

# Clothing, Accessory, and General Merchandise Stores

(NAICS 448, 452)

## SIGNIFICANT POINTS

- Sales and administrative support jobs account for 83 percent of employment in the industry.
- Most jobs do not require formal education; many people get their first jobs in this industry.
- Clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores offer many part-time jobs, but earnings are relatively low.
- Despite relatively slow employment growth, turnover will produce numerous job openings in this large industry.

### Nature of the Industry

Clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores are some of the most visited establishments in the country. Whether shopping for an item of clothing, a piece of jewelry, a household appliance, or even food, you will likely go to one of these stores to make your purchase or compare selections with other retail outlets. Composed of department stores (including discount department stores), supercenters, and warehouse club stores, general merchandise stores in particular sell a large assortment of items. Also included among general merchandise stores are dollar stores that sell a wide variety of inexpensive merchandise.

Department stores sell an extensive selection of merchandise, with no one line predominating. As the name suggests, these stores generally are arranged into departments, each headed by a manager. The various departments can sell apparel, furniture, appliances, home furnishings, cosmetics, jewelry, paint and hardware, electronics, and sporting goods. They also may sell services such as optical, photography, and pharmacy services. Discount department stores typically have fewer sales workers, relying more on self-service features, and have centrally located cashiers. Department stores that sell bulk items, like major appliances, usually provide delivery and installation services. Up-scale department stores may offer tailoring for their clothing lines and more personal service.

Warehouse club stores and supercenters, the fastest growing segment of this industry, sell an even more eclectic mix of products and services, in fixed quantities and at low prices. These stores typically include an assortment of food items, often sold in bulk, along with an array of household and automotive goods, clothing, and services that may vary over time. Often, such stores require that shoppers purchase a membership that entitles them to shop there. They offer very little service and usually require the customer to take home the item.

Compared with department stores, clothing and accessory stores sell a much narrower group of items that include apparel for all members of the family, as well as shoes, luggage, leather goods, lingerie, jewelry, uniforms, and bridal gowns. Stores in this sector may sell a relatively broad range of these items or concentrate on a few. They often are staffed with knowledgeable salespersons who can help in the selection of sizes, styles, and accessories. Many of these stores are located in shopping malls across the country and have significantly fewer workers than department stores.

### Working Conditions

Most employees in clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores work under clean, well-lighted conditions. Many jobs are part time, with the most employees working during peak selling times, including nights, weekends, and holidays. Because weekends are busy days in retailing, almost all employees work at least one of these days and have a weekday off. During busy periods, such as holidays and the back-to-school season, longer than normal hours may be scheduled, and vacation time is limited for most workers, including buyers and managers.

Retail salespersons and cashiers often stand for long periods, and stock clerks may perform strenuous tasks, such as moving heavy, cumbersome boxes. Sales representatives and buyers often travel to visit clients and may be away from home for several days or weeks at a time. Those who work for large manufacturers and retailers may travel outside of the country.

The incidence of work-related illnesses and injuries varies greatly among segments of the industry. In 2003, workers in clothing and accessory stores had 2.8 cases of injury and illness per 100 full-time workers, while those in general merchandise stores had 7.2 cases per 100 full-time workers. These figures compare with an average of 5.0 throughout private industry.

### Employment

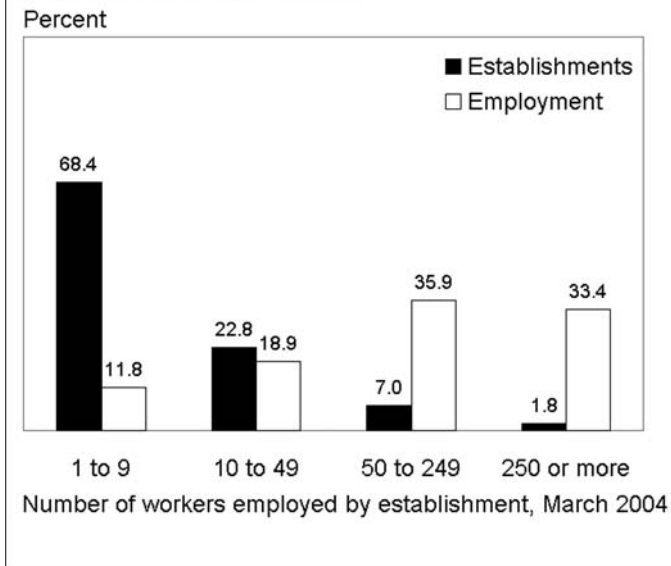
Clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores—one of the largest employers in the Nation—had about 4.2 million wage and salary jobs in 2004. Department stores accounted for most jobs in the industry, but only about 7 percent of establishments. In 2004, about 7 of 10 workers were employed in clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores having more than 50 workers (chart 1). In contrast to many industries, this industry employs workers in all sections of the country, from the largest cities to the smallest towns.

Many of the industry's workers are young—31 percent were under 24 years old in 2004, compared with 14 percent for all industries. About 29 percent of the workers were employed part time.

### Occupations in the Industry

Sales and related occupations accounted for 65 percent of workers in this industry in 2004 (table 1). *Retail salespersons*, who make up 43 percent of employment in the industry, help customers select and purchase merchandise. A salesperson's primary

**While fewer than 10 percent of establishments employ 50 or more workers, they account for nearly 70 percent of the industry's employment.**



job is to interest customers in the merchandise and to answer any questions the customers may have. In order to do this, the worker may describe the product's various models, styles, and colors or demonstrate its use. To sell expensive and complex items, workers need extensive knowledge of the products.

In addition to selling, most retail salespersons register the sale electronically on a cash register or terminal; receive cash, checks, and charge payments; and give change and receipts. Depending on the hours they work, they may open or close their cash registers or terminals. Either of these operations may include counting the money in the cash register; separating charge slips, coupons, and exchange vouchers; and making deposits at the cash office. Salespersons are held responsible for the contents of their register, and repeated shortages often are cause for dismissal.

Salespersons may be responsible for handling returns and exchanges of merchandise, wrapping gifts, and keeping their work areas neat. In addition, they may help stock shelves or racks, arrange for mailing or delivery of a purchase, mark price tags, take inventory, and prepare displays. They also must be familiar with the store's security practices to help prevent theft of merchandise. *Cashiers* total bills, receive money, make change, fill out charge forms, and give receipts. Retail salespersons and cashiers often have similar duties.

Office and administrative support occupations make up the next largest group of employees, accounting for 19 percent of total employment in the industry. *Stock clerks and order fillers* bring merchandise to the sales floor and stock shelves and racks. They also may mark items with identifying codes or prices so that they can be recognized quickly and easily, although many items today arrive preticketed. *Customer service representatives* investigate and resolve customers' complaints about merchandise, service, billing, or credit ratings. The industry also employs administrative occupations found in most industries, such as general office clerks and bookkeepers.

Management and business and financial operations occupations accounted for 2 percent of industry employment. (Only

managers located at the individual stores are counted in this industry. Higher level managers for national or regional chain stores with multiple locations typically are employed at the stores' headquarters and are classified in the management of companies and enterprises industry, which is not covered in the *Career Guide*.) *Department managers* oversee sales workers in a department or section of the store. They set the work schedule, supervise employee performance, and are responsible for the overall sales and profitability of their departments. They also may be called upon to settle a dispute between a customer and a salesperson.

*Buyers* purchase merchandise for resale from wholesalers or manufacturers. Using historical records, market analysis, and their sense of consumer demand, they buy merchandise, keeping in mind their customer's demand for style, quality, and low price. Wrong decisions mean that the store will mark down slow-selling merchandise, thus losing profits. Buyers for larger stores or chains usually buy one classification of merchandise, such as casual menswear or home furnishings; those working for smaller stores may buy all the merchandise sold in the store. They also plan and implement sales promotion plans for their merchandise, such as arranging for advertising and ensuring that the merchandise is displayed properly.

*Merchandise managers* are in charge of a group of buyers and department managers; they plan and supervise the purchase and marketing of merchandise in a broad area, such as women's apparel or appliances. In department store chains, with numerous stores, many of the buying and merchandising functions are centralized in one location. Some local managers might decide which merchandise, among that bought centrally, would be best for their own stores.

*Department store managers* direct and coordinate the activities in these stores. They may set pricing policies to maintain profitability and notify senior management of concerns or problems. Department store managers usually directly supervise department managers and indirectly oversee other department store workers.

*Clothing and accessory store managers*—often the only managers in smaller stores—combine many of the duties of department managers, department store managers, and buyers. *Retail chain store area managers* or *district managers* oversee the activities of clothing and accessory store managers in an area. They hire managers, ensure that company policies are carried out, and coordinate sales and promotional activities.

Various other store-level occupations in this diversified industry include pharmacists, hairdressers, material moving workers, food preparation and serving workers, and security guards.

## Training and Advancement

There are no formal educational requirements for most sales and administrative support jobs; in fact, many people get their first jobs in this industry. A high school education is preferred, especially by larger employers. Because many of the new workers in the industry are recent immigrants, employers may require proficiency in English and may even offer language training to employees.

Salespersons should enjoy working with people. Among other desirable characteristics are a pleasant personality, a neat appearance, and the ability to communicate clearly. Because of the trend toward providing more service, it is becoming increasingly important for salespersons to be knowledgeable about the

**Table 1. Employment of wage and salary workers in clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores by occupation, 2004 and projected change, 2004-14.**  
(Employment in thousands)

Occupation	Employment, 2004		Percent change, 2004-14
	Number	Percent	
<b>All occupations</b> .....	4,205	100.0	10.1
<b>Management, business, and financial occupations</b> .....	102	2.4	16.6
General and operations managers .....	47	1.1	14.7
<b>Professional and related occupations</b> .....	87	2.1	31.5
Merchandise displayers and window trimmers .....	19	0.5	11.6
<b>Service occupations</b> .....	205	4.9	14.1
Security guards .....	28	0.7	1.2
Counter attendants, cafeteria, food concession, and coffee shop .....	11	0.3	18.6
Janitors and cleaners, except maids and housekeeping cleaners .....	44	1.1	18.2
Locker room, coatroom, and dressing room attendants .....	11	0.3	12.6
Entertainment attendants and related workers, all other .....	26	0.6	18.7
<b>Sales and related occupations</b> .....	2,720	64.7	11.6
First-line supervisors/managers of retail sales workers .....	265	6.3	5.8
Cashiers, except gaming .....	601	14.3	5.9
Retail salespersons .....	1,795	42.7	14.3
Demonstrators and product promoters ..	15	0.4	15.4
<b>Office and administrative support occupations</b> .....	778	18.5	0.6
First-line supervisors/managers of office and administrative support workers .....	56	1.3	7.0
Customer service representatives .....	64	1.5	20.6
Information and record clerks, all other ..	24	0.6	-5.1
Shipping, receiving, and traffic clerks ..	71	1.7	6.3
Stock clerks and order fillers .....	429	10.2	-3.8
Office clerks, general .....	27	0.7	3.4
<b>Installation, maintenance, and repair occupations</b> .....	43	1.0	13.4
<b>Production occupations</b> .....	100	2.4	6.9
Tailors, dressmakers, and custom sewers .....	12	0.3	14.7
Jewelers and precious stone and metal workers .....	12	0.3	21.0
<b>Transportation and material moving occupations</b> .....	170	4.0	9.5
Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand .....	124	2.9	6.4

Note: May not add to totals due to omission of occupations with small employment

products and merchandise that are available. Some employers may conduct a background check of applicants, especially of those seeking work selling high-priced items.

In most small stores, an experienced employee or the manager instructs newly hired sales personnel on making out sales checks and operating the cash register. In larger stores, training programs are more formal and usually are conducted over several days. Some stores provide periodic training seminars to refresh and improve the customer service and selling skills of their sales workers. Initially, trainees are taught how to make cash, check, and charge sales; eventually, they are instructed on how to deal with returns and special orders. Other topics usually covered are customer service, security, and store policies and procedures. Depending on the type of product they are selling,

sales workers may be given specialized training in their area. For example, those working in cosmetic sales receive instruction on the types of products that are available and the types of customers to whom those products would be most beneficial.

Some salespersons are hired for a particular department, whereas others are placed after they have completed training. Placement usually is based on where positions are available. Some salespersons, often called “floaters,” are not assigned to a particular department; instead, they work where they are needed.

Advancement opportunities for salespersons vary. As those who work full time gain experience and seniority, they usually move to positions of greater responsibility or to positions with potentially higher commissions. Salespersons who are paid on a commission basis—that is, they earn a percentage of the value of what they sell—may advance to selling more expensive items. The most experienced and highest paid salespersons sell big-ticket items. This work requires the most knowledge of the product and the greatest talent for persuasion. In some establishments, advancement opportunities are limited because one person, often the owner, is the only manager, but sales experience may be useful in finding a higher level job elsewhere. Retail selling experience is an asset when one is applying for sales positions with larger retailers or in other kinds of sales, such as sales of motor vehicles, financial services, or wholesale merchandise.

Traditionally, capable salespersons with good leadership skills, yet without a college degree, could advance to management positions; however, a college education is becoming increasingly important for managerial positions such as department manager, store manager, or buyer. Computer skills are extremely important in all parts of the industry, especially in areas such as inventory control, human resources, sales forecasting, and electronic commerce. Many retailers prefer to hire persons with associate’s or bachelor’s degrees in marketing, merchandising, or business as management trainees or assistant managers. As of 2004, more than 150 colleges and universities offered educational programs in retail management, retail merchandising, retail marketing, retail sales, and fashion and apparel merchandising.

The National Retail Federation offers the National Professional Certification in Customer Service for customer service and sales-related occupations. Certification is voluntary and is earned by passing an exam and applying for certification.

## Outlook

Numerous job openings will result from turnover in this large industry. Jobs will be available for young workers, first-time jobseekers, persons with limited job experience, senior citizens, and people seeking part-time work, such as those with young children or those who wish to supplement their income from other jobs. Persons with a college degree or computer skills will be sought for managerial positions.

Overall, the number of wage and salary jobs in clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores is expected to increase 10 percent over the 2004–14 period, compared with the 14 percent increase projected for all industries combined. The relatively slow growth is due mainly to limited job growth in clothing and accessory stores, as discount department stores and supercenters account for a greater share of apparel sales. Also limiting employment growth is the popularity of supercenters and

warehouse stores that stress self-service and are, consequently, less labor intensive than traditional retailers. Employment in full-service department stores will grow the slowest, as more people buy from discounters.

Alternative retail outlets such as mail-order companies, home shopping, and the Internet will continue to take customers away from traditional retail stores, thereby limiting job growth. However, the negative effects on employment resulting from this trend will be minimized as traditional retailers increase their presence in these outlets. In addition, although online sales are expected to grow rapidly, sales at traditional retail stores are projected to continue to account for a major portion of total retail sales. Also, although electronic commerce is expected to limit the growth of some retail jobs, it is increasing opportunities for other occupations, such as Internet sales managers, webmasters, technical support workers, and other related workers.

Some companies are moving toward obtaining goods directly from the manufacturer, bypassing the wholesale level completely and thereby reducing costs and increasing profits. This trend may further limit job growth in the industry, particularly among administrative and managerial workers. In addition, many of these stores, particularly clothing and accessory stores, are highly sensitive to changes in the economy and to changing tastes of consumers. Guessing wrong on upcoming trends, especially several years in a row, or being unable to weather a recession can cause even large, well-established stores to go bankrupt or out of business. As a result, changes in employment can be volatile and may include periods of rapid increases and decreases in the number of jobs.

Job growth also will be limited as retailers try to lower costs by contracting out some of the activities typically performed by retail workers. For example, retailers will use temporary workers to stock and order products and to perform customer service.

Worker productivity is increasing because of technological advances, particularly among clerks, managers, and buyers. For example, computerized systems allow companies to streamline purchasing and obtain customer information and preferences, reducing the need for buyers. However, because direct customer contact also will remain important, employment of sales workers who interact personally with customers will be less affected by technological advances.

## Earnings

Hourly earnings of nonsupervisory workers in clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores are well below the average for all workers in private industry. This reality reflects both the high proportion of part-time and less experienced workers in these stores and the fact that even experienced workers receive relatively low pay compared with experienced workers in many other industries (table 2). Earnings in selected occupations in clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores appear in table 3.

Many employers permit workers to buy merchandise at a discount. Smaller stores usually offer limited employee benefits. In larger stores, benefits are more comparable with those offered by employers in other industries and can include vacation and sick leave, health and life insurance, profit sharing, and pension plans.

Unionization in this industry is limited. Only about 3 percent of workers were union members or covered by union contracts, compared with 14 percent in all industries.

**Table 2. Average earnings of nonsupervisory workers in clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores, 2004.**

Industry segment	Weekly	Hourly
<b>Total, private industry</b> .....	\$529	\$15.67
<b>Total, general merchandise stores</b> .....	301	10.32
Warehouse clubs and supercenters .....	328	9.94
Other general merchandise stores .....	317	9.93
Discount department stores .....	307	9.93
Department stores .....	290	10.67
<b>Total, clothing and clothing accessory stores</b> .....	268	10.55
Men's clothing stores .....	376	13.06
Family clothing stores .....	237	9.57
Shoe stores .....	241	9.46
Women's clothing stores .....	236	11.19

**Table 3. Median hourly earnings of the largest occupations in clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores, May 2004**

Occupation	General merchandise stores	Apparel and accessory stores	All industries
General and operations managers ...	\$23.50	\$27.65	\$37.22
First-line supervisors/managers of office and administrative support workers .....	18.41	11.21	19.72
First-line supervisors/managers of retail sales workers .....	15.04	15.18	15.73
Security guards .....	11.61	9.86	9.77
Customer service representatives ...	10.54	9.80	12.99
Shipping, receiving, and traffic clerks	10.15	8.89	11.73
Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand .....	9.12	8.38	9.67
Stock clerks and order fillers .....	8.56	8.70	9.66
Retail salespersons .....	8.26	8.44	8.98
Cashiers, except gaming .....	7.76	7.87	7.81

## Sources of Additional Information

General information on careers in retail establishments is available from either of the following organizations:

- National Retail Federation, 325 7th St. NW., Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20004.
- International Council of Shopping Centers, 665 5th Ave., New York, NY 10022. Internet: <http://www.icsc.org>

Information on many occupations in clothing, accessory, and general merchandise stores, including the following, appears in the 2006–07 *Occupational Outlook Handbook*:

- Advertising, marketing, promotions, public relations, and sales managers
- Cashiers
- Customer service representatives
- Designers
- Purchasing managers, buyers, and purchasing agents
- Retail salespersons
- Sales worker supervisors
- Security guards and gaming surveillance officers
- Stock clerks and order fillers