



Attention Laid-off Retail Execs: Here's How to Boost Your Job Prospects Right Now

By Katie Abel

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It really *is* about who you know. Thousands of laid-off retail workers from Macy's, Nordstrom, JCPenney and more are on the hunt for new jobs after a slew of big department store players made deep staffing cuts during the past few weeks.

While some stores have reopened, other locations are shuttering permanently in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic — and the continued consumer shift to digital shopping.

Longtime buyers, merchandising executives and store managers — many of whom have been on the job for decades — suddenly find themselves competing with their peers for very few openings. In addition, many lack the digital experience that every employer is seeking now.

“Executives that have only had experience in third-party merchandise environments may encounter a challenging job market,” said Kyle Rudy, SVP at executive placement firm Kirk Palmer Associates LLP.

But Rudy and other recruiting insiders agree that there's one big way to boost your job prospects right away — by leaning on industry colleagues. The biggest advantage that veteran workers have is their lengthy list of contacts. “Retail employees will need to be assertive in leveraging their extensive networks and relationships with the vendor community, or past peers, to break into brands or vertical retail environments - ideally ones that sell to digitally-native companies such as Stitch Fix or Shopbop,” Rudy explained. “This will give them a lift in digital that can help to future proof their skills.”

Craig Rowley, senior client partner for consulting firm Korn Ferry, encouraged retail veterans to keep all their options open. Many smaller brands and distributors in the fashion space are still on the hunt for talent.



Still, employers are thinking “long and hard” about who to hire, Rowley noted. “There’s a high level of uncertainty.”

What’s the most important quality to play up when pitching yourself out? Versatility, according to Rudy.

“This is definitely a changing of the guard in which digital fluency is no longer optional, and executives now need to be versatile, multiple-sport athletes who can make an impact beyond their functional silos,” he said. “However, this isn’t new. Like most of the trends that existed before COVID-19, the pandemic merely accelerated for merchants the technology-driven transformation that has been gradually occurring over the last 20 years.”