UPPER INDUSTRY REPORT · CPG & RETAIL

The CPG & Retail Talent Market in 2026.

How AI-accelerated sourcing meets seasonal, high-volume, and specialized hiring across CPG and retail — a data-driven field guide for talent teams.

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KEY FINDINGS

26.7%	voluntary turnover in retail & wholesale — the highest of any sector Mercer measured, roughly 2x the 13.0% all-industry average.[1]
265K–365K	2025 holiday seasonal hires forecast by NRF — the lowest level in at least 15 years, down from 442,000 in 2024.[2]
63%	of CPG employers cite skills gaps as their primary barrier to growth; 42% expect talent availability to decline further.[5]
737K	retail trade job openings in March 2026, up 48% year-over-year even as seasonal hiring volumes moderate.[7]
43%	of hourly retail and hospitality hires leave within 90 days, driving continuous re-hiring cycles.[13]

01 — The Scale

How big is retail and CPG hiring, really?

> **Retail is the largest private employer in America — and its labor market moves fast in both directions.**

Retail is the single largest private-sector employer in the U.S., directly and indirectly supporting **55 million jobs** — about 1 in 4 U.S. jobs — and contributing **$5.3 trillion** to GDP.[6] Retail alone directly employs **32.2 million** people, representing **26%** of total U.S. employment and **$3.0 trillion** in labor income.[6] CPG, meanwhile, is consolidating fast — **140 M&A deals** closed in 2025 worth roughly **$152 billion**, up 50% in value year over year — each reshuffling talent needs across the newly combined organizations.[8]

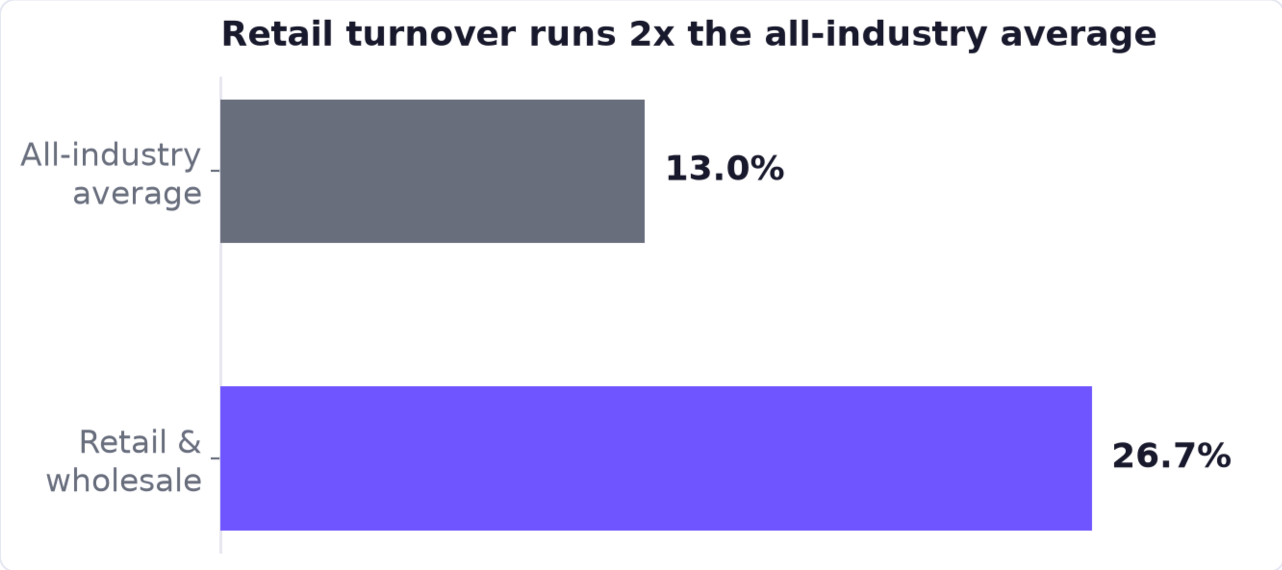
55M jobs supported by retail, directly and indirectly (NRF)	**$5.3T** retail's contribution to U.S. GDP	**$152B** CPG M&A deal value in 2025, +50% YoY

02 — The Turnover Crisis

Why does retail lose so many workers?

> **Retail turnover runs roughly 2x the all-industry average — and hourly turnover can top 60%.**

Mercer's 2025 U.S. Turnover Survey found voluntary turnover in retail and wholesale at **26.7%**, the highest of any sector measured and nearly double the **13.0%** all-industry average.[1] In-store hourly turnover can run **60% or higher** in a given year, and Korn Ferry data shows hourly retail turnover peaked at **75.8%** in 2022 before easing to roughly 60–65% by late 2024.[9,14]



Source: Mercer 2025 US Turnover Survey.

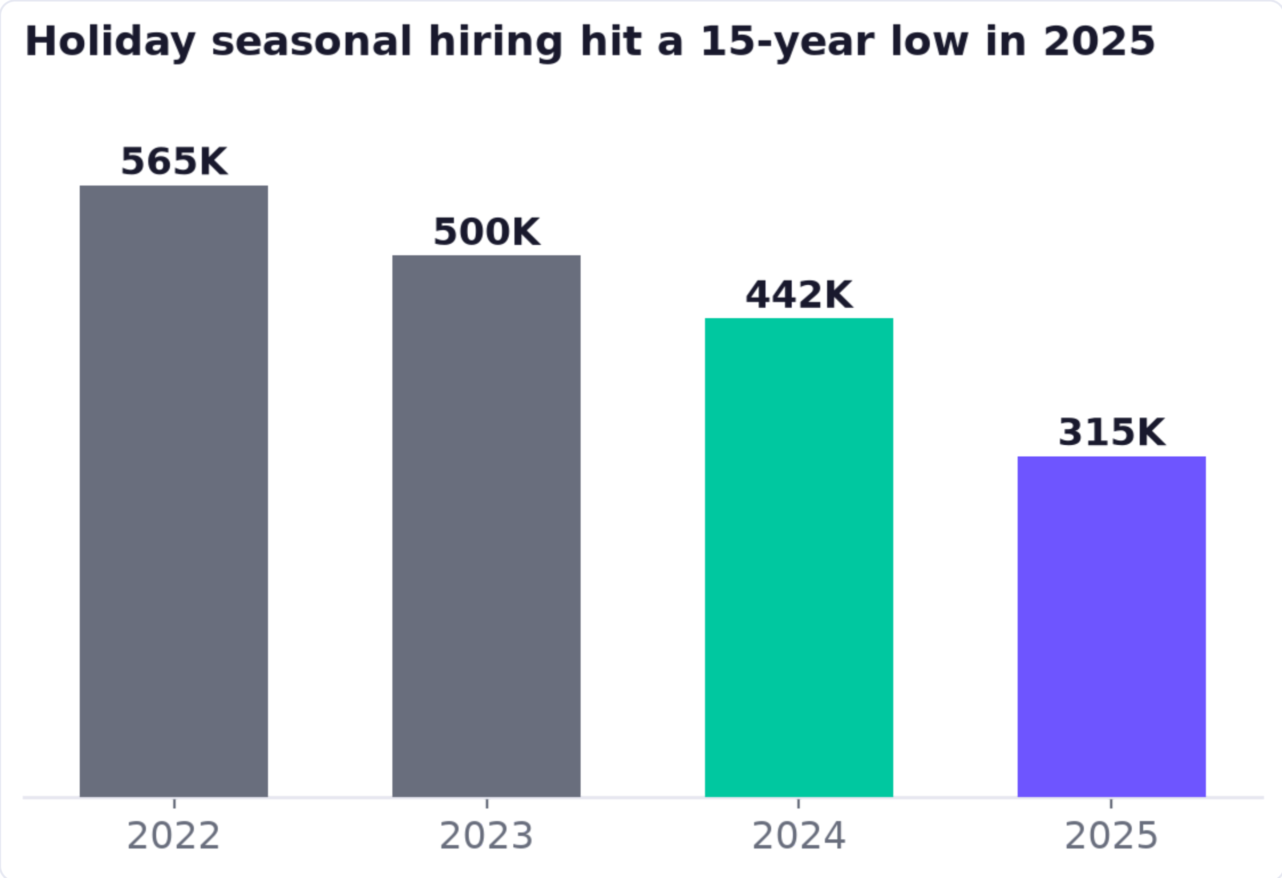
Much of this is front-loaded: **43%** of hourly retail and hospitality staff leave within their first 90 days, and separations run 3.8–4.1% monthly versus a 3.0% all-sector average.[13,10] The lesson: retail's staffing challenge isn't just filling a role once — it's filling it repeatedly, on a short clock.

03 — The Seasonal Shift

Is seasonal hiring disappearing?

> **2025 saw the lowest holiday seasonal hiring forecast in 15 years — even as holiday sales hit a record.**

NRF forecast just **265,000–365,000** seasonal hires for the 2025 holidays, the lowest level in at least 15 years and down sharply from **442,000** in 2024 — even as holiday sales were projected to surpass **$1 trillion** for the first time.[2,3] Retailers appear to be leaning more on existing staff hours, automation, and flexible scheduling than on net-new seasonal headcount.



Source: National Retail Federation holiday hiring forecasts, 2022–2025.

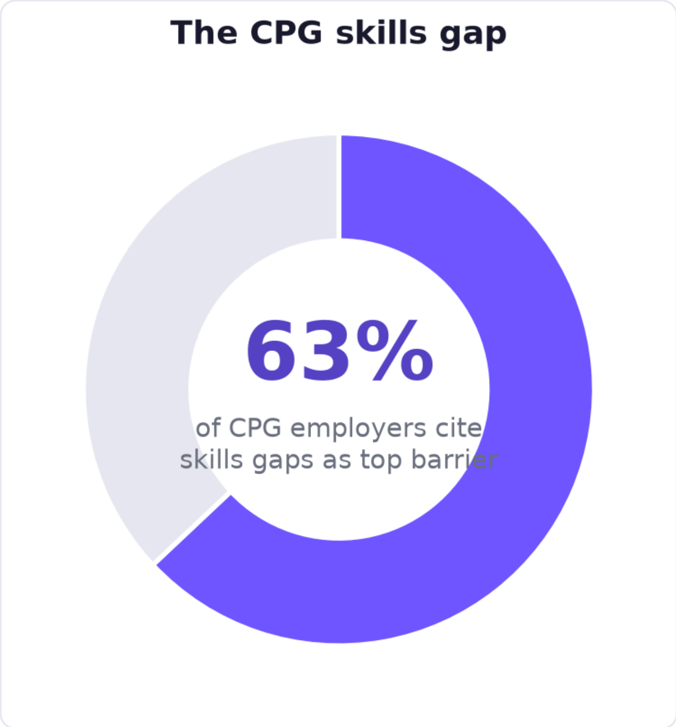
At the same time, overall retail job openings are rising: **737,000** openings in March 2026, up **48%** year-over-year, per BLS JOLTS data.[7] The mix is shifting — fewer pure seasonal adds, more year-round and specialized roles.

04 — The CPG Skills Gap

What's the hardest talent to find in CPG?

> **Nearly two-thirds of CPG employers say skills gaps — especially digital and analytics talent — are their biggest growth barrier.**

63% of CPG employers cite skills gaps as their primary barrier to growth, and **42%** expect talent availability to decline further over the next five years, according to Slayton Search's 2025 CPG talent-war analysis.[5] CPG CEO tenure has compressed to just **7.7 years** on average, reflecting how much pressure boards are putting on leadership to modernize commercial and digital capability fast.[5]



Source: Slayton Search, 2025 CPG Talent War analysis.

> "Retail's problem is volume and churn. CPG's problem is scarcity and specialization. Most hiring tools are built for only one of those — not both."

05 — The Application Paradox

If applicant volume is up, why is hiring still slow?

> **Retailers now get more applicants per opening than ever — the bottleneck has moved to screening, not sourcing.**

Retail openings now draw roughly **43 applicants** per role on average, up from 35 — evidence that volume isn't the constraint anymore.[7] Yet time-to-fill for retail overall still runs **40–42 days**, with corporate and management roles running **45–90+ days** and senior roles **90–120+ days**.[11,12] One 2025 analysis found hourly retail time-to-fill improved from 95 to 67 days after retailers automated the top of the hiring funnel — evidence that fixing screening friction, not adding more applicants, is what moves the needle.[15]

06 — The Playbook

What should a retail or CPG talent team do about it?

Five moves separate the retail and CPG organizations that will win the next 24 months of hiring:

1. Automate the top of the hourly funnel. With 43 applicants per opening, instant screening and self-service scheduling — not more sourcing — is where speed comes from.
2. Screen for fit before day one. Since 43% of hourly hires leave within 90 days, matching on genuine fit signals up front reduces the churn that keeps recruiters refilling the same seats.
3. Re-engage your existing pool first. Mine ATS history for previously screened seasonal and hourly candidates before sourcing net-new for repeat roles.
4. Widen the aperture for scarce CPG roles. Skill-graph matching surfaces adjacent-industry digital and analytics talent that keyword search misses.
5. Plan for churn, not just one-time hiring. Build always-on sourcing pipelines for chronically high-turnover roles instead of treating each vacancy as a one-off search.

This is precisely the model UPPER was built to run: autonomous, compliant sourcing and screening that scales for hourly volume and narrows for corporate scarcity — all in one platform, so lean retail and CPG talent teams can staff both ends of the spectrum without two separate toolchains.

The Walmart AI-hiring reference (Section on time-to-fill improvement) is drawn from third-party reporting on a vendor case study, not an independently audited outcome, and is presented here as illustrative context.

Sources

1. Mercer — 2025 US Turnover Survey
2. CNBC — Retail Holiday Hiring Lowest in 15 Years
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6. NRF / PwC — Retail's Impact Report, March 2024
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10. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics — JOLTS Table 4
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12. Tyges (citing SHRM) — The Hidden Toll of an Empty Chair
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This report synthesizes third-party research current as of July 2026; figures are attributed to their original sources above. Some forward projections are inherently uncertain. UPPER edition H2 2026 — refreshed semiannually.