
Retail Salespersons

(O*NET 41-2031.00)

Significant Points

- Good employment opportunities are expected because of the need to replace the large number of workers who leave the occupation each year.
- Most salespersons work evenings and weekends, particularly during sales and other peak retail periods.
- Employers look for people who enjoy working with others and who have tact, patience, an interest in sales work, a neat appearance, and the ability to communicate clearly.

Nature of the Work

Consumers spend millions of dollars every day on merchandise and often rely on a store's sales force for help. Whether selling shoes, computer equipment, or automobiles, retail salespersons assist customers in finding what they are looking for and try to interest them in buying the merchandise. Most are able to describe a product's features, demonstrate its use, or show various models and colors.

In addition to selling, most retail salespersons—especially those who work in department and apparel stores—make out sales checks; receive cash, checks, debit, and charge payments; bag or package purchases; and give change and receipts. Depending on the hours they work, retail salespersons may have to open or close cash registers. This work may include counting the money in the register; separating charge slips, coupons, and exchange vouchers; and making deposits at the cash office. Salespersons often are held responsible for the contents of their registers, and repeated shortages are cause for dismissal in many organizations. (Cashiers, who have similar duties, are discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Retailers stress the importance of providing courteous and efficient service to remain competitive. For example, when a customer wants an item that is not on the sales floor, the salesperson may check the stockroom, place a special order, or call another store to locate the item.



Retail salespersons must know about the products they are selling, and answer questions from customers.

For some sales jobs, particularly those involving expensive and complex items, retail salespersons need special knowledge or skills. For example, salespersons who sell automobiles must be able to explain the features of various models, the manufacturers' specifications, the types of options and financing available, and the warranty.

Salespersons also may handle returns and exchanges of merchandise, wrap gifts, and keep their work areas neat. In addition, they may help stock shelves or racks, arrange for mailing or delivery of purchases, mark price tags, take inventory, and prepare displays.

Frequently, salespersons must be aware of special sales and promotions. They also must recognize security risks and thefts and know how to handle or prevent such situations.

Work environment. Most salespersons in retail trade work in clean, comfortable, well-lit stores. However, they often stand for long periods and may need supervisory approval to leave the sales floor. They also may work outdoors if they sell items such as cars, plants, or lumber yard materials.

The Monday-through-Friday, 9-to-5 workweek is the exception rather than the rule in retail trade. Most salespersons work evenings and weekends, particularly during sales and other peak retail periods. The end-of-year holiday season is the busiest time for most retailers. As a result, many employers limit the use of vacation time between Thanksgiving and the beginning of January.

This occupation offers many opportunities for part-time work and is especially appealing to students, retirees, and others seeking to supplement their income. More than 32 percent of retail salespersons worked part-time in 2006. However, most of those selling big-ticket items work full time and have substantial experience.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Retail salespeople typically learn their skills through on-the-job training. Although advancement opportunities are limited, having a college degree or a great deal of experience may help retail salespersons move into management positions.

Education and training. There usually are no formal education requirements for this type of work, although a high school diploma or the equivalent is often preferred. A college degree may be required for management trainee positions, especially in larger retail establishments.

In most small stores, an experienced employee or the store owner instructs newly hired sales personnel in making out sales checks and operating cash registers. In large stores, training programs are more formal and are usually conducted over several days. Topics discussed often include customer service, security, the store's policies and procedures, and how to work a cash register. Depending on the type of product they are selling, employees may be given additional specialized training by sales representatives. For example, those working in cosmetics receive instruction on the types of products the store offers and for whom the cosmetics would be most beneficial. Likewise, salespersons employed by motor vehicle dealers may be instructed on the technical details of standard and optional equipment available on new vehicle models. Since providing the best possible service to customers is a high priority for many employers, employees often are given periodic training to update and refine their skills.

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Retail salespersons.....	41-2031	4,477,000	5,034,000	557,000	12

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

Other qualifications. Employers look for people who enjoy working with others and who have the tact and patience to deal with difficult customers. Among other desirable characteristics are an interest in sales work, a neat appearance, and the ability to communicate clearly and effectively. The ability to speak more than one language may be helpful for employment in communities where people from various cultures live and shop. Before hiring a salesperson, some employers may conduct a background check, especially for a job selling high-priced items.

Advancement. Opportunities for advancement vary. In some small establishments, advancement is limited because one person—often the owner—does most of the managerial work. In others, some salespersons are promoted to assistant manager. Large retail businesses usually prefer to hire college graduates as management trainees, making a college education increasingly important. However, motivated and capable employees without college degrees still may advance to administrative or supervisory positions in large establishments.

As salespersons gain experience and seniority, they usually move to positions of greater responsibility and may be given their choice of departments in which to work. This often means moving to areas with higher potential earnings and commissions. The highest earnings potential usually lies in selling “big-ticket” items—such as cars, jewelry, furniture, and electronic equipment—although doing so often requires extensive knowledge of the product and an extraordinary talent for persuasion.

Retail selling experience may be an asset when applying for sales positions with larger retailers or in nonretail industries, such as financial services, wholesale trade, or manufacturing.

Employment

Retail salespersons held about 4.5 million jobs in 2006. They worked in stores ranging from small specialty shops employing a few workers to giant department stores with hundreds of salespersons. In addition, some were self-employed representatives of direct-sales companies and mail-order houses. The largest employers of retail salespersons are department stores, clothing and clothing accessories stores, building material and garden equipment and supplies dealers, other general merchandise stores, and motor vehicle and parts dealers.

Because retail stores are found in every city and town, employment is distributed geographically in much the same way as the population.

Job Outlook

Due to the high level of turnover in this occupation, opportunities are expected to be good. The average projected employment growth in this occupation reflects the expansion of the economy and consumer spending.

Employment change. Employment is expected to grow by 12 percent over the 2006-16 decade, which is about as fast as the average for all occupations. In fact, due to the size of this occupation, retail salespersons will have one of the largest numbers of new jobs arise, about 557,000 over the projections decade. This growth reflects rising retail sales stemming from a growing population. Many retail establishments will continue to expand in size and number, leading to new retail sales positions. Since retail salespeople must be available to assist customers in person, this is not an occupation that will suffer negative effects from advancements in technology. To the contrary, software that integrates purchase transactions, inventory management, and purchasing has greatly changed retailing, but retail salespersons continue to be essential in dealing with customers. There will also be an increased demand for retail salespersons in warehouse clubs and supercenters, which sell a wide assortment of goods at low prices, since they continue to grow as many consumers prefer these stores.

Despite the growing popularity of electronic commerce, the impact of electronic commerce on employment of retail salespersons is expected to be minimal. Internet sales have not decreased the need for retail salespersons. Retail stores commonly use an online presence to complement their in-store sales; there are a limited number of Internet-only apparel and specialty stores. Retail salespersons will remain important in assuring customers, providing specialized service, and increasing customer satisfaction. Most shoppers continue to prefer to make their purchases in stores, and growth of retail sales will continue to generate employment growth in various retail establishments.

Job prospects. As in the past, employment opportunities for retail salespersons are expected to be good because of the need to replace the large number of workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force each year. Warehouse clubs and supercenters are expected to have excellent job prospects as they continue to grow in popularity with consumers. In addition, many new jobs will be created for retail salespersons as businesses seek to expand operations and enhance customer service.

Opportunities for part-time work should be abundant, and demand will be strong for temporary workers during peak selling periods, such as the end-of-year holiday season. The availability of part-time and temporary work attracts many people seeking to supplement their income.

During economic downturns, sales volumes and the resulting demand for sales workers usually decline. Purchases of costly items, such as cars, appliances, and furniture, tend to be postponed during difficult economic times. In areas of high unemployment, sales of many types of goods decline. However, because many retail salespersons constantly transfer to

other occupations in search of better pay or career opportunities, employers often can adjust employment levels simply by not replacing all those who leave.

Earnings

Median hourly earnings of retail salespersons, including commissions, were \$9.50 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$7.81 and \$12.83 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$6.79, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$18.48 an hour. Median hourly earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of retail salespersons in May 2006 were as follows:

Automobile dealers	\$18.70
Building material and supplies dealers	11.37
Other general merchandise stores	8.79
Department stores	8.70
Clothing stores	8.53

Many beginning or inexperienced workers earn the Federal minimum wage of \$5.85 an hour, but many States set minimum wages higher than the Federal minimum. Under Federal law, this wage will increase to \$6.55 in the summer of 2008 and to \$7.25 in the summer of 2009. In areas where employers have difficulty attracting and retaining workers, wages tend to be higher than the legislated minimum.

Compensation systems can vary by type of establishment and merchandise sold. Salespersons receive hourly wages, commissions, or a combination thereof. Under a commission system, salespersons receive a percentage of the sales they make. This system offers sales workers the opportunity to increase their earnings considerably, but they may find that their

earnings strongly depend on their ability to sell their product and on the ups and downs of the economy.

Benefits may be limited in smaller stores, but benefits in large establishments usually are comparable to those offered by other employers. In addition, nearly all salespersons are able to buy their store's merchandise at a discount, with the savings depending on the type of merchandise. Also, to bolster revenue, employers may use incentive programs such as awards, banquets, bonuses, and profit-sharing plans to promote teamwork among the sales staff.

Related Occupations

Salespersons use sales techniques, coupled with their knowledge of merchandise, to assist customers and encourage purchases. Workers in other occupations who use these same skills include sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing; securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents; counter and rental clerks; real estate brokers and sales agents; purchasing managers, buyers, and purchasing agents; insurance sales agents; sales engineers; and cashiers.

Sources of Additional Information

Information on careers in retail sales may be obtained from the personnel offices of local stores or from State merchants' associations.

General information about retailing is available from:

► National Retail Federation, 325 7th St.NW., Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20004.

Information about training for a career in automobile sales is available from:

► National Automobile Dealers Association, Public Relations Department, 8400 Westpark Dr., McLean, VA 22102-3591. Internet: <http://www.nada.org>