

## **Cinderella Revisited: A Historical Perspective to Graduate Work in Retailing**

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**Abstract:** The retail industry has been employing more graduates in recent years but unfortunately, it has been met with limited success. The purpose of this paper is to provide a historical perspective to the employment of graduates in the retail industry by firstly examining the nature of retail work and how it has changed over the last century. Subsequently, the paper examines the debate on the role of education and training in the retail industry. Drawing on these examinations, the paper concludes that retailers need to realign their graduate employment policies to match what they are able to offer to what graduates need.

**Keywords:** recruitment; graduate employment; retail work; historical analysis; education and training

**JEL Classification:** M12

### **1 Introduction**

The retail industry has been employing more graduates. In part, this is because retailers believe that with increasing competition, they will need to recruit better-qualified employees who can demonstrate a higher level of competency and hence, give themselves a competitive edge over their rivals. However, it has not been easy recruiting and retaining graduates in the retail industry. As graduates spend a longer time in educational institutions, they have higher expectations of their jobs. There is resistance in taking up retail jobs where lower pay, longer hours and subservient roles are the norm. It is no surprise then that such graduate employment initiatives have met with limited success so far.

This paper aims to provide a historical perspective to graduate employment in the retail industry as this may allow for new theorising (Hollander, 1986; Rassuli & Hollander, 1987). The paper begins with a historical review of work in the retail industry followed by an examination on the role of education and training in the retail industry. The last section discusses the implications of the review and suggests that retailers need to realign their graduate employment strategies in matching what graduates want to what retailers can offer.

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## 2. Cinderella of Occupations

Working in the retail industry had been described as the Cinderella of occupations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At one end, there is toil, tedium and poverty and at the other, there is glamour, fulfillment and financial security (Benson, 1986).

Retail work is hard work and involved irregular hours. It does not pay as well as clerical work but for a woman in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century without the necessary educational qualification for a clerical job, retail work was considered an attractive and a readily-available means to a white-collar job. More importantly, when compared to workers in the manufacturing industry, retail employees enjoyed shorter working hours, earned more money and were less likely to be laid off. Thirty-one of the forty-six studies conducted in the period from 1880 to 1940 in various states of the United States showed that women in stores earned more than women in manufacturing or all women workers. In addition, two separate studies conducted in New York and Ohio showed that the earnings of women working in stores increased more rapidly than the earnings of women working in other industries during this period (Benson, 1986).

Workers in the retail industry also often enjoyed discount on purchases, medical benefits and paid vacation. Two separate surveys conducted in 1918 and 1936 found that stores were more likely to provide some type of health care. Studies during this period also showed that a higher proportion of store workers had paid time off as compared to factory workers. For example, employees working for J.L. Hudson and R.H., Macy were given four weeks of paid vacation leave after 10 and 25 years of service respectively (Benson, 1986).

The financial security and other benefits made retail jobs attractive to women workers especially for those who do not have the necessary qualifications for a clerical job. However, besides the hard work and irregular hours, there were other downsides to working in the retail industry.

Retail work required employees to be in contact with the public and the social norms of the time considered such work disrespectful. In the United Kingdom in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, female retail workers were often perceived to be immoral and possibly working as prostitutes. Many of the retail workers were subjected to sexual harassment both by other employees and customers. When female sales assistants were hired by Harrod in the United Kingdom in 1888, they noted how “several of the junior members of the staff peered round showcases to see the beauty chorus arrive” (Rappaport, 2000).

It did not help that the rags-to-riches story of working class girls was popular in theatrical productions of the time. Like Cinderella, such productions showed how the working class girl used commodities to create a glamorous persona to capture the attention of gentlemen and move up the social ladder by marrying them. In

effect, such productions continued to fuel the impression that retail workers were of loose morals and worked as retail assistants for the sole purpose to get hitched (Benson, 1986; Rappaport, 2000).

Another negative aspect of retail work required employees to take on subservient roles in their contact with customers. This further contributes to the lowly status for employees working in the retail industry and expanded the opportunities for retail workers to be exploited. This was also reflected in theatrical plays and books of the period. The female shop assistant was often cast as a victim of upper-class greed and vanity, with male customers or the storeowner typically sexually harassing the shop girls. For example, "The Working Life of Shop Assistants" published in the United Kingdom in 1910, noted how female shoppers in the upper social classes derived their pleasure from retail workers' labour (Benson, 1986; Rappaport, 2000).

The situation was not different in Asia. In Hong Kong, Sincere, a departmental store retailer, tried to emulate the west by introducing women to replace men as sales assistants in their stores in 1900. Traditionally, Chinese women worked only in small family-run shops. Fashionably dressed salesgirls in departmental stores were such a novelty that they led to gawking crowds and disrupted business. After a few months, Sincere was forced to lay off the salesgirls because it was put into disrepute (Chan, 1998). This led Wing On, another retailer in Hong Kong, to decide against employing female sales assistants in 1907 when it opened its store (Yen, 1998). It was not until the late 1930s that women sales clerks finally became an accepted and common feature in China's department store business. In neighboring Japan, shop girls successfully replaced men in the retail trade only slightly earlier during the 1920s (Chan, 1998).

By the mid-century, there seems to be little change in the social status of retail workers. For example, in Priestley's (1947) play "An Inspector Calls" which was popular in Europe at the time, the lowly position of retail assistants of the period was demonstrated through Eva Smith. The protagonist was bullied out of employment as a sales assistant by the daughter of the rich Birling family and eventually forced to commit suicide. Eva was perceived to be of loose moral character by the older members of the Birling family but interestingly, found some acceptance among its younger members. In the United States, a collection of experiences of workers published in 1972 concurs that the improvement in the social status of retail workers remains marginal.

"There's some, they say 'a checker - ugh!'...They belittle me sometimes. They use a little profanity sometimes." - Babe Secoli, Supermarket Checker (Terkel, 1972).

"You have to be terribly subservient to people: 'Ma'am can I take your bag?' 'Can I do this?'" - Brett Hauser, Supermarket Box Boy (Terkel, 1972).

The climb to respectability for a retail job had been slow. By the turn of the century, while working in the retail industry was no longer disrespectable, it was still of low status. In Martin's (2000) film "Shopgirl", the protagonist Mirabelle continues with the depiction of the lowly sales assistant working behind a counter in Nieman Marcus, a departmental store in the United States. While her work was regarded as an acceptable form of employment, she was still a victim to a rich man's fantasies in the guise of Ray Porter who is twice her age. It is a modern Cinderella tale, albeit an older Prince Charming, of a lowly sales assistant waiting to be rescued.

More recently, biographical accounts of work in the retail industry in the United States reaffirms that there had not been much of an elevation of status among retail employees. Retail workers are still expected to be subservient to customers. While sexual harassment is only a remote possibility today, other forms of harassment by customers are still common (Feuti, 2007; Hall, 2010).

The above discussion has shown that there is little positive change in the status of retail work over the last century. While the retail industry was able to attract employees with its relatively higher salaries and other benefits in the past, this differential has been eroded with time. For example, shop assistants in Singapore are earning an average of S\$1,751 per month in 2010. This is lower than the average monthly wages of plant and machine operators and clerical support officers of \$2,094 and \$2,152 respectively (Singapore, 2011).

As such, in today's context, working in the retail industry is no longer appealing and a retail job is often seen as an occupation of last resort (Akehurst & Alexander, 1995; A. Broadbridge, 2003; A. M. Broadbridge, Maxwell, & Ogden, 2009; Swinyard, Langrehr, & Smith, 1991). Retail jobs offer the prospect of access to work, but rarely the opportunity to develop sustainable career paths (Lindsay, 2005).

The above discussion described how retail work has evolved and become less attractive over time. In the next section, the review will focus on how the retail industry views the importance of education and training of its employees over time and the implications this has on the employment of graduates in the retail industry.

### **3. Employing Graduates in the Retail Industry**

The importance of education in retail work had remained contentious over the years. Historically, jobs in retailing were viewed as simple and basic. There was little need for formal training since it was work experience that developed skills and retailer-specific knowledge (Beckley, 1949; Hudson, 1978; Strawbridge, 1978). Coupled with the fact that many retail establishments in the past were family businesses, and that knowledge and skills were learnt through hard work

and experience, retailers were more likely to see practical experience as more important than educational qualifications (Goldstucker, 1963). Hence, retailers opted to recruit employees with little qualifications and sought to provide the necessary training through internships and work experience.

This view has not changed much over the years. Most retailers still do not place emphasis on formal educational qualifications when recruiting their frontline employees as retail workers are only expected to do simple routine jobs. Subsequently, many retailers tend to view training to be of limited benefits (Byrom, Harris, & Parker, 2000). Training, when provided by retailers, is limited to the usual induction programmes for new recruits and programmes designed to ensure employees work to agreed standards of performance. Such training is not extensive and do not allow workers to develop a broad range of skills that will enable their progress in their careers. Retailers that saw training as a long-term investment are the exception rather than the norm (Barcala, Pérez, & Gutiérrez, 1999; Lindsay, 2005; Penn, 1995; Robinson, 1990). This is because in the service industry, personal qualities are valued above that of professional skills (Illeris, 2002).

For some retailers, economic considerations favour the status quo in recruiting employees with low qualifications and providing little training. Retailers need to employ a large number of frontline employees. Adopting a Taylorist approach and simplifying tasks keeps the requirements for the job low and allows for the employment of workers with minimum qualifications at a low wage level. More importantly, this arrangement also allows for the employment of part-time workers which further reduces the labour cost for retailers (Levy & Weitz, 2011).

However, the choice of such a strategy is not open to all retailers. The reduction of costs had to be balanced against the value of the activity's contribution to the store's individuality (Hollander, 1964). For retailers who are seeking to differentiate themselves from the competition through better service, they have to employ better qualified retail workers and provide training to enhance the customer's shopping experience (Bent & Freathy, 1997; Gutek, 1995; Illeris, 2002; Langeard, Bateson, Lovelock, & Eiglier, 1981; Lashley & Taylor, 1998).

Research conducted at Sears established that the employment of better employees has an impact on the profitability of the company. The research found that a 5% improvement in employee attitudes could lead to 1.3% improvement in customer impression and an increase in 0.5% of revenues (Martinez & Madigan, 2001). This was not limited to departmental stores like Sears. Other sectors including the supermarket sector recognize that better-trained retail workers will offer significant long-term differentiation (Seth & Randall, 1999).

This has led to some retailers to start recruiting graduates into frontline positions that are traditionally filled by non-graduates. In the United Kingdom, for example,

graduate share of employment in the retail industry had grown from 3.3% in 1988 to 6.5% in 1998 in Britain (Mason, 2002). Retailers believed that graduates possess a higher level of interpersonal skills, greater commercial awareness and an ability to learn the ropes faster (Gush, 1996; Mason, 2002). This will give retailers the competitive advantage that they need to differentiate themselves from the competition.

Retailers are aware of the advantages of a highly qualified workforce and have been warmly receptive of retail management programmes offered by universities. Some retailers have gone further and are actively working with universities to develop retail education and management programmes that are more relevant to the needs of the industry including the development of internship programmes (Hurst & Good, 2010; Jones & Vignali, 1994).

However, studies have shown that graduates have difficulties in assimilating to work in the retail industry. Retail workers with higher levels of education were more likely to be dissatisfied in their jobs (Bent & Freathy, 1997; Whysall, Foster, & Harris, 2009). With a higher number of years spent in educational institutions, graduates have higher expectations of their jobs when compared to non-graduates. These include the expectations of having the opportunity to develop their skills and building relationships with other people (A. M. Broadbridge, et al., 2009).

Graduates enjoy challenging work. They are interested in developing their skills and being recognized for their ability (Arnold & Davey, 1999; A. M. Broadbridge, Maxwell, & Ogden, 2007; A. M. Broadbridge, et al., 2009; Sturges & Guest, 2001). Unfortunately, in the retail industry, most graduate employees find themselves in jobs which could easily be, and often are, filled by people with much less formal education (Mason, 2002). As these jobs underutilize their skills and knowledge, there is little opportunity for graduates to develop their skills and be recognized for their ability.

In the short term, the retail industry does provide some challenges to graduate employees. Due to pressures to meet sales targets and train employees quickly, graduate employees are often put on accelerated training programs. While the job responsibilities of many graduates are no different from that of general sales assistants, some are given positions of significant challenge and responsibility. Even then, many of these jobs do not require the skills and knowledge of an employee with degree-level education. After a period of time, the graduate employee will soon realise the lack of intellectual skills required of the job and feels over-qualified by their education. It is not surprising then that turnover among graduate employees in the retail industry remain high (A. M. Broadbridge, et al., 2007; Gush, 1996; Mason, 2002).

The high turnover rate among graduate employees further perpetuates the problem. Retailers do not expect graduates to stay with the company for long and hence do

not have any motivation to modify the job scope to suit the needs of the graduate employee. When graduate employees succeed in obtaining employment in the retail industry which makes better use of their skills, this is more likely to occur through their promotion out of low-level jobs (Mason, 2002).

Graduates also value good relationships with colleagues as such relationships enable them to enjoy their work and feel connected to the organization. In addition, good relationships with other employees can be sources of emotional support for the graduate employee, especially when they are employed in their first job (Arnold & Davey, 1999; A. M. Broadbridge, et al., 2007; Sturges & Guest, 2001).

Unfortunately, such positive relationships with colleagues in the retail industry will be difficult for graduate employees to establish. Despite the recent employment of graduates in the retail industry, the majority of employees in the industry are still non-graduates. As the two groups have different expectations, behaviors and interests, it is difficult for members of the different groups to establish strong relationships with each other. In addition, many non-graduate employees view graduate employees as a threat to their livelihood. They are concerned that employers will favour graduates in terms of promotion or they may be disadvantaged in any decision that the company may make (Goldstucker, 1963; Leng, 2008).

Positive working relationships with colleagues in the retail industry is important because of the long working hours which necessitates constant interaction and a high level of teamwork and co-operation among employees. Frontline service workers often turn to other employees in a similar position for support, friendship, respect and admiration because no one else can understand the sufferings that they go through (Höpfl, 2002). In part, because there is a perceived sense of a common enemy, the customer in this case, a sense of camaraderie can develop among retail employees.

“We serve them but we don't like them (customers)... there was a camaraderie of sorts (among employees).” - Brett Hauser, Supermarket Box Boy (Terkel, 1972).

Indeed, the retail employee can often select their response to customers and in certain cases, exact revenge when the opportunity arise (Benson, 1986; Terkel, 1972). Even till today, and even in upmarket departmental stores, the story of the retail employee making the consumption process difficult for the consumer is not uncommon (Feuti, 2007; Hall, 2010). For example, shoppers were slighted by salespeople in Barneys during its heyday as the purveyor of fashion when the opportunity presented itself (Levine, 1999).

Good relationships with colleagues in the retail industry can be a source of motivation and job satisfaction (Bent & Freathy, 1997; Huddleston & Good, 1999). Given the centrality of positive working relationships with colleagues in the retail industry, failure among graduate employees to develop positive relationships with

other employees can adversely affect their success and eventually their continued employment in the retail industry.

The above discussion traced the arguments for the need of educated employees in the retail industry. While some retailers do not see the need for highly educated employees or are driven by economic considerations to employ workers with little qualifications, others have embarked on graduate employment programmes only to be met with limited success. Graduates have different expectations from non-graduates. They prefer jobs that provide them with personal development opportunities and an environment that allows them to form good relationships with their colleagues. Retailers have so far been limited in their success in meeting these different expectations.

The next section considers how a historical review of retail work and the role of education and training in the retail industry offer an alternative perspective to the issue of graduate employment in the retail industry.

#### **4. Fitting The Glass Shoe**

The discussion so far followed the evolution of retail work over the last century and the debate surrounding the importance of education and training in the retail industry. Retail work is not perceived to be of high social status although conditions of employment are not nearly as bad as the popular image of the poor, down-trodden salesgirl would suggest. A retail employment position is not considered as an attractive employment opportunity but as an occupation of last resort. It is no wonder then that the retail industry faces difficulty in recruiting and retaining graduates. After all, employees who feel stigmatized because of the low social status of their work will not only leave the industry, but will also not recommend a job in the same industry to a friend or family member (Wildes, 2005).

Goldstucker (1963) suggested that since there is little that can be done to alter the status of a retailing career, it may be pointless to beleaguer the issue. History had shown that the employment of a new group of employees in the retail industry is often fraught with difficulties as society is unable to accept such new working groups readily. However, with time, it is possible that the society will grow to accept these groups in a limited manner. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, female sales assistants were not accepted in their new roles in the retail industry. Today, while a retail job is still of low status, female sales assistants are no longer perceived as women of loose morals or prostitutes.

Graduates in the retail industry may be facing the same circumstance as female sales assistants in the past. While retail jobs are not appealing to graduates at the moment, with time, graduate employment in the retail industry may be something



that will be accepted to a larger extent. Already, many retailers are actively recruiting graduates. Interestingly, cultural conservatism in Asian countries had played a part in prolonging the acceptance of the employment of female sales assistants in Asian countries compared to the West. Whether that same conservatism will play a part in prolonging the acceptance of the employment of graduate employment in Asian countries remains to be seen.

Due to the different human resource strategies employed by retailers and the type of merchandise sold, it might be possible to see certain sub-sectors of the retail industry being more open and accepting of graduate employees (Dawson, Findlay, & Sparks, 1986). For example, many book retailers have established graduate employment programmes. Graduates are more open to work for book retailers because they believed that their qualifications can be useful in their work, they have an interest in books and that it is more respectable than the other sub-sectors of the retail industry due to the perceived higher intellectual capabilities of book sellers (Leng, 2008). Indeed, such sub-sectors can be agents for change in the graduate employment trend in the retail industry.

Across time, it can also be established that the positive aspects of retail work have diminished. Retail jobs were attractive to women early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to its relative merits over a job in the manufacturing industry and as a readily-available alternative to a white-collar job. However, workers in the retail industry are not paid as well compared to the other industries today. More importantly, as graduates in today's world are trained and have many opportunities open to them, many of which offer better terms of employment than the retail industry, the attraction of a retail job is not obvious to the graduate employee.

Fortunately, an attractive job is not only about pay levels. It is also about whether the job is interesting and contributes to employees' professional development. While retailers had some success in giving graduates challenging work with accelerated training programmes, they have not considered how quickly graduates learn and challenges dissipate. When that happens, graduate employees become bored and dissatisfied with their work.

Some retailers have attempted to resolve the issue by moving graduates across different functions and geographical locations. While this achieves the aim of continuously challenging graduates with new job responsibilities and helping them to assimilate into the company by knowing more people, this is only a short term solution. The long term solution lies in reviewing the need for graduates in the organization in the first instance and devising jobs that suit the needs of graduates.

The earlier discussion on the role of education in the retail industry and how retailers view work in the industry shed light on the resistance by retailers to systematically review the need for graduates in the industry. Retail work had for a long time been considered simple and required little formal qualifications. Hence,

without realizing the need and usefulness of better-educated employees, many retailers, especially the smaller ones, do not see the need for change (Barcala, et al., 1999; Byrom, et al., 2000). Coupled with economic considerations, it is not surprising that many retailers have decided to remain with the status quo.

For larger companies, even when they have decided to adopt a graduate employment strategy, there may still be resistance to graduate employment. Implementation of graduate employment programmes may be half-hearted when some quarters subscribe to the view that retail work is simple and that graduates are unable to make a difference to the company. Even when graduates are employed, they may not be able to gain acceptance from other non-graduate employees. Hence, the lack of support may force graduates to leave the company earlier than intended.

For retailers, this suggests that a successful graduate employment strategy does not stop at the management level. While a review of policies and guidelines as suggested by other researchers are important in ensuring the success of a graduate employment programme, retailers should also work on the informal support provided by employees, especially the non-graduate employees. Addressing the concerns of the non-graduate employees and building relationships between graduates and non-graduates employees will be critical aspects of any graduate employment programme.

Clearly, retailers need to re-visit what they require from employees. If retailers believe that formal education is not necessary for a successful retail career, then they should not continue to source for employees from colleges and universities. More importantly, if graduates are needed to fill in positions, retailers should not kid themselves that graduates are willing to accept wages that do not reflect their higher qualifications or jobs that do not require their level of knowledge of skills (Goldstucker, 1963).

The above discussion has focused on the demand perspective of graduate employment in the retail industry. Due to higher literacy levels in developed countries, the growing number of graduates gives a supply perspective to the issue as well. For example, the 1990s in the United Kingdom saw an increasing substitution of graduates for non-graduates in a range of occupational areas. While some of the substitution were driven by rising employer demand for skills and knowledge, others were due to the availability of an increasing number of graduates applying for previously non-graduate jobs (Mason, 2002).

This may have led to two different forms of service employment. In mainstream recruitment, graduates are employed into the company through formal training schemes into positions requiring graduate skills and knowledge in functions such as marketing and human resource management. Such graduates are generally within the radar of head office. This number is however, generally small. Non-

mainstream recruitment involves the employment of graduates into entry-level positions in sales, clerical and administrative areas alongside non-graduates entering the same kinds of jobs. These are generally supply-driven and head office has little or no data on these employees. Hence, mainstream employees usually enjoy substantial benefits in terms of initial salary, structured training and development programmes and promotion opportunities relative to non-mainstream graduates whose paper qualifications give them no advantage at all (Mason, 2002).

This provides a possible explanation to the graduate employment problem. Retailers perhaps do require graduates to work in head office positions but are either confused or succumbed to competitive pressures that they have expanded graduate employment to other functional areas without a corresponding change in their employment policies. Such a situation though plausible remains to be researched further.

If working in the retail industry was considered the Cinderella of occupations in the past, do graduates working in the retail industry today consider themselves as Cinderellas? Clearly, the potential glamour of the retail trade is lost to the modern graduate. The graduate of today is offered more glamorous opportunities in other industries compared to hard work, long hours and low pay in the retail industry. Retailers, like fairy god-mothers, must provide the necessary glamour, glass shoes, evening gowns and all. Failing that, retailers may find that the strategy of employing graduates to be more competitive will turn out to be just another fairy-tale.

## **5. The Modern (Graduate) Cinderella: Myth or Reality?**

Savitt (1989) had noted that a review of history can enhance an understanding of how environmental forces had shaped decisions. The objective of this paper was to frame the issue of graduate employment in the retail industry in its historical context and in so doing, understand how environmental factors have shaped the decisions of both employers and employees. This perspective had revealed that retail work had historically not been the most attractive career both in terms of conditions of employment and social prestige. In addition, the importance of education in retail work has remained debatable. With this historical baggage, it is unlikely that graduates will be working in the retail industry in large numbers in the near future until retailers have addressed this.

Still, while a career in retailing is not attractive among graduates, this is mediated by personal interest, exposure to retail-related subjects and academic performance in retail-related subjects (Commins & Preston, 1997; Swinyard, et al., 1991). Considering that retail employment among students is common, there then exists

an opportunity for retailers to correct the perception and engage these employees for the longer term (A. M. Broadbridge, et al., 2007).

This paper concurs with Freathy (1997) that employment structures do not operate in isolation from the wider structural transformations operating in the retail sector. The historical review of work in the retail industry and the perception of the role of education in retail work demonstrate that understanding the past is central in contextualizing change.

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