



**NIAGARA**  
**WORKFORCE**  
**PLANNING BOARD**

## Employer Toolkit



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## About This Project

This employer toolkit is part of a broader project undertaken by the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce, Literacy Link Niagara, and Niagara Workforce Planning Board. Broadly, this project seeks to identify employment needs of retail sector employers and potential employees, identify skills gaps and work with all stakeholders to improve the relationship between employees and employers.

In 2019, retail trade businesses provided over 25,000 full and part-time jobs, representing nearly 14% of all jobs in Niagara. More than 2,300 of Niagara's self-employed work in the retail industry. COVID-19 has created employment disruption in retail, as in all other employment sectors across the region. Throughout 2020, retail trade employers and employees faced significant disruption due to the COVID-19 virus, a reality that is likely to continue through 2021. The project has led to conversations with employers, employees, and job-seekers in the retail trade sector to learn the employment-related needs of the current and post-COVID-19 retail environment.

The project is funded by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MTLSD) as an Ontario Labour Market Partnership (OLMP) project. It is hoped that the research this project generates will be used for a community action plan and for other government policies aimed at assisting in the change brought about COVID-19 and the re-growth of the retail trade industry.

During fall 2020, we published a number of retail trade briefing notes regarding the retail trade sector. These reports utilized data gleaned from employer consultations alongside relevant retail trade data. For more information on this project and previous briefing notes related to the retail sector, please visit our website [here](#).

## Executive Summary

Prior consultations with members of the retail trade sector have indicated a gap in the needs of employers and potential employees/job seekers. For job seekers, challenges to employment included identifying relevant job postings, job security, workplace resources, and health and safety concerns given the current pandemic.

Comparatively, employers identified continuing struggles with hiring, and believe that the available labour pool requires more training and/or is unwilling to work, leaving roles vacant and retail businesses understaffed. The purpose of this toolkit is to provide support for employers and outline best practices in terms of employee attraction and retention.<sup>1</sup>

It is our expectation that this toolkit will help provide tangible ways to reduce the gap between the labour supply and labour demand within the retail trade sector in Niagara. To do this, we focus on five aspects of the employee-employer relationship:

1. Strategies to improve employee attraction by addressing the most consistent barriers to employment for Niagara residents;
2. Employee retention strategies, including employee skills development;
3. Best practices regarding workplace health and safety, specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic;
4. Best practices related to supporting employees mental health; and
5. Best practices associated with posting job opportunities online.

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<sup>1</sup> NWPB is acutely aware of the ongoing challenges that employers are facing at this time that present obstacles to implementing many of the suggestions outlined in this document. In an effort to ease this burden we have compiled a list of available employer supports related to COVID-19 recovery funding. For these funding opportunities, please see Appendix A.

## Section 1: Employee Attraction

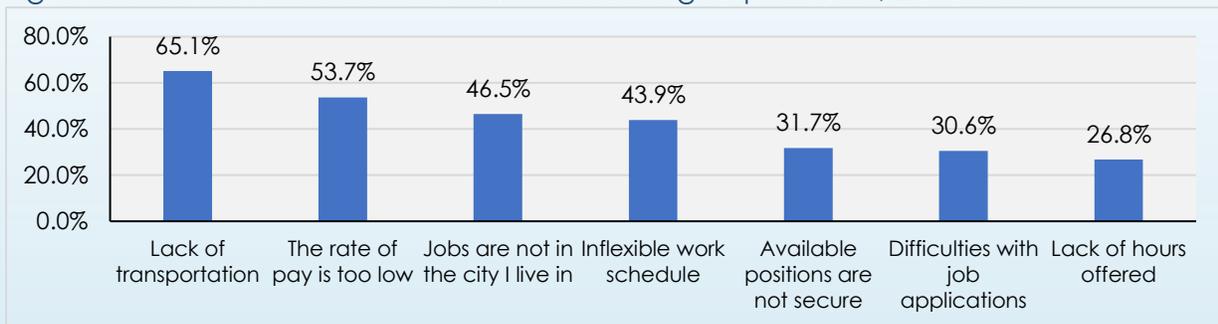
During consultations undertaken prior to and during the pandemic, employers have indicated that they struggle to fill open positions. Specifically, in a 2019 employer survey, 73.8% of respondents across all industries in Niagara noted they had difficulty filling open positions.<sup>2</sup> Given this difficulty, this section looks to identify existing barriers and potential solutions to successful employee attraction.

### What barriers to employment exist for potential applicants?

In response to a survey undertaken during the pandemic, the majority of job seekers felt there was at least one significant barrier to finding employment. Figure 1-1 presents the barriers chosen by over 20% of respondents.<sup>3</sup>

- Among 53 Employment Ontario (EO) clients, over half (65.1%) of respondents noted that a lack of transportation was a major barrier.
- Approximately 53.7% indicated that the rate of pay is too low among jobs to which they are applying.
- Respondents indicated challenges related to the rigidity and uncertainty of scheduled shifts, job security, and the long-term stability of work opportunities.

Figure 1-1. Most common barriers to work among respondents, EO Clients



### Overcoming barriers

Though employers are largely unable to mitigate external barriers such as their industry of employment, there are potential opportunities to lower other barriers. The following page outlines two possible options for employers struggling to fill vacant positions: emphasizing **job security** and **offer schedules that adapt to non-work barriers** (e.g., family-care and bus schedules).

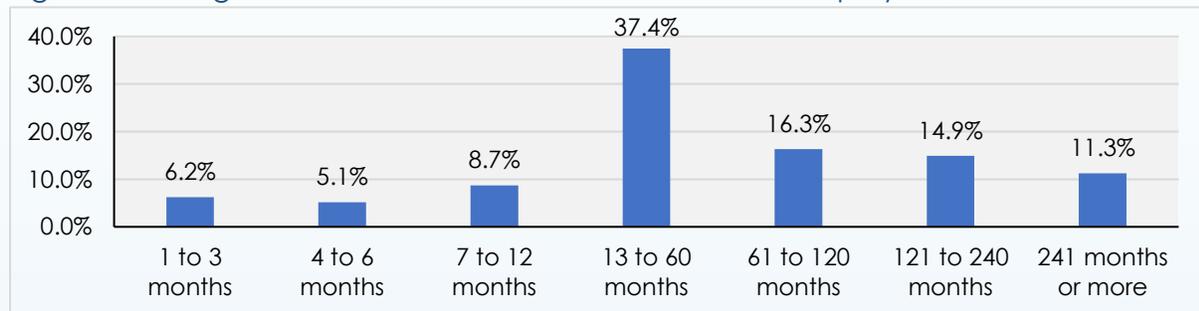
<sup>2</sup> NWPB Employer One Survey, 2019. For additional information on the findings of the Employer One survey, please access the following link: <https://www.niagaraworkforce.ca/files/EmployerOne2019summary-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Respondents were able to select more than one response, which is why totals equal more than 100%.

## Placing an emphasis on job security

Over three in ten respondents (31.7%) to our workforce survey noted that a perceived lack of job security was a major impediment to finding employment. However, Statistics Canada data show that, in Ontario, the average tenure for an employee in the *wholesale and retail trade* industry is 7.6 years.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, four out of every five employees in the *wholesale and retail trade* industry worked for the same employer for at least one year, while one in five have remained at the same job for over a decade (see Figure 1-2). Highlighting this job stability would likely allow potential applicants to view these positions as sustainable long-term, encouraging them to apply.

Figure 1-2. Length of tenure, wholesale and retail trade employees, Ontario 2020



Source: Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0055-01

## Offering flexible schedules

Variable scheduling is considered “the norm for part-time workers...in retail”, however this method of scheduling has been found to lead to work-life conflict and increased employee stress.<sup>5</sup> For example, in 2014, The Gap replaced variable schedules with consistent scheduling and encouraged management to work with employees to avoid conflicting with non-work responsibilities. In doing so, they saw a significant return on their investment. Management for The Gap suggested that if other employers embrace this method of employer-employee relationship they will reap three main benefits:

- Happier employees;
- A more stable workforce, and
- A more productive team.<sup>6</sup>

Adapting scheduling practices to embrace consistency is a large undertaking, but one that may lead to more sustainable and attractive employment.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0055-01 Job tenure by industry, annual.

<sup>5</sup> Henly, J. R. and Lambert, S. J.. (2014) *Unpredictable Work Timing in Retail Jobs: Implications for Employee Work-Life Conflict*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793914537458>

<sup>6</sup> Williams, J., Lambert, S., & Kesavan, S. (2015) *Stable Scheduling Increases Productivity and Sales: the stable scheduling study*.

## Section 2: Employee Retention

In 2018, Deloitte conducted a study and found that the average cost to train a new employee for Canadian business is \$899.<sup>7</sup> Considering this large sum spent on training new employees, it is beneficial to prioritize employee retention strategies. This section outlines factors that may assist with employee retention, and insights on employee training and upskilling.

### Employee retention

NWPB's 2019 Labour Market Insights Survey asked 184 Niagara residents questions related to job attraction and retention. Regarding retention, respondents were asked to identify three elements that were most likely to make them stay in a job (see Table 2-1).

The most common response, noted by over three in five participants, was *personal satisfaction in work*. Although *regular increases to compensation and benefits* were important, a general culture of respect and satisfaction was viewed as being more important

Table 2-1. Most important aspects of staying in a job<sup>8</sup>

| Employee retention                                     | Count      | % responses   | % people      |
|--|------------|---------------|---------------|
| Personal satisfaction in work                          | 111        | 20.1%         | 60.3%         |
| Culture of dignity and respect in workplace            | 87         | 15.7%         | 47.3%         |
| Feeling valued by co-workers and managers              | 83         | 15.0%         | 45.1%         |
| Regular increases to compensation and benefits         | 75         | 13.6%         | 40.8%         |
| Potential for advancement and promotion                | 61         | 11.0%         | 33.2%         |
| Level of autonomy in position                          | 61         | 11.0%         | 33.2%         |
| Access to tools and resources to succeed in position   | 38         | 6.9%          | 20.7%         |
| Culture of compassion in managing personal emergencies | 25         | 4.5%          | 13.6%         |
| Ongoing feedback from management                       | 8          | 1.4%          | 4.3%          |
| Other (please specify)                                 | 4          | 0.7%          | 2.2%          |
| <b>Total responses</b>                                 | <b>553</b> | <b>100.0%</b> |               |
| <b>Total people</b>                                    | <b>184</b> |               | <b>300.5%</b> |

These findings are supported by qualitative research that identified *supportive leadership, managing personnel scheduling, and competitive compensation* as successfully reducing employee turnover.<sup>9</sup> Notably, many of these retention strategies mirror the best practices related to employee attraction identified in Section 1. For

<sup>7</sup> Deloitte Canada, (2019) *University of Waterloo Economic Impact Assessment*.

<sup>8</sup> Respondents could indicate multiple responses which is why column 4 adds up to over 100%.

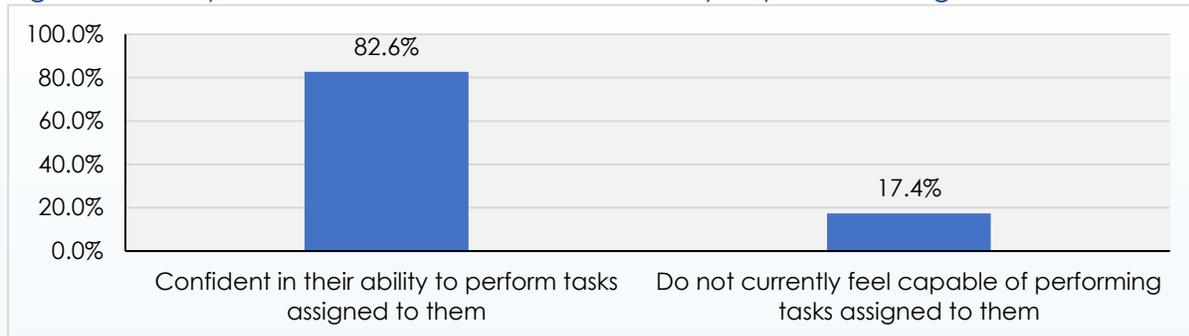
<sup>9</sup> Beato, A. (2017) *Effective Strategies Employed by Retail Store Leaders to Reduce Employee Turnover*. Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies.

employers who successful retain their workforce, investing in their employees appears to be inherently beneficial.

## Skills Development

In our survey of EO clients, 82.6% of respondents felt they were able to perform all the tasks at their job or in previous jobs they have held (see Figure 2-2).

Figure 2-2. Respondents' confidence in their ability to perform assigned tasks



At the same time, 58.7% of respondents were still interested in training at least one skill. The top five skills respondents were interested in training were:

- Working under pressure (46.2% of respondents selected this response);
- Cash registers (38.5%);
- Organization (38.5%);
- Customer service (34.6%), and
- Working independently (30.8%)

These data suggest that though employees are confident in their abilities to perform their current tasks, they see benefits to additional training. Further survey data show that employees are significantly more interested in training when they foresee that training leading to a promotion. In particular, 72.7% of respondents who were either *employed with available workplace promotions* or *unemployed* were interested in training opportunities. In contrast, only 45.8% of respondents who were *employed but did not believe there were promotions available* were interested in training (see Figure 2-3).

Figure 2-3. Interest in training opportunities



## Section 3: Health and Safety Best Practices

As the pandemic begins to recede consumers will return to physical stores with new expectations regarding their experience. Employees are likely to be tasked with a variety of new responsibilities and businesses will need to navigate these challenges and prepare for the new realities they will face. Best practices regarding health and safety must emphasize a safe environment for both customers and employees, a reality that has been emphasized by the Retail Council of Canada.

### Health and Safety Best Practices for Employees

- Recognize that employees are facing greater responsibilities during COVID-19.
  - Consultations with local businesses have indicated that employees are being given more responsibility than ever before. Acknowledging this burden and being aware that employees are impacted in different ways will help ease the additional stressors of changing workplace dynamics.
- Be aware of employee stress levels (see Section 4)
- Recognize workplace risks and provide PPE for employees when possible.
  - Ensuring that employees feel safe while working is critical given workforce concerns outlined in Section 1. Identifying situations that place employees at risk and working to reduce those dangers will be paramount.
- Ensure guidelines are clearly posted and employees are trained on how to implement new standards.
  - As the pandemic ebbs and flows, so too do the rules and guidelines surrounding workplace safety. Thus, ensuring current rules/responsibilities are clear alongside any training will ensure employees are prepared.
  - [Niagara Region Public Health](#) provides sector specific COVID-19 guidelines.

### Health and Safety Best Practices for Customers

Communicating clearly to consumers that you value their safety and can ensure a relatively safe shopping experience will be critical to enhance consumer confidence. Strategies suggested by the Retail Council of Canada, Ontario's Workplace Safety & Prevention Services, the FDA, and local Economic Developers include the following:

- When possible, screen customers for health issues.
- Encourage physical distancing in-store.
- Communicate current realities and expectations regarding behaviour to customers with transparency and authenticity.
- Where possible, integrate touchless technology to decrease transmission.
- Implement comprehensive cleaning procedures to alleviate customer concerns.

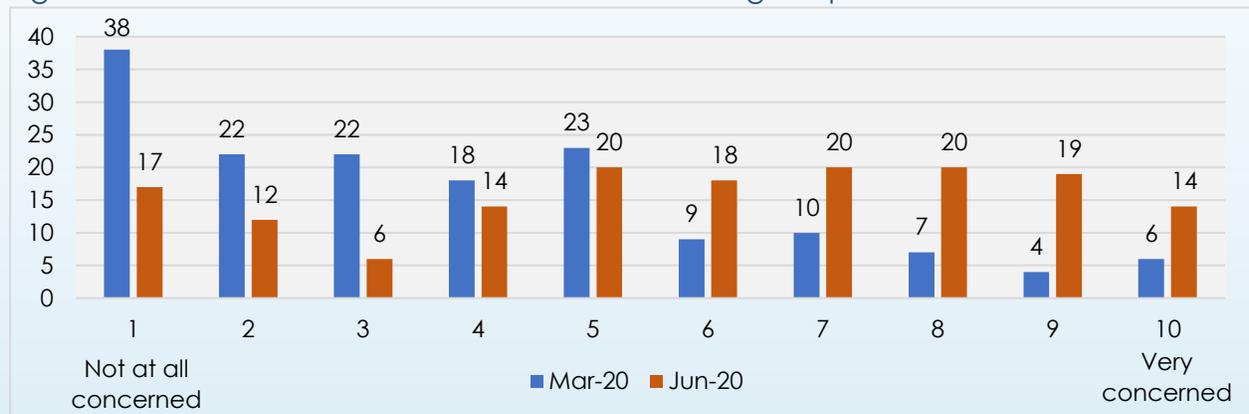
## Section 4: Mental Health Support Best Practices

Within the past decade a notable trend within Canada has been an increased awareness of the challenges surrounding mental health and a general de-stigmatization of mental health struggles. At the same time, there are still significant steps that need to be taken to fully embrace supporting employees' mental health.

### Why Supporting Mental Health Matters

Nation-wide, Morneau Shepell indicated that as of December 2020, mental health indices were the lowest they had been throughout the pandemic, and are significantly lower than wellbeing benchmarks taken prior to COVID-19. Locally, a survey of 169 members of Niagara's labour force shows that concern regarding an individual's mental health increased substantially during the pandemic. Specifically, when asked to rate their level of concern regarding their overall mental health, the average response was 3.82 out of 10 (with a higher number correlating to greater concern). In June 2020, however, the average response rose to 5.84 (see Figure 4-1).

Figure 4-1. Mental health concerns before and during the pandemic



Source: Niagara Workforce Planning Board Labour Market Insights Survey

Of course, an employee's mental health is inherently important from a human perspective. However, studies have also identified that employees who are "in good mental health" are significantly more productive than those who are "in poor mental health". In a 2017 study, men in poor mental health were estimated to be 6.17 times less productive than those in good mental health, while the productivity difference for women was 6.91 times less.<sup>10</sup> The following page identifies some best practices on supporting employee mental health, and encouraging a supportive work environment.

<sup>10</sup> Bubonya, M., Cobb-Clark, D. A., & Wooden, M.. (2017) *Mental Health and Productivity at Work: Does What you Do Matter?* Labour Economics 46. DOI: 10.1016/j.labeco.2017.05.001.

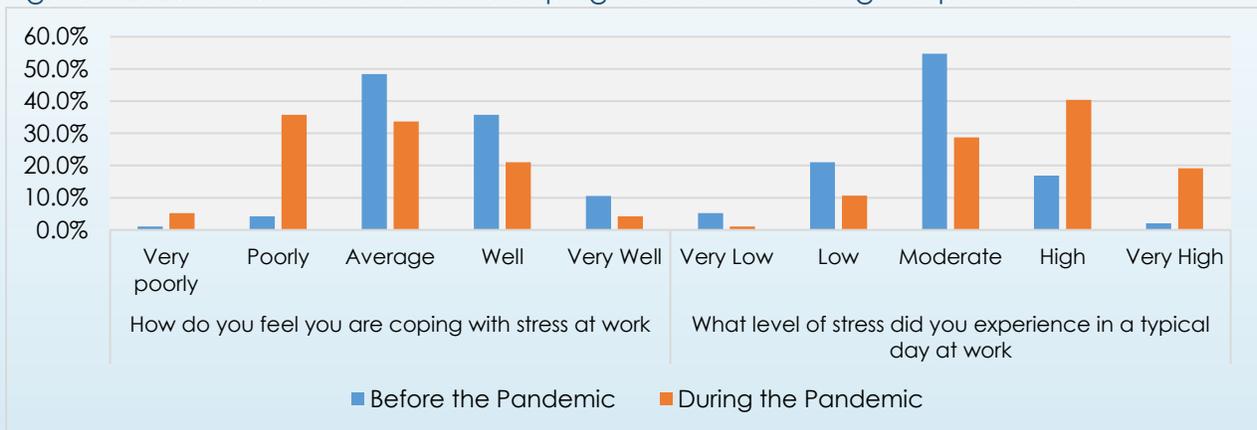
### Encourage growth and celebrate achievements in the workplace

- As noted in previous sections, employees who see opportunities for growth are significantly more interested in training opportunities.
- Previous work has also identified a clear relationship between opportunities for learning and development and employee well-being.
- Acknowledging and valuing an employee's contributions and identifying how it helps the business be successful encourages employees to view themselves as a significant part of the organization, and is a factor that employees indicate as being important to staying with an employer.

### Encourage open dialogue regarding employee health

- Our 2020 workforce-focused survey showed that approximately 54.4% of respondents were comfortable discussion mental health issues/concerns with their supervisor or management during the pandemic
- At the same time, we see that the percentage of respondents that reported either **high** or **very high** levels of stress in a typical day at work increased from 18.9% before the pandemic, to 59.6% during the pandemic. The number of respondents coping with stress **well** or **very well** decreased from 46.3% of respondents before the pandemic to 25.3% during the pandemic.

Figure 4-2. Levels of work stress and coping before and during the pandemic



- Broader research also indicates that not all employees will show they are struggling. In a Harvard Business Review study<sup>11</sup>, nearly 2 in 5 employees (globally) responded that no one at their company had asked about their health status.
- Encouraging wellness checks, open-door policies, or providing access to mental health supports (e.g., EAPs, flexible schedules to minimize other stressors) are ways to support employee well-being.

<sup>11</sup> Greenwood, K. & Krol, N. (2020) 8 Ways managers can support Employees' Mental Health. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/08/8-ways-managers-can-support-employees-mental-health>

## Section 5: Online Job Post Best Practices

As noted in our section on employee attraction, common barriers to employment include a lower-than-expected rate of pay or hours offered per week, and an inflexible work schedule. As such, online postings should clearly identify each of these aspects. Specifically, respondents to our survey would likely benefit from job postings clearly displaying:

- The rate of pay offered (or a viable range) for the position;
- The typical hours worked for the position (or the average range), and
- Expectations regarding work schedule (i.e., is the position 9 AM to 5 PM, five days per week, or varied; are there expectations for weekend or evening work; and how long prior to the new shift schedule is the notice published?)

Other examples of beneficial information an online job posting can include:

- Other methods to submit an application (such as in-person or over the phone)
  - When asked what technological barriers exist to applying for jobs, 39.4% of EO clients who responded to our survey noted that, while they feel comfortable using a computer, they are not comfortable filling in job applications online. Moreover, over one-in-five (21.2%) respondents did not have reliable access to a computer or internet.
  - Providing more than one method of applying allows individuals with barriers a way to still apply. See [this resource](#) from the Retail Council of Canada for further discussion on lowering accessibility barriers.
- Clear expectations regarding an employee's role within the organization.
  - As noted in previous sections, employees who understand their role clearly are less stressed and more productive.

During consultations employers have frequently noted that they are frustrated by the quantity of ineligible applicants that online posts receive. To reduce the number of applicants who mistakenly apply to jobs that they are unqualified for, consider:

- Using a descriptive title that states unambiguously what the job is.<sup>12</sup>
- Clearly outlining the education or certifications needed to qualify for the position.
- Clearly outlining any previous experience required to be considered.

The following page has two examples of online job posts from 2021 to highlight the difference between a descriptive job ad and a job post that provides minimal information to potential applicants.

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<sup>12</sup> For specific suggestions related to retail job titles, see here: <https://fitsmallbusiness.com/retail-job-titles/>



## Job Post Example 1

- No salary noted or a typical number of hours, except “mostly nights and weekends – part time”.
- No mention of specific experience needed or summary of day-to-day reality on the job.

## Pizza Maker

×

Part-time

Apply Now



### Urgently hiring

Looking for a part time pizza maker.

Mostly weeknights and weekends.

Skills and duties include but not limited to:

- amazing customer service etiquette (a MUST)
- PROMPTNESS
- ability to take orders and follow directions
- honesty and integrity
- making pizza, pasta, wings and subs
- cleaning and minor prep duties such as chopping veggies and meats

## Job Post Example 2

- Salary, benefits, and typical hours worked clearly identified.
- Job summary explains what a typical day may look like
- COVID-19 precautions are clearly noted

Job Type: Full-time

Salary: \$14.25 per hour

Additional pay:

- Commission pay

Benefits:

- Dental care
- Employee assistance program
- Extended health care
- Store discount
- Vision care

Schedule:

- Holidays
- Monday to Friday
- Weekends

Experience:

- retail sales: 1 year (Preferred)
- sales: 1 year (Preferred)
- customer service: 1 year (Preferred)

Work remotely:

- No

COVID-19 precaution(s):

- Personal protective equipment provided or required
- Social distancing guidelines in place
- Sanitizing, disinfecting, or cleaning procedures in place

### WHAT YOUR DAY LOOKS LIKE:

You arrive fifteen minutes before your shift to get yourself ready for the day, check the whiteboard to see how you and your team did yesterday and catch up on the latest promotions and sales from your manager. You scroll through Instagram to feel inspired before shifting into sales mode and heading to the floor. If things are quiet, you grab some product to put away, clean the glass on the showcases and play around with the demo model [REDACTED] that just came out.

You love this stuff and it shows! Your first customer of the day is looking for a [REDACTED] You warmly welcome them into the store and begin asking some insightful questions to understand where they're at in their purchasing journey and what their research has taught them already. You demonstrate some awesome accessories and sign them up for a [REDACTED] You know that the [REDACTED] saves lives so you tell them all about it. You offer to stay in touch by keeping them informed with the latest [REDACTED]



## Appendix A: Available support programs for employers

- [Ontario Small Business Support Grant](#)
  - Support for eligible businesses that are closed or significantly restricted due to the mandatory shutdown that started on December 26, 2020. Funding for \$10,000-\$20,000 to cover decreased revenue due to the shutdown.
- [Ontario's Main Street Relief Grant: PPE support](#)
  - Eligible for employers with 2-9 employees in retail, accommodation and food services, repair and maintenance, personal and laundry services, or gyms and yoga studios. A one-time grant of up to \$1,000 for costs of PPE.
- [Property tax and energy cost rebates](#)
  - Businesses that shut down or restricted services due to the mandatory shut down can apply for rebates on fixed costs.
- [COVID-19 Energy Assistance Program – Small Business \(CEAP-SB\)](#)
  - For eligible businesses, there is one-time funding of up to \$1,500 available to assist with energy bills
- [Small Business Recovery Resources](#)
  - Resources from taking your business digital, to free financial advice on coping with COVID-19
- [Road to Retail Recovery Playbook](#)
  - Playbook created by the Retail Council of Canada to support pandemic recovery
- [Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy](#)
  - Federal support for employee wage subsidies
- [Canada Emergency Business Account \(CEBA\)](#)
  - Interest-free loans for small businesses and non-profits for up to \$60,000
- [Canadian Emergency Rent Subsidy](#)
  - Businesses with lower revenue due to COVID-19 may qualify for rent subsidies
- [Support for entrepreneurs](#)
- [Relief for Indigenous businesses](#)
  - Support for qualifying Indigenous SMEs; interest-free loans provided through Aboriginal Financial Institutions and given by the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association, and the Métis Capital Corporations working in partnership with Indigenous Services Canada
- [Enhanced Work-Sharing Program](#)
  - Program to help employers keep their staff without having to hire and train new staff
  - Program to help employees keep jobs and skills obtained in the workplace
- [Regional Relief and Recovery Fund \(FedDev\)](#)
  - Liquidity support for businesses impacted by COVID-19 that either can not access other relief programs, or need additional support.
- [Canada Enterprise Emergency Funding Corporation](#)
  - Funding for large businesses impacted by COVID-19
- [Employment and Social Development Canada](#)
  - Helping Ontarians develop the skills they need to find good jobs. Ontario received \$614 million to help those that lost employment re-enter the workforce in hard-hit sectors. This includes skills training, on-the-job training, employer-sponsored training, financial assistance and benefits, employment counselling and services, and job opportunities



## Appendix B: List of Resources

1. Beato, A. (2017) *Effective Strategies Employed by Retail Store Leaders to Reduce Employee Turnover*. Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies.
2. Bubonya, M., Cobb-Clark, D. A., & Wooden, M.. (2017) *Mental Health and Productivity at Work: Does What you Do Matter?* Labour Economics 46. DOI: 10.1016/j.labeco.2017.05.001.
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18. Retail Council of Canada (2020). *Standard Operating Procedure (SOP): COVID-19 Routine Cleaning and Disinfecting with Checklist Recommendations for Retailers.*
19. Retail Council of Canada (2020). *Novel Coronavirus: RCC Retail Recovery Checklist Templates.*
20. Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0055-01 Job tenure by industry, annual.
21. Voorde, K. & Beijer, S. (2014) *The role of employee HR attributions in the relationship between high-performance work systems and employee outcomes.* DOI: 10.1111/1748-8583.12062
22. Williams, J., Lambert, S., & Kesavan, S. (2015) *Stable Scheduling Increases Productivity and Sales: the stable scheduling study.*