some new employees may learn best by observing current staff and management before jumping into hands-on training while others may learn best through hands-on training from the start. For more tips, see "[The Best Ways to Do On-the-Job Training](#)" from The Balance.
- **Access state and federal grants, tax credits, and training programs.** Federal and state government agencies offer monetary and programmatic support to small businesses to help train their employees and find talented workers. For more on how to find and apply for funding, see the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) [Career Onestop](#) Business Center guide to [Funding Employee Training](#). You can also search for a Federal Employment Training Program in your state through Career Onestop's [Service Locator](#). Finally, the DOL's [Employment and Training Administration](#) connects users to an array of government workforce development services to help you find and keep talented employees, including through government-sponsored pre-employment training programs.
- **Train on your organization's values.** Training and onboarding offer a great opportunity to share with employees what the company stands for, organizational values and culture, who your customers are, and how your business adds value for your customers. Infusing values into training can help illustrate how more specific or technical tasks fit into the big

picture.

- **Make sure your managers are involved managers.** Studies have shown that entry-level employees flourish and remain with a company longer when they have a supportive manager who fosters learning and recognizes accomplishments. Effective managers also model desired behaviors, make clear to employees what their expectations are, and show employees how their roles fit within the company as a whole. For more on the importance of effective frontline management in new employee training, see FSG's 2017 report, [Investing in Entry-Level Talent](#).
- **Use online training courses.** Online training courses can help you cut down on costs, and offer convenient, flexible options for your employees. However, some employees may not have internet access at home, so be sure to also make online training course access available in your place of work if you provide this training option so that all can participate. See the box below for some examples.

Helpful Resources

Online Training

- The Small Business Administration's [Learning Center](#) is a great one-stop shop for free online videos covering a range of topics in business.
- The [National Retail Federation (NRF)](#) offers online training courses and other helpful resources for retail businesses of all sizes.
- [Retail Training Services](#) offers specialized online training for a fee, allowing employees to undertake 15-30 minute modules in courses on sales, management, operations, marketing, and other aspects of retail.
- [Dale Carnegie](#) connects users to in-person or online courses offered for a fee on a range of business skills development, including managerial leadership, sales, and customer service.
- [BizLibrary, a paid service](#), offers thousands of online training courses and videos organized by topic, from management tactics to workplace

- **Track employee progress and make sure trainings are completed.** It's easy to overlook or fail to complete certain elements of job training once an employee is no longer brand new. But letting training activities fall by the wayside can mean you're not getting the most out of your staff. Consider using a tracking system to make sure that all aspects of job training are completed. This could take the form of a simple checklist, or a more formal

[performance review](#) in which a manager meets with each staff member one-on-one to monitor progress toward full competencies and skills development.

- **Evaluate your trainings regularly.** Studies have shown that high-performing companies seek employee and frontline manager input on training materials and activities.

[See how cross-training looks in practice at businesses that adopted the Good Jobs Strategy.](#)

How can I invest in my business to give my employees opportunities to grow professionally?

Professional development differs from training in that it involves your employee's long-term career, even if they someday leave your company, as opposed to a narrow view of their specific role at your business. Professional development activities can take many forms, from providing on-the-job training in a new role to offering stipends for employees to take classes at a local college. Creating opportunities for your staff to learn and advance in their careers is an effective way to increase employee longevity at your company while adding value in the form of new skills. These opportunities can also be a great way to improve loyalty among your workers if you can't yet raise wages or offer benefits.

The steps below can assist you in implementing professional development programs:

- **Consider what a "career pathway" looks like at your business.** It's no surprise that workers at small retail businesses often feel they have no room for growth within their company. Some business owners and employees embrace this reality, and are mutually transparent about the "revolving door" culture. If you want workers who remain with the company for years at a time, however, think about ways to give them a path of growth within your company. If you can't offer growth opportunities within your business, you can still boost employee engagement by enabling workers to develop new skills that will help them move up the career ladder when they do leave. Consider the following options:
  - *Look at career paths within larger businesses.* Larger businesses within your industry can serve as a helpful model for what career advancement might look like for your business as it grows. See, for example, "[5 Promising Career Paths for Retail Workers](#)" from *Monster.com*, which details types of roles retail employees can grow into as they gain experience.
  - *Identify skillsets your employees need to be promoted.* Creating opportunities for

career advancement within your business requires knowing which skills employees will need in a new role with greater responsibility. The article "[10 Things to Know about a Retail Management Career](#)" from *WorkitDaily.com* details the skillsets generally needed to work as a manager in the retail industry, and could serve as a helpful starting point for employees interested in developing management skills.

- *Find alternatives to traditional promotions.* If you're unable to offer opportunities for advancement within your business right now, consider other ways to help your employees take on more responsibility at work. While there may not be a fast track to management for your employees, there may be opportunities to build a career path through title changes and pay increases every 6-12 months based on new responsibilities, such as training new employees or taking on new projects that boost customer traffic. The detailed guidance offered by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in "[Developing Employee Career Paths and Ladders](#)" offers some alternatives to standard promotions, including job redesign, enlargement, and rotation.

- *Be transparent about upward mobility from the outset.* If you can't offer many opportunities for advancement within your business, you're more likely to find employees who accept this reality if you communicate it during the interview process. Alternatively, if your business does offer a career ladder, advertise the opportunities to candidates upfront. Taking these steps will help you identify the right candidates for open positions and keep those employees in the long term. For more tips on fostering upward mobility at your company, see "[Create a Career Path to Retain Employees](#)" from Connecteam.

- **Set up a mentorship program.** Establishing a mentorship system allows new and existing employees to build relationships, ask questions, and learn from those more experienced and skilled than they are. This system also provides a career step for your more experienced employees to become a mentor. For more on how to set up a mentoring system at your company, check out the [Workplace Mentoring Primer](#) from the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEP). To see how mentorship can help your business, see "[The Advantages of Mentoring in the Workplace](#)," from the *Houston Chronicle*.

- **"Upskill" your staff and promote from within.** Once you've identified a path of upward mobility at your business, look for ways to "upskill" your existing staff, or to help them learn new skills that qualify them for higher positions or bring new, needed skillsets to your growing business. Promoting from within greatly reduces the risks, time, and costs associated with hiring new staff members, but can also cut down on the need to pay temporary freelancers or consultants for special projects. For example, rather than bring on a consultant to help boost your social media presence, consider asking a staff member

with promising communications skills to step up and take on the task. Engaging employees in this way fosters a culture of supportive growth within your business.

For more guidance, see Deloitte and The Aspen Institute's _Guide to Upskilling America's Frontline Workers_ (we recommend jumping right to page 43, with "Getting Started"), which identifies work- based learning, continued education, and career navigation as the three central aspects of the upskilling process. The National Skills Coalition's 2017 report _Foundational Skills in the Service Sector_ also offers helpful advice for employers looking to upskill their workers (you'll want to jump ahead to "Better Skills, Better Business: Steps Employers Can Take" on page 22).

"How often should I give performance reviews?"

The frequency of performance reviews depends on several factors, including your business culture, the number of employees you have, the frequency of engagement with those you directly oversee, and your own managerial style. Some experts suggest giving feedback as often as possible, whereas others advocate for semi-annual or annual reviews. Frequency really depends on what works best for your employees, your company, and your needs. Regular feedback (even informal) can help your employees understand their performance on an ongoing basis and enable easier conversations during more formal performance reviews. Consider asking your employees how and how often they would like to receive feedback. For more advice on conducting employee evaluations, see "10 Key Tips for Effective Employee Performance Reviews" from The Balance.

Learn more

- **Evaluate employee goals through regular performance reviews.** Studies have found that working toward a meaningful goal is the top motivator for employees across industries.

- **Align employee goals with your business goals.** Getting your employees to think about their roles not just in terms of performing basic functions, but also as driving the success of your business can make them more productive, engaged, and likely to stay with the company long-term. This process requires looking for alignment between the goals of your staff and the goals you have for your company. To ensure goal alignment, take the following steps:
    - _Seek employee input._ One highly effective way to get buy-in to your business goals is

to ask your staff to weigh in on what they think would benefit the company in the long-term. Your frontline and customer-facing staff members, for instance, might have great ideas about ways to boost sales or new products customers want.

- *Communicate business goals to your employees regularly.* When employees don't understand what they're working toward, they're very unlikely to feel motivated to do their jobs well or look for opportunities to improve. Avoid this pitfall by being transparent about what you'd like your business to achieve—in terms of profits, sales numbers, new customer acquisition, or other measurable achievements—and how staff members can support these goals. These goals can even be captured on posters that are hung in the break room or through some other visual reminder.
- *Review alignment often.* It's important to evaluate goal alignment regularly, but especially when your business objectives or strategies change. Make sure your employees are kept informed and have the chance to set goals accordingly.

  For more on how to align the goals of your staff with your business, see "When to Change Employee Goals," and *How Employee Alignment Boosts the Bottom Line* by the *Harvard Business Review*.

- **Encourage staff to continue to learn outside of work.** Offering educational assistance programs that help employees master new skills or receive certifications are a highly effective retention strategy for businesses, especially in retail.

- Best practices for encouraging professional development activities outside of work include:
  - *Offer training or stipends to your employees.* Consider developing ways of encouraging your employees to seek out educational opportunities, including by reimbursing them for tuition costs. While tuition reimbursement is not the right option for all business owners, many find that the added value of a highly skilled staff more than makes up for the upfront costs of classes and workshops. Other learning opportunities include industry-specific trainings, customer service workshops, or skill-specific programs.
  - *Locate resources near you.* In addition to the online resources listed above, the U.S. Department of Labor's Career OneStop connects users to valuable information and resources to access professional development services, including:
    - Local Training Finder: This searchable database helps workers find training opportunities in their area.
    - Job Center Database: Here, users can search for an American Job Center near them, where they can receive in-person advice on ways to advance their

careers.

- Professional Development General Guidance: This page offers tips on how to network, receive certifications, and navigate an industry, among other topics.

See the box below for examples of professional development programs and services.

Helpful Resources

Professional Development

- Created by the National Retail Federation Foundation, Rise Up is an online service offering certifications in numerous aspects of retail work, including customer service, sales, and inventory, for employees looking to move up the career ladder.
- Supported by a nonprofit association of grocery retail executives—Western Association of Food Chains—the Retail Management Certificate program is a one-year program that prepares workers for careers in different segments of retail businesses, and can be completed online or at a participating community college
- Manpower powerYOU is an online training platform that allows workers to build skills in areas such as word processing and communications, and receive certifications in specialty skills like computer coding and human resources. Additionally, Manpower's Career Pathways tool also helps workers and employers identify upward mobility opportunities in retail.

What if I need to fire an employee?

While it's not something most employers want to think about, firing employees is an unfortunate part of managing a business. It's important to prepare yourself in the event that you might have to let a staff member go. The following best practices can help protect you as an employer, while respecting the rights of your staff:

- **Have clear policies, including for performance.** Have a clear attendance policy, cash register over/short policy, a clear process for performance improvement plans, an employee grievance policy, etc. so that employees know what is required of them and have clear, fair rules with opportunities to improve before termination.
- **Discuss performance issues with employees when they occur.** Don't wait until the problems get out of control. Address bad behaviors among staff members when they

happen so employees have a fair chance to improve. For guidance on confronting an underperforming staff member, check out "The thriving workplace: how to deal with difficult employees" from The Balance.

- **Document instances of employee misbehavior, underperformance, absenteeism, or other issues.** Gathering evidence of consistent problems with an employee supports your case for firing him or her in the event that your decision is challenged.
- **Familiarize yourself with discrimination laws regarding the firing of an employee.** Firing a staff member because of his or her race or religion, pregnancy, whistleblower status, or certain other characteristics violates the law. It's important to know these laws even if you don't plan to fire an employee, and regardless of the reason you want to let someone go. **For more information, see "What are the laws on firing an employee?" from Gusto.**
- **Prepare for the termination meeting with your employee, and be direct.** Gather your paperwork— including documents supporting your case for firing someone—and think through what you're going to say before you break the news. For more advice on how to approach a termination meeting, see "How to Fire an Employee the Right Way" from Fit Small Business.

Hiring + Professional Development: Additional Help

Meet with an expert or get advice from a peer

When instituting any sort of change in your practices or company culture, nothing is more valuable than learning firsthand from peers who have been there. Tackle your hiring, training, and retention challenges more quickly by seeking advice from a small business expert who knows exactly what you're going through. Various public and nonprofit services can connect you to advisors with personal experience running a small business, including SBA Small Business Development Centers. You can also check out Pacific Community Ventures' free BusinessAdvising.org platform. It connects small businesses around the country with experienced, pro bono business advisors who offer advice on a range of issues, including HR, marketing, IT, operations, and other small business concerns. To find other services in your area, visit the SBA's Local Assistance page.