

## ANALYSIS

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# STORE ASSOCIATES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

*Retail Week* and Manhattan Associates investigate the role of technology in the evolving retailer-customer relationship. **Nick Hughes** reports

**W**alk into the average high street store and the chances are that, at first glance, things don't look hugely different from a decade ago. There's a till in the corner of the shop, signage is clean and attractive, and staff are on hand to help with your purchase.

But look a little closer and the differences begin to emerge. It is not just the technology around the staff that has changed, their roles have also evolved.

For instance, they are often fulfilling online orders from their stock – a task traditionally undertaken at a warehouse. Technology is transforming the in-store experience and with it the role of the store associate.

No longer do staff members have a purely transactional or advisory role. They are personal shoppers, stock locators, enterprise sales people – there to assist the customer at each and every stage of their purchase journey.

Craig Sears-Black, managing director at Manhattan Associates, notes: "The role has evolved and the expectation of the value store associates bring has changed.

"Yes, associates can serve more people more quickly, and yes they can probably answer a wider range of queries, but in terms of the importance of their role as facilitators of sales it's arguably no more or less important than it was in the pre-digital age.

"Shoppers respond to staff on a human level. Technology can enhance the experience, but it can't replicate a smile or a friendly exchange of words."

For retailers looking to develop their in-store capabilities, the question is to what extent



technology can supplement the human qualities of store associates to help them have more meaningful engagement – but how much is too much?

It is also a case of backing the right tech at the right time. As the chief information officer of a grocery retailer says: "You'll maybe make 10 bets and you'll probably get two of them right."

*Retail Week* and Manhattan Associates' new report, *Technology and the role of the store associate*, is based on extensive interviews with a cross-section of retailers, and seeks to demonstrate how the retailer-customer relationship is evolving and analyse the role of technology in this.

It looks at the latest

technologies, explains their applications and assesses the investment case behind them. It also explores the need to have effective back-end systems in place that help realise the front-end capabilities.

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