



Question Bank for Workforce Service Providers: A Tool for Working with Retailers

Amy Blair, Jenny Weissbourd & Amanda Newman • March 2019

Workforce service organizations provide value to businesses by referring qualified job applicants, providing training and coaching to workers, and consulting about workplace culture and practices that affect worker stability and mobility. These services, among others, help firms attract and retain diverse talent to stay competitive. Ultimately, this also supports workforce providers' **primary mission: to improve economic outcomes for workers.**¹

For more than two decades, the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program has conducted research and evaluation on sector-based workforce programs. Over the years, we have seen that providers who serve workers most effectively have wide-ranging and ongoing conversations with hiring and workplace managers. These conversations both strengthen relationships with businesses and provide insights about labor demand, hiring and employment practices, and work environments. The information

providers glean from conversations will also be more nuanced and timely than what they can learn from labor market data analysis alone.

Many workforce development professionals have told us that they struggle to build relationships with business representatives. Engagement that focuses mainly on job openings and referring applicants can feel transactional. But many providers say they lack business knowledge and confidence to ask questions that would help them learn more about a firm or industry and propose services and strategies that could help both businesses and workers.

We developed this Question Bank to help workforce development professionals craft learning-focused conversations with retail business representatives, such as store managers and human resources professionals. To help guide you to the questions that are most relevant for your organization and the stage

of your relationship with the business, we've divided the questions into three categories:

- I. Questions to Understand the Business and its Workforce (p. 4)**
- II. Questions About Employee Engagement, Development, and Advancement (p. 5)**
- III. Questions About Compensation and Scheduling (p. 6)**

How to Use This Tool

You can use this tool to find questions that help you learn about a business with an eye toward providing workforce services. Or you might pick questions from the tool to help you identify retailers that are a good fit for the job-seekers you serve. Using the tool to ask questions and learn about a large number of businesses in your region can help you develop expertise about industry norms and practices. This can give you the confidence and standing to talk with retailers about how their employment practices stack up against their local competitors for talent.

Relationships take time and more than one conversation to build. Starting from a place of inquiry – asking employers about their workforce in the context of business goals, operations and culture – can help you to establish a knowledge base about practices in the sector, identify the retailers you want to build relationships with, and help you build standing in discussions about strategies for promoting worker retention and advancement.

Prepare for Your Conversation

It is human nature to enter into a conversation with pre-conceived ideas about what you will learn. Before talking with a retailer, you might find it helpful to jot down notes about what you think their responses to some of the questions will be and then compare these

with what they tell you. This strategy can be effective not only for identifying and challenging your assumptions, but also for preparing you to participate actively in discussions with a retailer.

Let the Conversation Guide Your Questions

When you take a look at the Question Bank, you'll see that there are far too many questions to ask anybody in one session! You should pick and choose a mix of questions based on your objectives, the stage of your relationship, and what you already know about this retailer and the local industry. You may find that some questions feel right for first discussions and others would feel more comfortable once you've established rapport. With this in mind, each section begins with an open-ended question to encourage the retail manager to share her approach. We suggest you listen closely and let the context you hear shape the questions you ask next from the detailed list that follows. Some of the follow-up questions included here – such as questions about turnover or wages – may be sensitive for retailers. It's valuable to communicate that there is no "right answer." The goal is to learn from each other to improve the experience of workers and contribute to the success of the business. You may also want to begin the conversation by saying a word about what you plan to do with the information shared to address any concerns the employer may have about confidentiality.

Plan for Retail Seasonality

As you plan to use this tool and engage retailers, remember to consider the seasonality of the retail year. Retailers may be more available and interested in partnership in some months than others. Typically, the retail fiscal calendar runs from February 1 to January 31, and the holiday season (from October to

January) is the busiest time of year. Planning for new workforce investments usually occurs during the annual budgeting process ahead of the fiscal year start. Calendars can differ depending on the type of retailer—for example home and garden retailers have different peak seasons than department stores or grocery retailers. Consider asking retailers about their calendar and planning conversations at the times when they can be most receptive.

Advance Work

Preparing for conversations with retailers by doing a little “desk research” in advance is good practice, but talking with retailers directly is what will most help you to develop the expertise you need to be helpful to both your clients and the businesses that employ them. Since it’s the only way to build new or deepen existing professional relationships (and you likely have limited time and resources), we urge you to get out in the field and talk to retailers. With this caveat in mind, here are a few questions you could explore to help you prepare for conversations:

- What do you and others in your workforce development community know about the company and the experiences of its workers?
- What can you learn about job openings, application procedures and career opportunities by visiting a company’s “career” site, Glassdoor, or other employment sites? (keeping in mind that individuals motivated enough to write reviews are frequently those who have had very negative or very positive experiences)
- Is the retailer locally owned? Where is its corporate headquarters? Are there different brands under the same corporate umbrella?
- What has the company been communicating publicly via recent press releases?
- Has the company been in the news recently? Why?

I. Questions to Understand the Business and Its Workforce

Questions in this category help you develop an understanding of the business and its workforce practices, and to start to get to know the manager you are speaking with. Listen for information about how this manager thinks about attracting and retaining talent. What is the manager most proud of, and are there human resources challenges that your organization may be able to help address? This conversation can also help you understand the structure of the business and the types of decisions this store manager has authority to make.

Opening Question:

Tell me about your business and your workforce.

Potential Follow-Up Questions:

How do you describe your brand and target customer?

Why do people want to work for your company?

Who does well here? (what types of experiences, expectations, personalities)

Tell me how you hire staff. Who and how do you recruit? What is involved in screening (application process, assessments or work-based tests)?

Who are your major competitors for workers?

How many people work here? How many employees supervise or manage other people in your store(s)?

If you were asked to describe your business' "culture" to a job applicant, how would you describe it?

How long do front-line workers typically stay? Do you know why they usually leave? Why do they stay?

What are the most challenging aspects of working here?

In what ways are people management expectations communicated to managers and supervisors?

Is people management a part of managers' performance review? What weight is it assigned relative to other operational accountability? (for example, 20/80, 50/50, no weight?)

What metrics are used to assess manager performance on people management practices and outcomes? (for example, metrics related to retention, internal promotions, workforce diversity, harassment complaints, other?)

Are there challenges related to your workforce that keep you up at night?

Does your company have goals for increasing racial or ethnic diversity? In what ways do these vary for front-line staff? Supervisors? Managers? What types of successes or challenges have you had meeting goals?

Is management across store locations centralized or do stores operate autonomously? What is the store team responsible for and what is managed at the regional or headquarters level?

How well do you think job descriptions support your hiring and retention efforts? In what ways do they accurately describe the job or fall short?

What kind of flexibility do you have to make adjustments to job descriptions?

Who else in your company sets policy or makes decisions about how you attract the workforce you need?

II. Questions about Employee Engagement, Development and Advancement

These questions help you learn about how this company provides opportunities for workers to learn, grow and contribute feedback and ideas. It is common to hear about retail managers who started at entry-level and advanced within a company; you may even learn that the manager you're speaking with started in an entry-level role. Because the typical mix of employees in a store is heavily concentrated at entry-level, probing can help you learn more about what it takes for a worker to advance. This line of inquiry may also help you learn about ways that workforce services could help a retailer meet goals for internal promotion and improve retention.

Opening Question:

How long have you worked here and what's been your path to this job? Can you describe the typical path to moving up in the company?

Potential Follow-Up Questions:

How do you learn about your employees' satisfaction at work? What have you learned?

Can you tell me about training that new workers receive in the store(s)?

Is it a goal to cross-train workers? What's going well and what has been challenging?

Who does on-the-job training? Do you have designated trainers?

Are there new skills your workers need to help your business remain competitive in the face of technology or industry shifts? What are they?

How do workers stay up to date about products and inventory so they can provide good customer service?

In what ways do employees receive feedback from their managers and coworkers? What does coaching or mentoring look like in your store(s)?

What are the most important performance measures you assess in workers' formal reviews?

Does your business have a recognition program for employees who show behaviors or values (for example, customer service, innovation, decision-making)?

Do managers typically have conversations with workers about sales goals, progress toward goals, and their role in meeting goals? When and how do these conversations take place?

What kinds of input about operations improvement do you get from frontline staff? Have staff suggestions helped to reduce costs or increase sales?

Do frontline workers ever make decisions or solve problems for customers? How?

Do you have short- and longer-term goals related to worker development and advancement?

What are the different opportunities for advancement in your store(s)? How do workers learn about them?

Can you tell me about what you're looking for in front-line staff as you think about internal promotion?

How does a front-line worker typically get the training or experiences to prepare for a promotion?

Do you have a "succession planning" process to prepare workers for leadership roles?

Roughly what percentage of supervisory or management positions are internal promotions?

Are managers expected to have career development discussions with all employees or only with those identified as most promising candidates for promotion?"

Does the company have a **tuition assistance program**² that supports employee development? What are the eligibility criteria? What types of education and training can employees use the program for?

III. Questions about Compensation and Scheduling

Compensation and scheduling may be sensitive topics for retail managers. At the same time, this information can help you assess the fit of this company's employment practices for your job-seekers' needs, enabling you to refer workers who will stay and succeed. As you probe, tread gently, and listen for indication of what the manager does and does not have control over. For example, policies set by headquarters (such as just-in-time scheduling software or surprise merchandise promotions) may lead to staffing up on short notice.

Once you've established rapport, see if this manager is open to conversations about staffing and scheduling practices that promote retention. For example, some firms that prioritize customer service try to **operate with slack**,³ and always have **enough staff on hand**⁴ to be responsive to customers. As you have conversations with different retailers, you'll be in a position to help them learn about how their wages, benefits, and scheduling compare with others' and how this affects their ability to hire and retain the workforce they need.

A number of states and cities have recently introduced new laws regulating wages and scheduling practices. Businesses anticipating or adapting to new regulations may be particularly interested in information about **strategies and tools**⁵ to enhance their workforce practices to improve productivity (such as **stable scheduling apps**).⁶

Opening Question:

Where does an entry-level worker typically start in terms of position, shift schedule, wages and benefits?

Potential Follow-Up Questions:

What's the mix of full-time and part-time workers in your store(s)?

What's the work cadence in your store? When are workload peaks in a typical week? Are you busiest on weekends?

What is the process of going from part-time to full-time? How about from seasonal to regular part-time or full-time?

How far in advance do workers receive their **schedules**?⁷ How consistent are schedules from week to week? How do you balance workers' preferences for hours with other scheduling priorities?

Are there factors outside of your control that complicate scheduling, such as last-minute changes to product deliveries or merchandise promotions?

Do you have workers who would like to have more hours than you're able to schedule?

Do you use scheduling software (for example, Kronos) to manage worker scheduling? Do you use any other technology-enabled scheduling apps such as Shyft, Shift Messenger, or Crew?

Does a store manager have a prescribed number of labor hours and/or labor budget? In what ways does a manager have flexibility to vary from this?

What's your starting wage?

What benefits do you provide to employees? Who is eligible? When do benefits start?

Are there any raises structured into your compensation policies (e.g., a bump in wage at 90 days)? How does this work?

Do you know how your wages, benefits and opportunities for salary increases compare to industry peers? Do you compete with other industries for workers, and if so do you know how your wage compares?

[If applicable] Are you aware of new laws related to minimum wage and/or stable scheduling that will impact your business? If so, how are you adapting?

About Reimagine Retail

With support from the Walmart Foundation, in 2016 the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program launched **Reimagine Retail**, a project to explore ways to enhance stability and improve mobility for the retail workforce. We are working closely with partners in six regions – Chicago, San Diego, the San Francisco Bay Area, Phoenix, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh – to test strategies and capture learning about approaches they are using to help retail workers thrive and advance. Across and beyond the Reimagine Retail network, workforce service providers have asked for tools to build their capacity to develop stronger relationships with retailers. This Question Bank offers a practical building block for constructing conversations with retailers about their workforce and workplace practices that affect worker experience, retention, productivity and advancement.

Resources Referenced

- ¹ Dawson, Steven L. “Employer Engagement and the Myth of the Dual Customer.” The Pinkerton Foundation. July 2016. <http://www.thepinkertonfoundation.org/paper/employer-engagement-and-the-myth-of-the-dual-customer>
- ² Fall, Jaime S., Rachael Bourque, and Sean Stowers. “Tuition Assistance Policy Discussion: Roadmap to a Skilled and Educated Workforce.” UpSkill America and Pearson Education. February 2019. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/tuition-assistance-policy-discussion-roadmap-to-a-skilled-and-educated-workforce/>
- ³ Good Jobs Institute. “Good Jobs Scorecard.” <https://goodjobsinstitute.org/good-jobs-scorecard/>
- ⁴ Sasser, W. Earl. “Match Supply and Demand in Service Industries.” *Harvard Business Review*. November 1976. <https://hbr.org/1976/11/match-supply-and-demand-in-service-industries>
- ⁵ Newman, Amanda, Jenny Weissbourd, and Jeannine La Prad. “A Retailer Bets on Learning and Development: Goodwill Industries® of San Diego County.” The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program. February 2019. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/retailer-bets-learning-development-goodwill-industries-san-diego-county/>
- ⁶ Williams, Joan C., Saravanan Kesavan, and Lisa McCorkell. “Research: When Retail Workers Have Stable Schedules, Sales and Productivity Go Up.” *Harvard Business Review*. March 2018. <https://hbr.org/2018/03/research-when-retail-workers-have-stable-schedules-sales-and-productivity-go-up>
- ⁷ Ibid.

Reimagine Retail was made possible through funding from the Walmart Foundation. To learn more about Reimagine Retail, visit [as.pn/reimagine-retail](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/reimagine-retail). To learn more about the Workforce Strategies Initiative, visit [as.pn/wsi](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/workforce-strategies-initiative). Stay up-to-date with the Workforce Strategies Initiative by joining our mailing list ([as.pn/eopmail](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/eopmail)) and following us on social media ([as.pn/eopsocial](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/eopsocial)).

 twitter.com/aspenworkforce  facebook.com/aspenwsi  linkedin.com/company/economic-opportunities-program

2019 by the Workforce Strategies Initiative, an initiative of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program.
Published in the United States of America. © by the Aspen Institute. All rights reserved.