

## Features

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## Bridging the Labor Gap

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You can't have a conversation about the retail environment anymore without talking about labor issues. It's most often the underlying factor standing in the way of greater profits—"If only I could hire more workers," I often hear owners and managers lament.

I turned to Sam Kirkland, strategic relationship manager for Epicor, a point-of-sale (POS) solution for all sizes of garden retailers, as well as hardware and sporting goods stores. We talked at length about mobile POS (mPOS) solutions, and why they're the next step for retailers looking to gain more employee productivity,

and improve speed and number of transactions. It's the next tech step before self-checkout, which he hears a lot of retailers talking about, but very few jumping into (yet).

"Mobile POS is going to bridge a gap of either labor gets resolved and we learn how to cross-train clerks so they can do more or it's a bridge into a self-checkout environment," he said.

Either way, more retailers are looking into the mobile system for greater efficiencies. So what is it? Simply put, it's a wireless device that looks similar to a smartphone that allows you to access almost all the same information as a POS terminal. You can insert it into a fitted "pistol grip" that allows you to scan items for checkout or scan products for inventory management. You can swipe credit cards on it and add on a PIN option for debit cards. You can even add on a mobile printer to print receipts.

Consider the number of times a day employees get stopped by a customer and they need to go to a terminal to look up availability or product information, then return to the customer to answer, Sam said.

"[mPOS] gives you visibility just like you were at any terminal in the store," he added. "It's a lot closer to having an actual terminal at your fingertips, whereas it used to be very minimal information."

### What to Consider

Before you jump in, there are things you need to consider. The mPOS devices work on a Radio Frequency, or RF, and some switch to cellular automatically if the RF is blocked somehow. This means you need to determine if your store works with this technology, or if you need to augment your RF and/or cell coverage in some way—this may be a consult with an expert to find out.

Next, a management discussion is important to determine the goals and your expected return on investment for the mPOS devices (you'll likely need more than one—more on that in a minute). Do you want to be able to conduct transactions in other parts of the store? Do you want to increase the amount of people in your loyalty program? Do you want to improve the speed and frequency of your inventory checks? Do you want to offer a “concierge-type service” where an employee shops with a customer and finishes the transaction right there?

There are lots of reasons to go with the mPOS, but do know what you want to get out of it first because it will be a financial investment. However, Sam noted that if you researched the tech four or five years ago, you'll be pleasantly surprised at how much the cost has come down. You can get a quality device for around \$1,000 or even a little under now. But, he stressed, opt for a quality device and the warranty (and he's not typically a warranty guy, but in this case he recommends it).

“Get a business-grade piece of equipment,” he said, adding the rough environment of garden center retail will mean it'll get dropped, get water on it, etc. They typically last three to five years, with five being if you took really good care of it. Every two to three years there are new updates that add more functionality, so it might be beneficial to have a replacement plan in place to keep up.

## **More to Think About**

Once you've parsed out the basics, Sam recommended buying one device well ahead of when you want to deploy it. For example, if you want to be up and running by Spring 2024 in the Midwest, start at least three months ahead of time to get the hardware. It takes a little time to set up and train.

“Give yourself time so you don't create higher anxiety for the staff,” he added.

Once you're comfortable with the first device, then it's time to consider if you need more, and if you do, how many. Sam said often once employees get trained on it, they want to use it more. Consider how many employees would benefit from them and what the ROI on each one would be.

Not all your employees may be clamoring to use it, though. Those who are very comfortable with a smartphone are the ones likely to ease into using an mPOS device.

There's also one more added benefit in that it helps with employee retention. “As we look at how to get more out of employees without that point of working them out of a job, this can make them feel more valuable in the business,” he said, adding there's an additional benefit. “In talks years ago, I asked, ‘Is your business a cool place to work?’

Mobile makes it a cool place to work.” **GP**