

Braving the tides of a shifting retail industry

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The rules are changing for those who aspire to carve out a place for themselves in the online marketplace



Sears

and Amazon – two retail giants with remarkable track records of financial success – yet, one is now at the doorstep of demise and the other is on a trajectory that seems only to be moving upward.

If the online marketplace has rendered the traditional in-store shopping experience on the brink, then how are the rules changing for those who aspire to work in the retail environment? Since it is Grey Cup weekend ... Consider the role of the quarterback. There was a time when quarterbacks would almost universally complete passes from the pocket, relying on the offensive line to protect them, so as to stay upright and pass downfield without much risk of being hit or injured by the defence. The most important skills for a quarterback were a great throwing arm, accuracy and the ability to scan the entire field for players who were open for the touchdown pass.

In the world of professional football today, the expectations on a quarterback have changed. Sure, the fundamentals are still important, but it's just as essential to be mobile to avoid pressure from the defence and, if necessary, complete the big throw downfield while in motion. Nowadays, with a few notable exceptions, most typical quarterbacks are valued more for their athleticism and speed, for their agility in adapting quickly to changing situations on the field.

That, when you think about it, isn't that much different from what is happening in the world of retail. If you're a worker relying on skills that made you successful a decade ago, then you may also find yourself, much like Sears, at the edge of extinction. What will it take to thrive in retail? So what exactly are the career skills needed to adapt and thrive in the changing retail landscape? While the clichéd welcoming smile and positive attitude criteria may still be true, it's certainly much, much more.

When comparing Sears with Amazon, the obvious shift is that traditional retail is being replaced by options that promote less interaction with people and more interaction with systems. That means digital skills – web support, software development, even the ability to write code and program – are paramount. In other words, invest in more technology learning.

In an online world, writing concisely and compellingly becomes crucial.

The ability to write is, essentially, the ability to communicate online. Whether you're composing web copy, sending e-mails or even documenting telephone interactions, how you write matters. Like it or not, people make assumptions about your intelligence, your ability to get the job done and your credibility based on your writing. So learn how to write and you'll position yourself as a valuable asset in a technologydriven retail environment.

Another key proficiency: thoughtful, yet agile, decision-making.

Jeff Bezos, Amazon's founder and chief executive, has pinpointed two kinds of decisions – Type 1 and Type 2. Type 1 decisions are not reversible and, therefore, require great care before action. Type 2 decisions, on the other hand, are like walking through a door: If you don't like the outcome, you can always go back. Your career success will lie in being able to differentiate between the two.

There are two other factors that are particularly relevant in increasingly system-driven environments, such as retail.

First, an immense amount of data are being amassed and classified; that means that it is essential to be able to rapidly absorb and analyze vast quantities of information, to separate the necessary from the nice-to-know. So find ways to demonstrate and showcase your cognitive abilities.

Second, a growing shift toward collaborative decision-making. While working in teams is certainly not new, what is gaining prominence is intellectual humility: a willingness to consider and accept that other people have valid (and perhaps even better) ideas and solutions than you might. If you can demonstrate intellectual humility, coupled with a problem-solving mindset, you offer a very powerful combination to the world of retail.