



5-Star Employees

Discover What It Takes to Shine

How do you create a thriving business? What are the traits of great employees who stand out within a team? *Hardware Retailing* spoke with successful retailers to discover what they look for in top-notch talent. Those retailers recommended their own five-star employees. To learn what motivates them to drive their teams to success, we spoke to the five-stars, too.

In the following pages, you'll meet excellent employees from three unique home improvement businesses to learn how they entered the retail industry

and how they perform at their peak daily. You'll also find out from their employers what characteristics have helped these workers stand out in the interview process and as valued members of their retail operations today.

Future five-stars can visit [TheRedT.com/5-star-checklist](https://www.theredt.com/5-star-checklist) for an overview of the qualities that make a well-rounded employee with prospects for rising in their companies.

The employees highlighted in this article are examples of people who embody the characteristics their employers look for in every person hired for their respective positions.



Striving to Do More

Julie Haff
Head Cashier
Connolly's Do it Best
Hardware & Rental

After 25 years of owning and operating a pet supply retail business, Julie Haff and her husband closed up shop. Although she was hunting for a new job, she didn't think retail would continue to be a part of her journey—yet a routine shopping trip opened a door to something that she still loves today.

“My husband was shopping at Connolly's one day, and he learned that the store was hiring for cashiers,” Haff says. “At that point I had never even been inside the store, but I drove straight there and filled out an application. Ten years later, I'm still here and now I'm the head cashier.”

Haff came to the business with no prior knowledge of the hardware industry, but her background as a business owner and her strong work ethic have made her one of the most vital employees in the business, Connolly's Do it Best Hardware & Rental owner Michael Connolly says.

Personality is very important for a cashier, he says. The cashier is the first and last person to address a customer, so it is important for people in this role to be friendly and make a good impression on the customer. Looking at past experiences, Connolly says he would hire someone with a good personality even if they had never used a cash register, because he can teach someone the skills they need to do their job, but he can't teach personality.

“I would rather be patient in the hiring process than to hire someone that ends up being a project,” he says. “I knew immediately that Julie was a good fit. During the interview, she was very easy to talk with. She had prior experience in retail and was able to speak to that experience.”

“What I appreciate so much about Julie is that she is superb with customers, but she is also organized and a self-motivated individual.”

—Michael Connolly,
Connolly's Do it Best Hardware & Rental

The Right Stuff

The traits and skills Haff possesses work to her advantage in her position. She enjoys getting to know customers and giving them directions to the department or person they might need. Being able to help solve customers' problems is a point of pride for her.

“I know that the majority of people who walk through those doors are here because they have a problem they're dealing with,” Haff says. “If I can at least get them in the right area and alert one of our experts to help, it really makes me feel good.”

Haff is also a standout employee because of the work ethic she exhibits in other parts of her position.

“What I appreciate so much about Julie is that she is superb with customers, but she is also organized and a self-motivated individual,” Connolly says. “She keeps her area at the cash register tidy, she knows the sales we have running and she can quickly recognize when there's an issue in the store. Because of that, she helps us keep the business running smoothly. And if there is a problem, she tries to come up with solutions to fix it.”

Setting an Example

Staying busy is vital for cashiers, even if shoppers aren't walking through the door or are ready to check out.

Haff multitasks, whether that means reviewing sales books on the computer, checking inventory levels or making price changes. She not only compares inventory for her location, but for all four Connolly's stores in the Fort Wayne, Indiana, area. When new employees join the team, Haff is also responsible for training them on the register.

Doing a good job in any position requires the person to look beyond the role they were hired to fill, Haff says.

“I believe you should always strive to do more,” she says. “You need to be willing to help in other departments and learn about the business

as a whole. If you're aware of what needs to be done and you stay busy, you can be an example for other employees, and you can prove that you are a valuable part of the business."

Finding these qualities in an employee is important and is a strong reason why retailers should invest in their staff to improve retention, Connolly says. To keep employees, he provides continual training, like giving team members the chance to work in all the different areas of the business. Employees are also welcome to attend customer-focused in-store training events to enhance their knowledge and connect with the community.

Connolly also continues to encourage his team to develop their skills and complete training through online resources, like programs available through the North American Retail Hardware Association (NRHA).

From the employee perspective, Haff says hearing feedback and gratitude for a job well done also helps for employee retention.

"I respond well to receiving feedback in a positive way, so even if I need to change something, I know they want to help me grow," she says.



Julie Haff, head cashier at **Connolly's Do it Best Hardware**, does her part to satisfy customers, train new hires and keep the business running smoothly.



Taking the First Step

Casey Williamson
Manager
Manchester Hardware

Before joining the team at Manchester Hardware in June 2015, Casey Williamson had experience working at an independent business and in hardware. Her retail career started in high school, when she worked at an independent pet store, and she later got a job at a Tractor Supply Co. store.

“I appreciated how much I learned there, but it wasn’t until I came to Manchester Hardware that I learned how much I could contribute to an independent environment with everything I had learned about the industry,” Williamson says.

When she interviewed for the role of rental associate at the Easthampton, Massachusetts, store, she knew the business was where she wanted to be.

“It was kind of a no-brainer,” she says. “It felt nice to be back in the independent setting. The community and Manchester Hardware are close-knit, and we have a lot of loyal customers.”

A Prime Promotion

Owner Carol Perman appreciates Williamson’s past experience, and since she has joined the team, Williamson has become an asset to the entire operation, Perman says.

“Casey is becoming more well-rounded and more aware of the different ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of the business.”

—Carol Perman, Manchester Hardware

“Casey has such a strong work ethic,” Perman says. “She’s thorough, and she’s attentive when you’re talking to her.”

Williamson’s respect for her co-workers and the work she does are also qualities Perman values.

“Casey works with them as a part of the team,” Perman says. “She sets a good example being punctual and completely committing to the job at hand.”

In 2016, the company’s store manager unexpectedly quit, leaving a hole in the management team. Williamson had recently been promoted to assistant manager, but was still learning the ins and outs of retail management.

“Being new to management, I found myself without the store manager to teach me along the way. I was feeling a little green at that point,” she says. “I found myself needing to step up.”

To help her gain the knowledge she needed at a critical time, Williamson and Perman looked into the NRHA’s Retail Management Certification Program, which is designed to help key employees enhance their leadership and retail operations management skills.

At the time, Perman was looking for opportunities to downsize the business to focus on the core categories that were crucial for the Manchester community. NRHA’s program was the key to starting the downsizing process. Over the course of the six-month program, Williamson completed a project that helped the operation close its rental business.

“We’re trying to reposition the business to best serve our community,” Perman says. “We want to get it leaner and meaner, and closing the rental business was part of that.”

Since completing the NRHA program, Williamson has taken on more responsibility in the company and is becoming more familiar with the financial side of the operation.

“Casey is becoming more well-rounded and more aware of the different ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of the business,” Perman says. “We’re showing her the profit and loss statements and the margin reports. She’s learning all the time.”

Centered on Service

Williamson is grateful for the opportunity to continue growing in her role, and she knows she has support all around her, from customers and staff.

“Seeing loyal customers and working in a place that’s so full of history inspires me,” she says. “And there are a lot of people who have worked here for years. They’re full of information and experience.”

Williamson says one part of her job that she enjoys most is working with regular customers to complete a large project.

“It’s a great feeling to see people come in with plans on paper looking to you for advice,” she says. “To be able to fulfill that list, and they come back with a finished product, it’s really satisfying.”

A memorable project she consulted on from beginning to end was a bicycle that a customer found on the side of the road. With Williamson’s assistance, he rebuilt it into a motorbike and rode it to the store to show her the finished project six months later.

Developing relationships with customers creates value that goes beyond just a sale, Williamson says. Being engaging and personable can make the difference between a one-time customer and a lifetime customer.

“It’s important to have fun,” she says. “I always make sure to ask my customers open-ended questions to keep the conversation going.”

With all the knowledge she has gained on the job and through additional training, Williamson has her sights on bigger plans for Manchester Hardware in the future.

“It’s a big goal for us to go through a retrofit through our co-op. To be a part of that initiative has been exciting,” she says. “In the future, I’m hoping for an opportunity to assume more ownership within the company.”



Casey Williamson, manager at **Manchester Hardware**, enjoys being able to help customers see a project from start to finish successfully.



Practicing Core Values

Daniel Gorn
Assistant Manager
Hassett Hardware

Daniel Gorn interviewed at Hassett Hardware in 2015 for what he considers his “first real full-time job.”

He was 19 years old, taking college classes, playing jazz music as a side gig and living in Half Moon Bay, California. He simply needed a reliable job.

Gorn interviewed for a sales associate position at Hassett Hardware’s Half Moon Bay store, never dreaming he would love its company culture or that he would quickly grow into a company leader.

“Daniel really embodies all of our core values,” says Eric Hassett, who co-owns the six Hassett Hardware stores in California. “He’s very customer-focused, friendly and inquisitive. He recognizes that the only reason we’re here is to serve customers.”

Shortly after he started, Gorn took on more responsibility in the business. He began overseeing a section of the store, later was tasked with maintaining the Half Moon Bay store’s hardware department and fasteners selection.

The company offers a program called Future Leaders, which Hassett says is an opportunity for promising associates to learn more about the business and learn “the language of being a supervisor.” Hassett thought Gorn would be a perfect fit for the program, and it served to prepare him for a bigger opportunity.

Bridging the Gap

Gorn has grown as a leader through his ability to ask questions and challenge his team members to improve in a positive manner, Hassett says.

“He is always supporting newer, younger and incoming staff members. He bridges the gap between generations.”

—Eric Hassett, Hassett Hardware

In 2017, Gorn moved into an assistant manager position when Hassett Hardware bought an existing store in Belmont, California. He worked alongside the Hassett family while converting the store into a Hassett Hardware location, and now oversees many of the day-to-day operational responsibilities.

The 50-year-old store needed to be revamped, and retirement-age employees needed to get on board with a new company culture. Gorn stood out as the man to bring positive change, Hassett says. He believes the changes that Gorn has led since July are evident.

“The challenge was not small,” Hassett says. “The bulk of the store’s employees have been there a very long time, and they’re not young. Daniel has gotten them energized. He’s done a really great job with that, while at the same time, he is always supporting newer, younger and incoming staff members. He bridges the gap between generations.”

For Gorn, developing his leadership skills with Hassett Hardware has been a pleasant surprise ever since he began working at the store. From even his first days on the job, he has seen how the team culture shapes the way Hassett Hardware does business and why it works well.

“I really feel on board with where the company is going, and it motivates me to support everyone I’m working with,” Gorn says. “I have this built-in motivation now to make the store the best it can be and encourage the team to help each other as much as possible.”

One way Gorn has been able to instill a sense of collaboration and support in his new role has been to maintain regular huddles, or check-ins, with the team at the start of the day.

He uses these huddles to give the entire staff a chance to strategize for the day ahead and consider how to best meet customers’ needs while operating efficiently as a team. The check-ins remind staff of the values Hassett Hardware holds dear.

“When it comes to coaching employees, it’s important to tie it back to specific core values,” Gorn says. “The core values and the culture are touched on by everything we do. It’s something that’s lived in and active.”

Putting In the Effort

Gorn believes his personal work ethic and the lessons he has learned from the company's owners on how a store should operate have shaped his own management style and helped him stand out as a five-star employee.

"If I'm not doing well, I know before anyone else does. That's kind of its own motivation," Gorn says. "I know what a good culture looks like and what a well-maintained store looks like. It's obvious when I need to try harder, plan better and change what I'm doing."

Taking a step back to see the big picture is something all employees can do to improve their performance and develop a strong work ethic, he says. According to Gorn, seeing the big picture is about recognizing high-priority tasks and knowing why those tasks are important.

"Good work ethic is about earnestness, being proactive rather than waiting to be prodded to do something," he says. "There's a lot of personal satisfaction in completing a task and doing it well, rather than the bare minimum." ➔



Hardware Retailing staffers Renee Changnon, Kate Klein, Melanie Moul and Todd Taber contributed to this article.

Daniel Gorn, assistant manager at **Hassett Hardware**, says the operation's existing standards have helped develop him as a five-star employee.

Find More 5-Stars Online

Independent businesses' five-star employees have more star power than can fit in these pages! For more insight into the characteristics of five-star employees, read about these staff members from two Ohio operations at [TheRedT.com/5-star](https://www.theredt.com/5-star).



Bill Powell, Hardware Team Leader, E&H Hardware

After 25 years as a dairy farmer, Powell's family sold their cows, and he was looking for a new opportunity. Eventually, he joined E&H Hardware in Delaware, Ohio. Powell goes to work eager to learn something new each and every day, after more than 14 years with the company.



Alyssa Tolzda, Inventory Manager, Modern Home & Hardware

Right out of high school, Tolzda made a decision that led to a career. Since joining the Modern Home & Hardware team in Woodsfield, Ohio, and serving as a cashier for five years, she has invested in training to develop her industry knowledge and work her way up to inventory manager.