

Retail Confidential, Part 2: Behind the Counter

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After undergoing computerized personality tests and cattle-call interviews to find a retail job this season, our reporter finally landed a gig at a J. Crew in midtown Manhattan. Here's how it went:

Turns out, J. Crew is fairly old-school when it comes to hiring—I get the job with a paper application and routine interview, which takes place out on the mall concourse. “Welcome to my office!” says my interviewer. He steers the conversation from my current job to how I'd handle sticky customer-service scenarios and whether I can work until midnight during the holidays. Eight days later, I get the call offering a part-time sales-associate position for \$9.60 an hour, plus commission. Maybe I'm not such a bad prize after all. In fact, says Doug Fleener, managing partner of retail consulting firm Dynamic Experiences Group, I'm actually a “dream hire”: professional, brand loyal and willing to work late. My complete lack of sales experience? No biggie. Retailers expect to do a lot of teaching.

I figure the training at J. Crew will be pretty intense. After all, Restoration Hardware puts new workers through a weeklong course, while Home Depot gives employees six months of product training in categories like lumber. But my two-night, six-hour J. Crew group orientation, conducted in a back room packed with boxes and a vacuum cleaner, is mainly devoted to administrative issues. We cover tax forms and scheduling procedures and review the list of “unacceptable behaviors,” like sleeping on the job and threatening to use a gun. Everyone perks up for an exhaustive discussion of the employee discount and sighs over the dress code. It's very Hillary Clinton circa 1992—dark bottoms and button-front shirts, headbands encouraged. It's also strictly enforced: Thanks to our New York location, CEO Mickey Drexler could pop in at any time. “I feel your pain,” our manager says.

The managers are so good-natured and enthusiastic, it's hard to take offense at anything they say. I barely blink when one tells us that using the bathroom after we punch in constitutes “stealing time.” (When contacted for comment, J. Crew says it doesn't want associates dressing and grooming on company time.) And it hardly feels intrusive when, at the end of the night, the managers smile and inspect my bag; one ultradiligent one even asks to see inside my wallet's coin compartment. Such precautions, it turns out, aren't limited to J. Crew, which says it's trying to prevent employee theft. At some mall stores, employees have to carry their personal belongings in clear plastic bags.

But that's hardly on my mind when I start my first shift at Store 700, two stories of prep heaven in a chic urban mall. It's among the busiest in the chain and usually packed with inquisitive tourists. Despite plans to have me shadow a veteran clerk on my first day, there's no time to observe. And since I have no idea where anything is located, how the clothes fit or where to find the “hold” slips, I have to learn on the fly. With my headset buzzing every 30 seconds with chatter between sales clerks and the back room, it feels like working the floor of the stock exchange.

J. Crew says that, had I stayed longer, I would have received additional training. Indeed, after several shifts, I do start getting the hang of things and can see how I might soon keep up with my fellow clerks who cheerfully juggle multiple customers—along with their refolding duties. Plus it's fun to, say, encourage shoppers squeezing into toothpick cords to try the more flattering boot cut. Unlike retailers that create elaborate scripts dictating every potential interaction, J. Crew allows its clerks considerable freedom in handling customers, encouraging us to provide honest feedback in the dressing room. (“They'll love you for it,” says our manager.) I also appreciate that I'm not immediately held to a stringent hourly sales goal. In some chains, even rookies have to meet tough quotas for sales, card applications and shelf upkeep—or face the ax.

Still, it's easy to understand why annual industry turnover in retailing tops 100 percent. One manager discourages me from chatting with coworkers, even when the store's closed and we're stocking displays. In the back, a grimy locker room doubles as the break room, with a few broken, stained office chairs, no table and notices from management about a cockroach problem.

According to Ron Wince, CEO of Guidon Performance Solutions, a Phoenix consulting firm, space in the back of the store costs just as much to rent as space in the front, so retailers tend to scrimp on employee areas. The average break room, he says, is “a pit.” J. Crew’s response? It’s up to every associate to keep the break room clean.

Then there are the unpredictable hours, perhaps the toughest adjustment for anyone used to the office 9-to-5. J. Crew’s policy of putting hourly workers “on call” actually isn’t so unusual in this climate; such flexibility helps companies align labor costs with traffic flow, says consultant Fleener. My other surprise? A midweek, nine-hour overnight shift to help unpack and fold hundreds of cartons of new holiday inventory. It feels odd to punch in after dark and downright surreal when the manager tells us to take our dinner break before 2 a.m., because that’s when he’ll be locking the doors for the rest of the night. Consultants say this practice, which J. Crew says it adopted for associates’ safety, has become common in the retail world.

Sometime around sunrise, I’m having an existential zombie crisis over the fact that I’ve just spent four hours folding a small table of T-shirts. But a cheerful coworker says not to worry: He once spent a whole night on a single sweater display. “It was a good-ass table,” he adds proudly. He’s right—a decent 5 a.m. folding job is nothing to scoff at. Still, my manager thinks otherwise. “Not so great,” he says, and he ruffles up my stacks. “We’ll just have to give them a ‘vintage’ look.” great,” he says, and he ruffles up my stacks. “We’ll just have to give them a ‘vintage’ look.”

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