

What Apocalypse? Engaging with Retailers to Train Workers for Bright Futures

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What's the future of retail? A quick scan of today's top stories suggests retail is undergoing a "retail apocalypse" with brick-and-mortar stores being replaced by online shopping and retail jobs replaced by robots. But is it as doom and gloom as media presents it?

On April 24th and 25th, leading organizations from across the nation known as the [Retail Opportunity Network \(RON\)](#), convened in Chicago to discuss this retail transformation. Founded in 2015, the 50+ organizations that make up the RON are developing more efficient and innovative ways to advance frontline retail workers by working collaboratively to drive system change in the U.S. retail sector. Since the RON's founding, it's become clear that retailers play an essential role as levers of system change, particularly as the retail sector undergoes what employers are instead calling an *evolution*.

While technological innovations were a hot topic, April's convening frequently returned to the subject of employer engagement. How do RON members from various backgrounds ranging from education to workforce development engage with employers to train the frontline workforce in new skills when retailers are coping with so many other challenges simultaneously?

Despite the so-called "retail apocalypse," the mood in the room was optimistic. RON members carefully examined five common challenges faced by retailer employers and their workforce partners:

1. Capacity to execute training programs
2. Initiating partnerships
3. Deriving business value
4. Scaling programs
5. Ensuring program perseverance

Each challenge was addressed by inspiring examples and strategies presented throughout the course of the event, some drawn from a panel event hosted at the Chicagoland Retail Sector Center. This panel featured three local employers – Sprint, Gap and Pete's Fresh Market – and all three employers noted the pressure to innovate in today's retail environment, therefore relying on community partners to expand their capacity to train and hire. In turn, these community partners offered to design programs built upon the employers' existing resources and began with small pilot projects that did not tax employer resources and time.

Of course, in any sector, getting in the door to engage an employer partner is often a time-consuming and delicate process. Both RON members and panelists agreed that the key to initiating a good relationship lies in creating business value through common retail metrics such as turnover or employee engagement scores. The Midwest Region President of Sprint, Jim Mills, noted that attrition was particularly costly to any retailer, so the company was thrilled to be able to source skilled hires through Project Prepare Blue. Gap Midwest's Regional Director, Tracy Sartin, emphasized that their [This Way Ahead](#) program is expanding because participants stayed with the company longer and were more engaged than their peers. Offering a willing employer partner a strong business case will ensure the start of a good partnership.

One partnership, between RON member [Instituto del Progreso Latino](#) (Instituto) and Pete’s Fresh Market (Pete’s), stood out thanks to the presence of Yesenia Cervantes, Dean of Student Services and Community Affairs at Instituto, and Alita Bezanis, Director of Organizational Development at Pete’s. Alita praised Yesenia’s efforts to help Pete’s craft the training program they needed to help prepare staff for the launch of seven new stores and Yesenia stressed that Instituto’s curriculums “were tailored and included input from Alita, management and frontline staff from Pete’s” to ensure a good fit. Instituto and Pete’s strong partnership was also based on the presence of a dedicated team member from both parties, a strong sense of data sharing, and flexibility in course design. The initial program saw 36 students graduate with National Retail Federation certifications, and thanks to the flexible development process the program has now scaled up to enroll over 60 students in its latest cohort and includes a retail ESL component.



Pictured above: The Retail Opportunity Network Spring Convening panel on the transformation of work in retail at the Chicagoland Retail Sector Center featuring representatives from Instituto del Progreso Latino, Sprint, Gap and Pete’s Fresh Market. The Instituto/Pete’s team is pictured in the bottom right and includes successful graduate and panelist Eileen Pratl as well as trainer Rebecca Zeman.

The training programs developed by Sprint, Gap and Pete’s are all relatively new, but it is important to design such programs for sustainability. Customers are increasingly demanding unique in-store experiences and the National Retail Federation found in a recent analysis of retail sales associate postings from 2007 and 2017 that “Retailers from all sectors are reworking and redefining their store strategies, with retail sales associates front and center”¹ as providers of top-notch customer service. More frontline employees than ever will need training in soft skills which is supported by Alita Bezanis who stated that Pete’s looks “to invest in the people who had invested in putting the ‘hard work’ into their jobs but were hitting a wall because of certain soft skills, language, customer service skills, retail education and management skills.” Designing programs to meet these future needs will mean building in mechanisms for live feedback, gaining support for programs from all departments and focusing on career pathways. At Pete’s, Alita secured the backing of her managers to give employees paid time off the floor for training, and according to Yesenia “this relationship continues to grow and develop as Instituto is getting to ready to provide managerial training for those employees who already completed their advance customer service training”.

Sprint, Gap and Pete’s Fresh Market are just three examples of successful retailer engagement partnerships presented at the RON convening, and each provided inspirational testimonies of surmounting the common challenges of capacity, partnership, business value, scale and perseverance with replicable solutions. As the retail sector continues to place more emphasis on their frontline labor, these examples prove that partnership with the workforce system can make enhanced training for the right skills a reality.

1. [“How the Retail Sales Associate Role Has Changed Over the Last Decade”](#), Allison Zeller, National Retail Federation.