

THE LENS · WALKING INTO JAVITS · PART 3 OF 7

Frontline Associate Technology: Are We Empowering Associates or Giving Them More Work?

Retailers keep adding tools for associates. The question is whether those tools remove work, or just move it onto a smaller screen.

THE SHORT VERSION

Think about the last time you walked into a store and encountered an associate who really knew their business. Those interactions didn't require the latest technology. They required knowledgeable people who had the time, confidence, and freedom to connect with customers.

Today, we're asking those same associates to do considerably more: checkout, inventory, online fulfillment, curbside pickup, returns, merchandising, plus team communications, performance measurements, and notifications from tablets, handhelds, and point-of-sale systems. Somewhere in that growing list, they're still expected to deliver a great customer experience.

WHY IT MATTERS

Zebra Technologies' 2025 Global Shopper Study found that 88% of surveyed retail associates reported challenges obtaining timely assistance or information, up from 82% the previous year. At the same time, 87% believed better tools make their work more enjoyable and less stressful.

There's an interesting disconnect here. Put four disconnected applications onto one handheld, and we haven't simplified anything. We've just moved the complexity onto a smaller screen.

THE BUSINESS QUESTIONS

Are associates spending more time engaging with customers or managing applications? Are we simplifying their responsibilities or simply digitizing an increasingly complicated workday? And when technology saves time, how are we using that additional capacity?

WHAT'S CHANGING

1. **Unified mobile workspaces.** At Tom Ford Fashion, associates use mobile tools to access information and complete transactions without leaving the customer. According to technology partner KWI, transactions that took 10 minutes now take seconds. But one device doesn't automatically create a seamless experience.
2. **AI-assisted guidance and task management.** In Walmart's initial overnight stocking rollout, team leads and managers estimated its AI task tool cut planning time from 90 minutes to 30. Imagine a system recognizing increased traffic, identifying tasks that can wait, and helping a manager arrange support. Is anyone actually doing this yet?
3. **Automation and operational efficiency.** RFID, computer vision, automated cash management, and connected inventory can reduce repetitive work. But are we actually eliminating tasks or creating another digital checklist?
4. **Continuous learning and knowledge.** AI-assisted knowledge tools and short, targeted learning help associates answer questions and build skills without constantly stepping away from customers.



WHEN EFFICIENCY AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE COMPETE

You can hit a KPI without creating much value. So yes, you got one more order out the door. But if doing so meant seven other customers received a poor experience, what did you really gain? Picture someone walking into a long line of frustrated customers waiting on online orders. That's not a good vibe, and they notice.

THE LENS · FRONTLINE ASSOCIATES · AT THE SHOW

WHAT WE'RE WATCHING AT NRF

Three sessions on Sunday, January 10, look at the associate from different angles: managing multiple roles, AI for frontline learning and support, and what happens when automated processes need a human. The first two run back to back, so plan the walk from Room 411 down to the Expo floor.

ROAD TO NRF '27 · WALKING INTO JAVITS

Frontline sessions on our list

Sunday, January 10 · Javits Center, New York

SUN · 10:45 AM

One Store, Infinite Roles: Empowering the Modern Retail Associate

FEATURING
Samsung · EssilorLuxottica
HP Stage, Javits North, Rm 411

SUN · 11:15 AM

Frontline First: AI for the People Who Make Retail Run

FEATURING
Nebraska Furniture Mart · HP
AI Stage by Klaviyo, Expo Level 1

SUN · 1:00 PM

Closing the AI Execution Gap in Store Operations with Ulta Beauty

FEATURING
ServiceNow · Ulta Beauty
HP Stage, Javits North, Rm 411

Cambridge Retail Advisors · Booth 6703

Check the NRF app for rooms and updates

A FEW COMPANIES WORTH EXPLORING

- **Zebra Technologies (Booth 3303).** Enterprise mobile devices, RFID, inventory visibility, and AI-assisted workflows.
- **Axonify (Booth 3229).** Frontline microlearning and coaching without pulling associates off the floor.
- **StoreForce (Booth 1927).** Workforce management, scheduling, and store execution aligned with traffic.
- **UKG (Booth 5826).** Workforce management, scheduling, timekeeping, and payroll.
- **Workday (Booth 5415).** Workforce planning, scheduling, HR, and employee development.
- **42Gears (Booth 3783).** Mobile device management and fleet support across large retail networks.
- **Zipline (Booth 5451).** Store communications, task execution, and clearer shift priorities.

The real test isn't only how well technology works. It's how the store operates when it doesn't.

THE LENS · FRONTLINE ASSOCIATES · NEXT STEPS

WHERE DOES THE SAVED TIME GO?

90 → 30
MINUTES

Walmart team leads and managers estimated its AI task tool cut overnight shift planning from 90 minutes to 30. That's real time back. The question is whether it goes to customers or straight to another task list.

TAKE THESE FOUR QUESTIONS TO EVERY BOOTH

1. **What work does this actually eliminate?** Show us the tasks and steps that disappear.
2. **How does this support an associate's entire workday?** Show us the transitions, including when priorities change.
3. **What happens when something goes wrong?** Lost connectivity, inaccurate information, an interrupted workflow.
4. **Were frontline associates involved in designing and testing this?** What did they challenge, and what changed?

THE TEST

Is this technology getting out of the associate's way, or giving them one more thing to manage?

COMING UP IN THE SERIES

Parts 4 through 7 cover AI and checkout, in-store retail media, inventory and returns, and the systems that have to work together.

Previously: Part 2, Experiential Retail: Inside the Store and Beyond Its Walls

SCAN

Read the article

Open the guide

ABOUT CAMBRIDGE RETAIL ADVISORS

We aren't software vendors, and we aren't theoretical consultants. CRA is a specialized retail advisory firm of seasoned industry operators who have lived with the systems, led the implementations, and solved the operational friction. Strategy, system selection, and execution grounded in real retail experience. Read the full article at cambridgeretailadvisors.com. **See us at NRF '27, Booth 6703.**

Sources: Zebra Technologies, 2025 Global Shopper Study; KWI Tom Ford Fashion case study; Walmart, June 2025. Session details from the NRF '27 agenda; check the NRF app for updates.