

Retail staff want more tech, research reveals

An IDC study sponsored by Microsoft, titled *Empowering Retail Associates in South Africa*, has shown that while many retail workers in South Africa are feeling overworked, most of them see technology as a remedy to these issues.



Colin Erasmus, chief operations officer at Microsoft South Africa

“We often refer to them as ‘the deskless workforce’ – our economic lifeline during the height of the pandemic, working overtime to maintain our supply chains, at considerable risk to their own physical and mental health,” said Colin Erasmus, chief operations officer at Microsoft South Africa. “We owe them solutions to their challenges, and technology has enormous potential for retailers to take the important first steps toward improving the employee experience for associates.”

In compiling *Empowering Retail Associates in South Africa*, IDC researchers extensively interviewed frontline workers and their managers. The researchers found that 38% of South African retail associates feel their working hours are long, and their schedule rigid, and that this has led to increased stress and attrition.



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However, almost all (81%) of those polled believed technology would enable them to do their job more effectively, and 77% felt it would lead to them being more engaged with their organisation. Over half (52%) of all associates indicated skills development as a key area that technology could bring about significant improvement in, and 50% said it could improve customer experience.

Transformation

There is a gap between the recognition of the importance of technology and digital transformation maturity in the retail sector, though: 62% of retail associates in South Africa believe that their organisation is below or on par with the industry average.

“The good news is many retail organisations in the country are pursuing their frontline work transformation initiatives, driven by customer demand and broader industrywide transformation – and with a focus on the employee experience,” said Erasmus.



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In guiding South African retail businesses in how to attract and retain talent, the report urged them to improve the productivity of retail associates through digital tools, develop their skills through virtual training and learning, and accelerate this digital evolution of the frontline workforce to keep up with industry standards. Investments in digital platforms and automated learning technologies will bring a 40% increase in productivity to organisations, predicts the IDC.

“Retail associates have traditionally been underserved by technology, despite the fact that their challenges are growing, and arguably at a pace in excess of those faced by their back-office colleagues,” Erasmus added. “Human-machine collaboration, new skills and a workplace that blends physical and digital tools can bring a brighter future for these essential workers.”

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