

Essential Skills for the Retail/Wholesale/Grocery Sector

Sector Profile

Canadian supermarket sales were estimated at \$65.8 billion in 2007, with B.C.'s portion of the industry posting sales valued at \$9.9 billion. In terms of total 2007 sales, supermarkets were the largest single trade group in B.C.'s retail sector, representing 17.5 percent of the province's retail sales. The supermarket sector accounted for 16.0 percent of Canada's total retail sales in 2007.

Statistics Canada's Business Register shows that B.C. was home to about 1,598 supermarkets and other grocery stores in 2007, about 14.7 percent of the national total of 10,837. Data on the number of employees per establishment is available for 1,151 of the B.C. stores. The data show that B.C. has a range of supermarkets of varying size. Just over a quarter of all establishments are small, with between one and four employees. The remaining 75 percent of establishments are spread roughly equally across the size ranges until the largest size categories of 200-499 and over 500. Forty-three establishments in B.C. fall into the two largest size categories, or 3.8 percent of the total.

A total of 53,710 British Columbians were identified by the 2006 Census as being employed by grocery store organizations, 13 percent of the national total of 414,470.

At the time of the Census, B.C. had approximately 12.4 grocery store employees per 1,000 population, slightly less than Canada at 12.7.

The occupational breakdown of the industry in Canada and in B.C. is almost identical.

In both cases, over 80 percent of people employed in grocery stores are in sales and service occupations, such as the six occupations included in this study.

Management occupations account for a further 10 percent of employees in the B.C. industry and 11 percent in Canada.

Overall, half of employees in grocery stores throughout Canada are full-time; for B.C. the proportion is higher at 53 percent. The percentage working full-time in the sales and services occupations is substantially higher in B.C. at 47 percent, compared to Canada at 43 percent.

Required Education & Training

Grocery workers in B.C. are more likely to have finished high school than their counterparts in the Canadian industry overall. Thirty percent of Canadian grocery workers have not completed high school, compared with 23 percent of B.C. grocery workers. B.C. workers (6%) are less likely to have completed an apprenticeship training program than Canadian workers (8%).

Several positions in grocery stores, such as meat cutter and baker, are apprenticeable Red Seal trades. There was a general consensus among store managers interviewed that while they would prefer high school graduation and experience and/or a journey person's ticket for these positions, the reality is that this has become an unrealistic expectation.

For store supervisors, most stores indicated they would prefer Grade 12 graduation, but it is not a requirement. In almost all stores interviewed, supervisors are hired internally and have already worked in several jobs in the store.

While some managers indicated that they would prefer Grade 12 graduation, none of the stores insisted on a particular academic standard for cashiers.

One common finding among all stores interviewed is that they rely on on-the-job training to meet most of their training needs. The grocery retail industry operates in a fast-paced, competitive environment. It is often not practical to send employees off-site for training. For these reasons, various forms of on-the-job training, ranging from fairly structured and formal to informal, are the standard for this industry.

Larger chains are more likely to have formal, on-the-job training programs delivered by designated trainers who have received training on how to train. Some components may be delivered in a group setting, or made available to employees through a computer terminal or manual. In general, smaller chains and single stores are less likely to be able to provide structured and formal training for anyone except managers. Most stores, will, however, provide financial support to employees who wish to take the meat cutter or baker certification.

All stores interviewed, regardless of size, utilize in-house standard orientation and training programs for all new employees. These usually include sessions on company policies, expectations of employees, benefits, and safety procedures. New employees are also paired with a more experienced employee in the same department for anywhere from one day to several months, depending on the complexity and risks of the job (for example, a very 'green' meat cutter might be paired with a more experienced meat cutter for up to 6 months before being left to work on his/her own.) One grocery chain requires that all employees have a minimum of 4 hours of training before they can work on their own.

The mandatory Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) new employee training is included in all orientation programs. All stores require all employees who handle food in the course of their duties to receive Level I Food Safe training, and some require all employees to take this training. Because this is available in high schools, most new employees bring this qualification to the job. However, all stores interviewed will pay for employees to get this training, which can be accessed through various sources, such as Health Authorities, Regional Districts, Community Colleges and private trainers. Some stores pay for longer term employees to take Level II Food Safe as well.

The essential skill that all stores include in their training provided to all their employees is Oral Communication. This consistently emerged as a key skill in every grocery retail occupation and was frequently mentioned as the most valuable skill an employee could bring to the job.

Skill Gaps & Training Needs

This study revealed that the human resources challenges for the B.C. grocery retail sector are very similar to those identified in the Canadian Food Industry Council's (CFIC's) national study. B.C. grocers are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and

retain workers. Several interviewees noted that there is a lack of recognition for the industry and its workers. Retail grocery is no longer seen as a career and therefore does not attract people seeking full-time, long-term work in the numbers required to ensure development of future industry leaders. Grocers reported having particular difficulty filling meat cutter, baker and deli positions.

In some cases, interviewees attributed the difficulty with recruitment and retention to wage levels in the grocery retail industry and the fact that young employees can earn much higher wages in other industries. One interviewee noted that he tends to lose his part-time employees in the summer months to higher paying construction jobs. As the 2010 Olympics approaches, the industry in B.C. may experience intensified competition from other industries for human resources.¹ An interviewee indicated that people are not attracted to meat cutting as a career, particularly in the grocery retail sector, because of relatively low wages. Efforts are underway to broaden the appeal of meat cutting as a profession with the launch of a new website – Join the Meatforce – that provides information about the industry, how to get training and job opportunities.²

Others pointed to poor availability of higher level training programs. For example, there is only one location in B.C. for meat cutter certification, at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops. The travel required to study meat cutting likely deters many British Columbians from pursuing this career. Similarly, Red Seal Baker's certification is only available in B.C. at Vancouver Island University³ and this may deter mainland residents from pursuing baking as a career. External training for retail managers customized to the grocery sector is also hard to find in the province.

Availability and accessibility are significant barriers to training for retail grocers. Issues relating to meat cutter and baker certification have already been noted. Training in supervisory and people management skills for retail grocery was also frequently identified as a significant gap in available training. Interviewees also noted that good training on the business side for managers is hard to find. One manager suggested that a certificate or diploma in retail grocery management would not only help to address this, but would also raise the profile of the industry and encourage more people to consider it as a career.

Time and cost are also major barriers to training in the retail grocery sector. Many managers told us that they had excellent senior staff who were very good in-house trainers, but the pace and demands of the industry make it difficult to free them to provide the training. Similarly, the salaries of trainees must still be paid while they are being trained. Part-time staffing brings the additional challenges of reduced availability for training, longer periods between training sessions, a greater need to repeat material, and higher turnover - all of which make training more time consuming and

¹ Peters, Carly, 'Long Term Success', *Western Grocer*. Available on the CFIC website at www.cfic-ccia.ca

² The website is a project of the Canadian Professional Meat Cutters Association, with funding from *the Agriculture and Food Council of Alberta, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the Agriculture Council of Saskatchewan Inc., and the Investment in Agriculture Foundation of British Columbia* and is found at www.meatforce.ca

³ Formerly Malaspina University-College.

expensive to provide. Costs and time issues are exacerbated if employees must travel off-site for training. Transportation was noted as a significant issue for First Nations staff in particular.

The table below shows, for each of the six grocery occupations reviewed in this study, the essential skills identified in the appropriate profile as important to that occupation and the essential skills where potential skill gaps were identified through this research. In some cases the gaps are in areas identified as important and in other cases they are not. It should be noted that HRSDC profiles for the three lower skill occupations, sales clerks, cashiers and clerks, are becoming out-dated as these were the first occupations profiled. As such, all gaps warrant further consideration, regardless of whether they are in an area identified as important.

Essential Skills and Essential Skills Gaps Cross Walk

Positions	Essential skills identified as most important by HRSDC or CFIC	Areas identified as potential skill gaps
Store Supervisors and Head Cashiers	Oral communication Problem solving Decision making Working with others	Oral communication Job task planning & organizing Numeracy Computer skills
Meat Cutters	Document use Working with others Oral communication	Document use
Bakers	Job task planning & organizing Oral communication Decision making Reading text	Job task planning & organizing Reading text Numeracy
Sales Clerks	Oral communication Finding information Working with others Continuous learning	Document use Computer skills Job task planning & organizing
Cashiers	Document use Numeracy Oral communication Memory	Document use Numeracy Oral communication Problem solving
Clerks	Oral communication Job task planning & organizing	Oral communication Reading Numeracy Document use

Existing Workplace Curricula & Resources

Off the shelf training, for example FOOSDSAFE or WCB training for new employees, was identified as a common resource for employers. Interviewees also identified a variety of methods used to deliver customer service training and to reinforce its practice by staff. Most stores have checklists that department managers or supervisors review with new employees and may ask them to sign; many use commercial videos or scenario playing; one store has computerized customer service training so that staff can work on the training when the store is less busy; another store holds group sessions in the evenings with training delivered by the HR Manager. Most stores use Communication Books – one per department – where critical new information for staff is posted. All department employees are required to read these when they come on shift and may be required to sign them in some cases.

Recommendations

Validating and enhancing the preliminary results from this study would be an important pre-requisite to the development of an effective skills enhancement strategy. Of critical importance to this next step is the formal involvement of a partner, such as the Canadian Food Industry Council, which brings a great depth of knowledge of both the industry and its workforce to the table. What is needed is sensitivity to the industry's traditions and constraints. Training interventions will best succeed when they use the processes already underway throughout the sector – on-the-job-training. Training with an essential skills focus will provide employees with a skill set they will have throughout their careers, ultimately enriching their own lives and benefiting the B.C. economy.

Research Methodology

The study relies on three main sources of information: industry statistics from Statistics Canada; interviews with owners and managers of eight grocery organizations in B.C.; and the results of a web-based employee survey. Six occupations (identified in the National Occupational Classification system) specific to the grocery sector were reviewed in detail: store supervisors and head cashiers, meat cutters, bakers, sales clerks, cashiers and clerks. Securing the participation of grocery stores proved to be challenging within the two-month timeframe of the study. While input was received from a range of organizations, from national chains to one-store independents, the study did not obtain input from the three largest chains in B.C. and representation of B.C.'s northern region is relatively weak. For this reason, the essential skills findings in this report should be considered preliminary.

This report was prepared by Camosun College working with the Canadian Food Industry Council. For more information and to read the full report, please contact Scott MacInnis at macinnis@camosun.bc.ca.