

# Career Development in Retailing - Equal Opportunities for Men and Women?

Abstract for

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## **Introduction**

Although the Swedish retail sector has grown substantially the past 20 years and is rapidly cementing its importance to the domestic economy, it does not lack challenges. One such challenge, identified in previous studies (Andersson, Kazemi, Tengblad & Wickelgren, 2011; Wickelgren, Kazemi, Andersson & Tengblad, 2012; Andersson, Kazemi, Tengblad & Wickelgren, 2013), concerns attraction, recruitment and retention of competent co-workers. These personnel matters are pointed out, by retail managers, as essential for operations and inherently difficult to handle. One factor for the retail sector ability to attract and retain competent co-workers is the opportunity for making a career.

Career development in the retail sector might be a challenge for several reasons. The retail sector is claimed to be a sector where younger and relatively inexperienced people might get their first job, and while offering limited career opportunities, besides being store manager, these younger people soon leave retailing for further studies or for working in other sectors offering better prospects for career development (Isaksson & Bellaagh, 1999; Ljunggren Lönnberg, 2006; Danilov & Hellgren, 2010). Parallel to this somewhat gloomy overall picture of the retail as a sector with apparent challenges concerning opportunities for a rewarding career for their employees we have seen a number of accounts of the opposite picture while conducting previous studies (Wickelgren, Kazemi, Andersson & Tengblad, 2012; Andersson, Kazemi, Tengblad & Wickelgren, 2013). When asking retail store managers to describe their personal career development to their current position, several rich accounts of a variety of career opportunities appear (Ibid). This goes for both male and female store managers, although the gender issue tend to haunt the retail sector when it comes to the proportions of men and women in the role as store managers (Handelsnytt, 2011a; Handelsnytt 2011b). So there seems to be possible to extract different descriptions of the current situation depending on how the issue of career development with regard to gender is studied. Therefore, we have started a study that aims to illuminate the issues of gender based career opportunities in the Swedish retail sector using different research approaches. We

are pursuing the study using both statistically compiled data and by interviews with men and women of the trade.

### **On career in retailing**

Whilst performing a study on careers and career development it is important to ponder what is meant by “career development”. Career development might mean that a seller in a store is being promoted to become the store manager. That would constitute a classic idea of advancement within an organisation or a vertical career move (Glaser, 1968). However, making a career could also be about leaving an organisation to embark another, thus switching employer and perhaps tasks, constituting a lateral career move or a horizontal one (Hughes, 1958; van Maanen and Barley, 1984; Lindgren et al 2001). In fact, in our changing world, the traditional idea of career understood as vertical promotion in a single organisation, might be increasingly outdated (DeFilippi & Arthur, 1996; Arthur & Rosseau, 1996).

Since most stores in Swedish retailing are rather small the number of formal hierarchical levels are limited, to say the least. An average store is staffed by sellers and a store manager, so there are only two hierarchical levels at the typical retail unit. As the mobility in the Swedish labour market generally has increased (Helldahl, 2008) it is relevant to study individual career statement of people within retailing who have been in the business for a while to illustrate the variety of possible career development otherwise poorly captured in the body of statistics available. In doing so, we have been inspired by the broad definition of the notion of career of Arthur *et al* (1989:8) who claimed career to be: “[...] *the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time*”. Such a definition captures both horizontal and vertical career moves, as well as intra- and inter-organizational career development. This kind of career development has come to be known as boundaryless career (DeFilippi & Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rosseau, 1996; Sullivan, Carden & Martin, 1998; Peiperl, Arthur & Anand, 2002).

### **On gender in retailing**

There are several studies on different aspects of gender and career (e.g. Kanter, 1977; Wahl, 1992; Eriksson, 2000; Renemark, 2007; Linghag, 2009), but no studies particularly focusing retail career in Sweden. However, in Bergman and Ivarsson (2010) demands on employees of being available for employers, family and customers are highlighted as challenges for the employees and for retailing as a sector. Difficulties to combine work and private life are described from certain gender differences, and the results mention an extra challenge for retailing to ensure the employment terms of women.

Examples of studies of gender and career in retailing are available from Great Britain. A study of senior retail managers found that men accumulated social capital and used network techniques more strategically and instrumentally in a career promoting purpose than women did, when reaching senior levels. Women at senior levels voiced that they used networks for social support and handling and

overcoming macho cultures (Broadbridge, 2010). In another study from Great Britain, some partial explanations for women not reaching the position as store manager are presented; informal promotion processes, networking, mentorship, and a persistent opinion of management as being something “masculine” (Traves, Brockbank and Tomlinson, 1997). The question remains yet unanswered if these results might be relevant in a Swedish context.

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