The Gross Domestic Product for retail trade in 2002 was $947.9 billion in current dollars, a 9.0% share of the national total. (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis)

The retail trade industry is predicted to add 2.1 million new jobs between 2002 and 2012, an increase of 14%. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)

The retail industry offers substantial employment opportunities because part-time and temporary work is plentiful in a wide variety of formats ranging from small, independent retailers to national and multinational retail chains. Solid store experience can lead to an array of retail management and store support career ladders. A college degree can afford direct entry into management training programs and regional/corporate level career paths. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and National Retail Federation Foundation)

Education leading to a high school diploma or equivalent is important for employment entry in retail.

College graduates will fill most new management positions. Employers increasingly seek graduates from junior and community colleges, technical colleges, and universities.

While structured training at smaller stores is generally brief, on-the-job training is continuous for committed employees who demonstrate initiative and often takes a mentoring form. At larger companies, initial training tends to be very structured, often lasting several days, and may be instructor-led and computer/video-based. Supplemental training in the form of on-the-job, instructor-led, computer/video-based, self-paced, and coaching is offered at various stages of employee tenure, supporting career advancement.

Pipeline: Career Ladders and Lattices
The retail trade industry is a dynamic field with diverse career ladders, a wide range of employee benefits, and on-the-job training that is increasingly driven by high-end technology that requires advanced skills. Employers recruit job candidates from community colleges and universities and train incumbent workers to upgrade their skills for career advancement.

Pipeline: Recruitment and Retention
Retail trade employers struggle to attract and retain the best and brightest employees because of the misperception that jobs are low-wage and lack growth potential. In reality, today’s retail trade careers are more than just cashier and sales associate positions; they encompass information technology, marketing, communications, loss prevention, finance, and merchandise sourcing.

Pipeline: Diversity
In an increasingly diverse society, multilingual employees are desirable. Retailers are customer service–driven and need workers to speak the languages of their customer base. Limited English Proficiency (LEP) is a problem as workers may speak the language of customers, but lack basic English language and literacy skills to perform all job functions.

Competency Models
Though the retail industry has started work on initial training models and skills certifications, they are not yet used consistently across the industry to build skills competency requirements for positions at all levels and to encourage career growth. Retailers are struggling to attract qualified individuals, train them, and have them advance their careers.
The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has sought to understand and address the critical workforce needs of the retail industry. DOL held forums with employers and the National Retail Federation Foundation to learn about their hiring and training needs and potential solutions to those challenges.

U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao has announced an investment totaling more than $5 million to implement industry-identified strategies to confront the workforce challenges identified by small, medium, and large retailers. These innovative approaches address the following workforce needs of business while also effectively helping workers find good jobs with good wages and promising career pathways in the retail industry:
• expanding the pipeline of youth;
• helping alternative labor pools gain industry-defined skills and competencies;
• developing alternative training strategies;
• developing tools and curricula for enhancing skill sets;
• enhancing the capacity of educational institutions;
• developing industry-defined career ladders and lattices;
• developing strategies to retain and retrain incumbent workers; and
• assisting transitioning individuals from declining industries to high growth industries.