

# IDEAS

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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

## I SEE DEAD PEOPLE

Recall the movie *The Sixth Sense* when young Cole confesses, “I see dead people.” These abject folks meander about oblivious to the reality that they’re dead. Are any of your employees this way, productively dead or irrelevant?

Employee termination is never a happy topic, especially this time of year. It’s a new season and, hopefully, a time to redefine your business. We like to focus on our inventory and product mix, but our “people mix” is just as important.

### THE DARK SIDE OF VETERAN STAFF

The best competitive edge independent stores maintain over big-box competition is staff. Our best employees not only harbor a passion for our product but are also immersed in the local music community. Willing to settle for modest salaries, they sign on to our industry out of a love of music. Being part of this community gets them out of bed to punch our time clocks and serve our customers. If your operation is successful, it’s most likely because of low turnover and a crew that feels comfortable in your retail culture.



**Productive employees can turn into dead weight if they don’t adapt to new trends**

Still, there’s a potential dark side. What do you do when long-term veterans have skill sets that are no longer relevant in today’s buying culture? What happens when a worker has been hired to serve a customer profile that’s no longer profitable or has simply vanished?

The sad thing is these can be truly good people, but if they’re

incapable of catering to today’s market, they’re doing your business more harm than good.

When I entered music retail back in 1980, we had an active organ club. These seniors met monthly and communed in our store after hours at a time when half our piano department showroom featured Hammond organs. It has probably been 10 years since an organ graced our floor.

Back in the 1970s and early ’80s, we had a vibrant live music scene in our town and a sales crew tuned to support professional players. The DJ era and a higher legal drinking age put the kibosh on most of this activity. Twenty years later, the scene has all but vanished.

We were also a professional band instrument headquarters for a half century until the advent of specialty warehouses and toll-free phone numbers. The Internet sealed the deal, toppling us from the top of that summit.

Has this been all bad? No. We’ve replaced organs with digital pianos and MIDI-capable keyboards. The live music scene has been replaced with a plethora of personal home recording gear and church

musician hobbyists. The school music rental market remains profitable even though the top-end wind market is almost nonexistent. In other words, markets have not gone away but evolved.

### ADAPTABILITY IS A MUST

The pregnant question is: What happens when markets change and employees don’t? If your veterans are buggy whip experts, what happens to them when horses are no longer a fashionable mode of transportation? What happens when the rate of change advances exponentially?

Here’s a hard-core truth: With the virulent speed of change in today’s retail culture, adaptability now trumps longevity and expertise when it comes to staffing.

Making the tough decision to let an untrainable veteran go is one of the most unpleasant duties management faces, but it’s necessary. The only way to avoid employee obsolescence is to hire with this aptitude for adaptability in mind. **MI**

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