Workplace 20205:
Retail Reimagined

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In the Digital Era, Customer and Employee Experience are still key in physical retail.

The retail industry has undergone a massive upheaval in recent years – and Covid-19 seems certain to lead to further disruption.

In the aftermath of the global crisis, businesses have had to fundamentally rethink their physical offerings, not to mention their digital capabilities and supply chains.
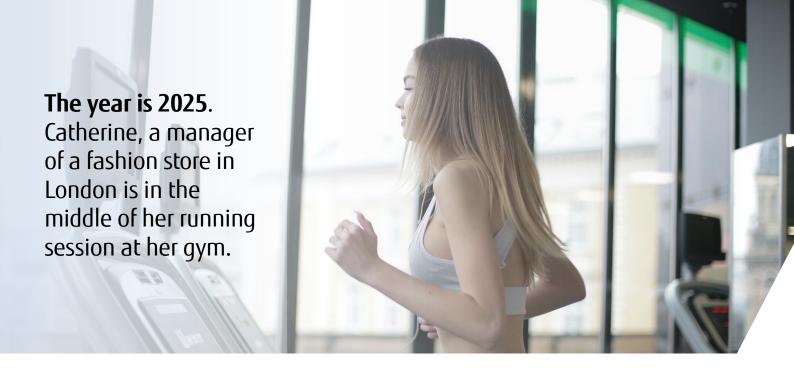
There has also been a transformation in the level of service that customers expect from retailers, however they choose to interact with them.

Likewise, businesses are increasingly having to reimagine the idea of the workplace as employees' expectations increase.

Following the pandemic, employee experience is now key to a business enjoying the fruits of a loyal and productive workforce.

But what might customers' interactions with retailers and their employees be like in 2025, and what sort of changes to the workplace and working practices of those in retail are likely?

The year is 2025.
Catherine, a manager of a fashion store in London is in the middle of her running session at her gym.

Advances in immersive virtual reality have transformed the humble treadmill into a multisensory exercise experience, with image, sound, and climate tuned dynamically to each user's preferences. Today Catherine is running with her regular team across an imaginary VR landscape – and the fact that the team is spread across many cities and continents is no barrier to constant and lively banter. Catherine is only halfway through her run when Rita, her retail digital assistant, interrupts to tell Catherine about a last-minute change to her shift.

The Assistant Manager running the first shift at the store has had to leave early, because even in 2025, sick children still want their parents. He knows it won't be a problem – almost all in-store staff now spend some time working from home, supporting online customers via video chat. And since Catherine had tagged gym time as "interruptible", she was automatically asked to come in early to provide cover.

Catherine heads to the store in the center of London, taking advantage of the fast mobile network during the journey to review her VR data visualizations: financials, staff, inventory, customer sentiment. These fundamentals of retail are timeless, but high-speed mobile connections and cheap, high-performance number-crunching enabled by quantum computing have transformed retail reporting. On the train Catherine "walks through" a VR visualization of her store, with the store's performance color-coded by floor, section and individual garment, both in real-time and since start of shift. The different overlay textures and colors highlight a section where sales are down.

The issue needs immediate attention and Rita suggests three possible solutions, combining tweaks to the merchandising, pricing and stock locations, as well as bringing forward deliveries of some new ranges. Catherine uses her experience to select the two suggestions that will work for her store and customer base, and gets her team to work on them.

As Catherine brings up her team management visualization, she reflects that she sometimes feels like the leader of a SWAT team. Her dashboard shows her which team members are currently in-store, which are with customers, and which are on track to hit their sales targets. This enables her to assign corrective actions to the best available staff through real time to-do lists on their wearable assistant devices. Those same wearables enable her team to call for remote support advice, both human and robotic – because having access to each customer's complete purchase history, preferences and satisfaction ratings really helps the team guide them towards items they will love. And the wearables also ensure the team is co-ordinated, so that they help each other out with demanding clients, lost property, and anything else the day may bring.

In fact in-store wearables have become a critical component of physical retail, and as such were among the first devices to benefit from predictive maintenance. This means staff are almost always warned well before there's a problem with the wearables, so that sales conversations are rarely interrupted. When something unexpected does occur, the wearables themselves give direct access to the IT helpdesk, which can resolve most problems remotely without team-members leaving the floor. And as a last resort, spares are held fully charged on each sales floor, available at a moment's notice.

When Catherine arrives at the store, she always checks her displays - whereas many of the adjacent retailers have simply converted the traditional shop windows into scrolling electronic display screens, Catherine strives to make hers much more striking and dynamic. As a retail professional, Catherine has seen that to survive and prosper, stores now need to offer unique retail experiences – the very opposite of the sameness that plagued so many high streets in the early 21st century.

So it makes perfect sense that at this ethnically diverse and creative end of Oxford Street, the merchandising is curated to resonate with that local ethos. To increase footfall, the store is also live streaming to show on the outside of the store the activities, people and events that are generating most shopper interest on the inside of the store – and consequently, the store is bustling.

One effect of the squeeze on retail margins has been the disappearance of almost all office space in retail stores, so Catherine's first scheduled meeting of the day takes place in the in-store chill out zone, where she greets Sarah, a new starter on the Customer Experience team. All the formal paperwork required by the onboarding is now completed through robotic process automation, so once Rita has authenticated Sarah through facial recognition, Catherine is free to take her for a guided tour of the store.

While they walk through the store, Catherine explains the automated monitoring of the garments on their display units and tables, a critical part of their integrated logistics, supply chain and stock management system. At all times Catherine and Sarah remain in contact with their store colleagues via their wearables – in a workforce as distributed as physical retail, real-time communication and collaboration are critical.

Catherine has some concerns about the quality of the personalization recommendations her AI is generating. The store should be able to predict the tastes and needs of customers with razor sharp accuracy – but they are seeing a worryingly high rate of returns. Catherine has learnt from experience that AI recommendations usually benefit from human review – the algorithm only ever sees part of the story. As part of her 90-day plan, Catherine asks Sarah to propose some improvements to the recommendation strategy. If Sarah needs any training support or a consultation with the team of remote in-house data scientists, it's all available 24/7 both in-store and from home.

As a gift to welcome her to the team, Catherine generously tags Sarah's ID as eligible for triple staff-discount until the end of the day. Tempted by this option, at the end of her shift Sarah goes to explore the experience kiosks that have replaced both traditional changing rooms and previous generation "magic mirrors".

Once authenticated, the 360° display adapts to Sarah's favorite locations and upcoming travel plans. It then suggests a range of potential purchases, triangulating between Sarah's previous purchase history, demographic and socio-economic profile, current fashion trends and travel plans. The 3D VR technology shows Sarah how she would look in her favorite and planned destinations, and when she sees a combination of items that she would like to try on, they are robotically delivered to the kiosk within seconds.

Sarah is pleased with the look, but would like a second opinion, so she pages one of her new colleagues in the Customer Experience team to advise. Guiding customer choices and personalization is a core part of the Customer Experience role, both for in-store purchases and the huge proportion of sales now initiated online. Straight click-and-collect wins for speed and convenience, but when possible, expert advice and adjustments both dramatically improve customer satisfaction. In this case a few small tweaks (and many years of experience) are all that's needed, and Sarah decides to buy.

The customization has been requested and paid for before Sarah even leaves the kiosk. She knows the garments will be made up within minutes, and delivered within the hour to the pickup point at the station at the start of her commute, in time for her dinner date that evening.

As Catherine's and Sarah's story illustrates, the retail sector is reimagining itself, adapting rapidly to the blending of online and offline, and to the huge opportunities created by omnichannel, AI, cloud, mobility and collaborative systems.

The dramatic technological innovations hide a more important finding – that great staff and the memorable experiences they create for customers remain the most important success factors for the future of retail.

Because of this, hiring and retaining the best talent will become more important than ever to retailers. This will drive retailers to offer more attractive working conditions, and more flexible workplaces will be a key component. Giving staff the ability to balance their home and work commitments will be crucial in employers retaining their top talent. Providing positive employee experiences has become as crucial as exceptional customer service for a successful retailer. Only by adopting agile practices can retailers become nimble enough to master the rapid changes that the future of retail will bring.

> **Technology will underpin the store experience of the future as online and offline experiences are blended with the use of smartphones, interactive media, sensors, virtual reality and advanced analytics. However, product, process and people will re-main the fundamental differentiators for the store. Hiring, training and rewarding your best talent to deliver great shop-ping experiences will remain at the heart of stores retailing. Technology should only ever be the enabler, not the master.**

Richard Clarke, VP Global Retail Business Development, Fujitsu

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