



Laid Off or Furloughed in Retail? These Are the Free Training Programs to Sign Up for Now

By Jennie Bell

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The job landscape is a frightening place right now.

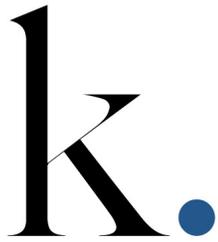
Last month, as a result of the coronavirus shutdown, [employers in the U.S. shed](#) more than 20.5 million jobs, and the unemployment rate spiked to 14.7% — numbers that haven't been seen since the Great Depression.

While many states and cities are in the process of loosening restrictions on commerce and allowing stores and other businesses to reopen, economists predict that it will take more than a year for the country's economic engine to get back up and running to its 2019 levels, which is grim news for the many retail workers who have been furloughed or laid off during the pandemic.

And when operations do return in earnest, competition for open positions will be fierce, experts told FN, which is why it is crucial for workers to ensure they have the skills employers will want post-pandemic, and to take advantage of training opportunities now.

“Agility, resourcefulness and imaginative problem solving skills are going to be especially important as we re-emerge into a world that looks very different than it did before,” said Kyle Rudy, SVP at the executive search firm [Kirk Palmer Associates](#). “This can be found in all job levels, and should be embraced and encouraged.”

Matt Priest, president and CEO of the Footwear Distributors and Retailers of America agreed: “Agility and a broad knowledge base will be very important skills to hone during this time. Economic downturns bring consolidation of workflows, meaning people will take on a variety of issue areas and tasks as new responsibilities.”



Training for Free

Numerous educational platforms are available online, [offering instruction on a range of professional topics](#). Among them are Coursera, Udacity and General Assembly, as well as LinkedIn Learning, which has become an increasingly popular resource (during March, membership in its groups grew 130% from the previous month).

While useful, the courses typically are fee-based, which means they aren't necessarily affordable for everyone, particularly for workers who have been furloughed or laid off. That's where industry organizations like [FDRA](#) and the National Retail Federation have stepped in.

To aid workers, FDRA launched the [Digital Professional Development Center](#) on its website in late April. The online portal offers access to the organization's array of videos, podcasts, research and articles on a variety of subjects, including customs, sustainability, intellectual property, retail and sourcing. And most notably, the site is free.

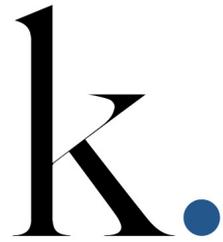
"My hope is that the center will help all of our professionals become more knowledgeable, agile and capable as we get back to work," said Priest.

He noted that this is just one of FDRA's many initiatives to serve the industry during a difficult time. "Part of what we have tried to do is capture workers via their personal emails so we can stay connected, even when they are not reporting to work on a daily basis," said Priest. "This development center is the next step in a process of doing everything we can to support the entire American footwear industry."

The [NRF](#) Foundation also is helping workers up-skill during the coronavirus crisis through its longstanding RISE Up educational series. The program is now offering its introductory "Retail Industry Fundamentals" training for free. And its two advanced programs — "Customer Service & Sales" and "Business of Retail: Operations & Profit — are currently 50% off.

Geared toward entry-level workers, the Retail Industry Fundamentals class is a self-paced online course that takes about five hours to complete and covers basic details about the business. "It includes concepts around customer service, profits and discounting, and helps people understand omnichannel and the technology they'll be using," said Adam Lukoskie, VP of the NRF Foundation.

The more in-depth courses are targeted to managers and mid-level workers. They take roughly 15 hours to complete and conclude with a comprehensive exam. Those who complete



the RISE Up training receive a certification that they can feature on their resume, as well as a badge to post on their LinkedIn profile.

Lukoskie said retail workers can sign up for the Fundamentals training program as an individual or through one of RISE Up's 800 training partners by applying online [here](#). (New individual learners should select "Free from NRF Foundation" in the first drop-down question.)

Essential Skills

Even before the coronavirus outbreak shuttered stores, the retail industry was increasingly moving online. And now the COVID-19 crisis has simply accelerated the shift.

The NPD Group reported that [online penetration spiked to 39%](#) in March, compared with 28% during the first two months of the year. Within the e-commerce sphere, footwear brands' own direct-to-consumer websites gained the most share online, followed by athletic footwear specialty sites.

In this new world, digital skillsets will become increasingly vital, explained experts.

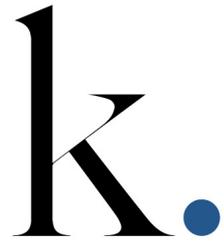
"It might be too early to tell just how dramatically the job landscape will be altered, [but] I do feel a leaner, more creative and digitally driven retail industry will emerge," said Rudy. "One thing we know for sure is that technology and virtual fluency will continue to be especially important even as we phase human interactions back into our day-to-day experiences."

He encouraged executives to bolster their understanding of topics like digital marketing, to not only maintain communications with consumers, but to make themselves a valuable resource within their companies.

And at the store associate level, Lukoskie stressed that in today's complex retail system, it's crucial for workers to be highly customer-centric, which means they need a strong grasp of technology in order to provide a complete shopping experience.

"The associate has to be able to talk to a customer to understand what they need, and then have the ability to work the technology to deliver on that," he said. "It's about understanding the omnichannel, knowing how it works and all the options that are available."

But, Lukoskie added, the primary requirements of a job can't be overstated. "Show up on time, come in with a smile, be a team player and work with others," he said. "We talk about



skills all the time with employers and they say, 'That's great, but if they're not showing up on time, I don't care how good their customer service is.'"