

BY REBECCA WICHERS-SCHREUR

# WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A YOUNG RETAILER TODAY

Reflections on the pandemic year so far, an industry award and where young people can shine in today's business landscape. This past Outstanding Retailer Award winner is VP, HR and administrative services for Wood Works of Renfrew, Burnstown Building Supply, two Castle-member stores in Eastern Ontario.

**C** OVID-19 has brought many changes to our industry, some of which may be here to stay. We have had to tackle the challenge of keeping our staff and customers safe and healthy while still serving our community in a meaningful way. And now, while we have begun to adjust to our 'new normal', we are still facing record-high lumber prices and material shortages across all categories.

But, on a personal note, it has been a year since I found out that I had been awarded the Hardlines Young Retailer of the Year Award for 2019. It was such an exciting moment for me! Little did I know that the year ahead would come with so much craziness. I had such high hopes for what I was going to do with my year.

This was the only award given to an individual, and as a person under 30 and a woman in the building supply industry, I took this honour extremely seriously. I wanted to use this platform to showcase the opportunities available to young people in business. I had so many plans and ideas for how to expand our business and show more people what my team can do. One of those ideas was to start a more regular blog-style segment—hey, at least I am accomplishing one of my goals!

COVID-19 has forced a lot of businesses to abandon what they had planned for this year. It has also shown a lot of us how strong and resilient we are, and the extent of our ability to pivot quickly in a rapidly changing environment. This is where my fellow young people have a business advantage, in my opinion. We have been facing challenges and having to make quick decisions our entire lives. We grew up with technology that was changing at an astonishing rate and have learned to harness change and develop a unique skill set.

Young people today are facing extremely high expectations. They are coming out of college or university with mountains of debt, many of them working to try to mitigate that debt when they finish.

A post-secondary degree used to virtually guarantee a job, but today many graduates struggle to find jobs in their field, or at all. Permanent, full-time positions are harder to come by. Many have been forced into contract or part-time positions, only for employers to complain of lack of commitment when they don't stick around. All the while, young people face the assumption that they don't want to work. Levels of mental illness in young people are at record-high levels, and they only continue to rise.

But I see a silver lining in all this: today's youth are adept at facing struggles and adapting quickly. They're technologically savvy and willing to learn new tasks. Given the chance they will go above and



beyond for their employers. For many youth, the best employment relationships are a give and take—if you are there for them, they'll be there for you. They want to feel valued and appreciated, just as everyone does. If you give your young people a chance, I think you will be pleasantly surprised.

To all employers: now is the time to harness the power of youth. Train them. Give them opportunities. As COVID-19 continues to ravage areas of the world, younger employees will be the ones to rely on. Your more experienced staff may want to retire, leave the workforce earlier than planned or take more extended absences to avoid the risk of exposing themselves.

Don't just rely on your youth to be the ones who show up. Push them to do more. To be more. Utilize their passion and determination. Ask for their opinions, hear their ideas and take heed of what they say. They may be young, but that does not mean they have not faced adversity or that they are incapable of great things.

To all the young people out there: pay attention to what is going on in the world right now and how you can make a difference. If you are fortunate enough to be employed but you're not feeling appreciated, I am confident in your ability to make yourself seen. Channel your past experiences and you can find a way to accomplish your goals.

If you're not working right now, I'm sorry. Some of you may have been using this time to try to figure out what you want to do next, some of you may be struggling just to get through the day and regardless I understand. But hey, if you're looking for a job then give me a call, 'cause I'm always looking for talented people! 📞

Photo: Annemarie Gruden