Introduction

Funded by Walmart Giving’s $100 Million Opportunity Initiative, Hope Street Group launched the Retail Opportunity Network (RON) in 2015. RON is a collection of over 70 organizations working collaboratively to drive system change for the U.S. retail workforce by developing ways to make it easier for frontline retail workers to advance in their careers. Over the past four years, Hope Street Group has collaborated with RON members in education, training and workforce development to share best practices, collective learnings, and promote solutions designed to address signaling efficiencies across the retail sector. Through consistent employer engagement, practice change, better coordination across stakeholders, and a focus on supporting intermediaries, we have made an impact. This report summarizes our work with RON across the first two iterations of the Network, major impacts, and a vision for the future as retail continues to rapidly evolve.

Acknowledgements

Hope Street Group would like to thank all of the organizations who participate in the Retail Opportunity Network. Support for the Retail Opportunity Network is provided by Walmart Giving.
History

Established in 2015 as a part of the Walmart Foundation’s $100 Million Opportunity Initiative, the Retail Opportunity Network (RON) was founded with the intention of identifying opportunities to collaborate and share knowledge among a select group of eight organizations breaking into the relatively new space of retail workforce development. Early research by RON member MDRC determined that few workforce intermediaries offered training for incumbent retail workers or employees seeking to advance into middle skills roles in the retail sector for a variety of reasons. Therefore the first two years of the Network focused on developing operating structure, building relationships between members, and creating a foundation of strong research that has provided a business case for training and retail competency model used by many in their work today.

Based on this initial foundation, as of 2017, the RON was conducting work in three specific areas members identified as essential to system change in the retail sector:

**RON specifically works to:**

- Generate and share insights into retail as a sector of opportunity
- Build effective approaches to retail training and advancement
- Engage retail employers to improve the ecosystem

Today, RON members are changing how careers in retail are viewed by both workers and employers. Through a variety of competency-based strategies, RON members are creating greater access to entry-level jobs and coupling that with training and development that demonstrate a clear career path. Frontline retail workers gain a better understanding not only of the opportunity for advancement, but of what it takes to move up the ladder into middle-skill and management positions. Employers reduce turnover, increase employee engagement and invest more in upskilling programs that provide opportunities for frontline staff to “future-proof” their skills in a time of uncertainty in the retail sector.
Impacts

As of 2019 RON members are spread across the country in 32 states and 70 major metro areas. Over 200 individuals and 70 organizations participated in events or communications hosted by Hope Street Group including e-newsletters, webinars, the Retail America podcast, an online portal, working groups focused on equity or technology, and semi-annual in-person convenings featuring local site visits with retail employers. Through these points of connection Hope Street Group successfully helped RON members adopt or adapt new tools and technologies, increased collaboration between RON members, codified shared learning across organizations, and amplified the role of retail as a sector of opportunity.

Success Stories

Generate and share insights into retail as a sector of opportunity

- Work across multiple RON organizations firmly established the fact that retail is essential to a community’s economic success, which provides a strong business case for investing in the advancement of frontline employees.
- For example, retail and food service/drinking places account for 10.7% of employment in Baltimore, 23% of employment in Des Moines, just under 12% in Phoenix, 19.2% in San Diego and 10.6% in Dallas. It is the third largest sector by employment in King County, Washington (Seattle).

Build effective approaches to retail training and advancement

- Several RON members developed retail training programs that clearly demonstrate upskilling can help frontline employees advance their careers while benefiting business partners’ bottom lines.
- Generation’s Retail Career Advancement Program boasts an 83% one-year retention rate (1), a pilot at MOD Pizza in the San Francisco Bay Area through FSG’s Talent Rewire Innovation Labs cut turnover among youth hires from 67% to 50% (2), and Youth Job Center provided training for youth in Gap Inc.’s This Way Ahead Program where trainees ended up with double the retention rate of their peers (3).

Sources:
(1) Lauren Eyster and Semhar Gebrekristo, Generation’s USA Retail Career Advancement Program Profile, 2018.
(2) Megan Hansen, How a culture of “doing the right thing” is good for business, 2018.
(3) Emily Stover, Ted Carroll, NuDonna Williams, and Hester Buell, Ready to Work: Opportunities in Retail for Youth, 2019.
Engage retail employers to improve the ecosystem

- A survey of RON employer engagement in Spring 2018 found that members had engaged over 245 retailers across the country in a variety of training programs, employer learning networks, and upskilling initiatives.
- Collaboration between RON members also increased the efficiency of engaging new retailers. Resources created by collaboratives such as the Aspen Institute’s Reimagine Retail Program, Upskill America and the National Association of Workforce Boards, and the National Retail Federation Foundation’s RISE Up Program all benefit workforce intermediaries within RON and beyond.
Through the efforts of RON, Hope Street Group was able to identify best practices and explore opportunities for innovative solutions that could have significant impact on the retail industry. One such opportunity was an immersion into how intermediaries (e.g., career navigators and mentors), if properly trained, could prepare individuals for advancement and a viable career pathway within retail. This learning gave rise to a collaborative initiative between Hope Street Group and Goodwill Industries International (GII) called GoodPaths.

GoodPaths serves as another success story from RON in advancing frontline retail workers. Hope Street Group has already seen positive results from the pilot phase of this online competency-based career navigation system first tested with three Goodwill member sites and now used at more than 30 Goodwill locations. At the original Goodwill sites, 1 in 5 participants has been promoted and received a wage increase. Additionally, 86% of participants that were coached through the pilot by August 2018 were retained for more than 180 days. Building on learnings from implementing this program with GII as well as similar results from our manufacturing and healthcare networks, Hope Street Group created Skilling America.

Skilling America develops the on-the-ground capability of professional intermediaries working in multiple sectors, including those Hope Street Group collaborated with through the RON, by equipping intermediaries with current tools, technology, data and methods that work. This initiative will allow Hope Street Group to effectively scale competency-based tools and methods, including those developed by RON members, with workforce professionals and educators across the nation.

Just as Hope Street Group identified the potential of Skilling America the RON reached an inflection point. The Network continues to grow at a rapid pace and bring increasingly diverse backgrounds, experiences and skills sets to the table. Member feedback made it clear that a new Network structure that further capitalizes on this diversity and offers multiple highly tailored learning experiences would be essential to the Network’s future. Therefore Hope Street Group is proud to partner with FSG, a mission-driven consulting firm with experience in community management and a contributor to the RON, to help the Network transition into a new phase. Hope Street Group is confident that FSG can take the reins of this learning community and continue to drive system change in the retail sector.

Moving Forward