

# CANDID CAMERA

**Richie McBride** explains how frontline retail workers can feel protected thanks to body-worn cameras

**T**he retail sector is the largest private sector employer in the UK with almost three million workers, but prior to Covid-19 few appreciated the service they were providing. Retail workers are now being recognised as true frontline key workers, and continue to play a critical role as we battle the global pandemic. However, retail crime is on the rise, with one in six staff abused daily. According to the Association of Convenience Stores, there has been a 40 percent increase in crime against shop workers since the first lockdown began, and a campaign for new legislation to better protect retail staff is now gathering pace.

Vocovo recently commissioned an independent report entitled *Empowering the Forgotten Frontline*, where they questioned 251 UK retail workers from over 100 stores. Unsurprisingly the report found that in-store safety was one of the biggest concerns. Nearly half (48 percent) of those questioned admitted to experiencing verbal abuse with 32 percent experiencing physical abuse during Covid-19. Almost a third of retail workers said protecting staff from customer abuse was the biggest challenge for stores, with one in five (21 percent) listing abuse from customers as a personal concern. The survey also found 90 percent of workers admitted to feeling vulnerable at work, with reasons including being outnumbered by customers, working alone and being unable to communicate with security or co-workers. What is possibly most concerning is that three quarters of retail workers said they have been in at least one situation where they feared for their physical safety in-store.

"Many colleagues are left fearing for their personal safety and that of their colleagues on a daily basis. Simply put, a huge proportion of retail workers don't feel safe in the workplace and this is an issue that needs to be made a priority for retailers. These fears are exacerbated by the current Covid-19 situation and the struggles of communicating with colleagues during social distancing. The shop floor can quite often feel like a lonely place in some retail environments and now more so than ever. Retailers need to look towards communications technology to empower their frontline workers, increase safety and ensure that staff feel connected, regardless of the scenario." Notes Vocovo in its report *Empowering The Forgotten Frontline*.

Retailers have a duty of care to protect staff whose mental health is at risk. Retail workers face growing levels of abuse, higher demands from customers and increasingly challenging working conditions. Prior to the existence of lockdown, 42,000 violent incidents were recorded in the previous year, costing retailers a staggering £900-million. In a report carried out by the University of London, it was found that a rise in retail crime is causing "long-lasting anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder" among workers in the sector. This has led experts to call for urgent help to protect retail staff, saying they have a duty of care to do everything they can to make sure workers feel safe, secure and valued in their workplace.

## MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC ARE FAR LESS AGGRESSIVE TO STAFF IF THEY KNOW THEY ARE BEING FILMED

In a bid to combat this problem many large retailers are looking at new ways to help staff feel more protected and secure. Asda, and more recently the Co-op, have announced that they are utilising Body Worn Cameras (BWCs) to enhance in-store security, and more large retailers are set to follow suit in the very near future. The increased threat on a daily basis is forcing all retailers to rethink security policies, as quite literally lives are at risk if retail staff are not given adequate protection. One of the most effective ways to actively deter aggressive behaviour and protect customer-facing staff is to equip staff with body-worn cameras. These are proven to improve the safety of colleagues in public-facing roles and shoppers within the stores, while producing compelling evidence when needed.

BWCs act as a confrontation preventer, as it is proven that members of the public are far less aggressive to staff members if they know they are being filmed. Members of the public are made aware that recording will begin, then the BWC is activated with the simple push of a button. Studies examining the use of such equipment show they make a real difference in protecting frontline staff and the public. Not only do they deter aggression and in many cases eliminate the need to activate a panic alarm or radio



**Wearing a camera makes staff feel safer at work**

during an incident, but they also help staff feel valued, safe and more protected. The cameras also greatly speed up the handling of incidents, insurance matters and complaints. Furthermore, they are utilised to highlight training requirements, evaluate protocols and improve best work practices.

In order to deliver the benefits, a BWC system must be simple to deploy, easy to manage and straightforward to use with minimal training; the BWC is a tool for the user to protect themselves – but it isn't the focus of their job, nor should it be. Also the back-office management suite needs to be secure and able to deliver court-admissible evidence packages.

Co-op, the largest consumer co-operative in the UK and one of the largest retailers in the country, is rolling out an integrated body-worn video solution from Motorola Solutions to frontline colleagues, with a focus on further increasing safety in-store against a background of rising retail crime in the industry.

The Co-op has seen in-store crime increase by more than 140 percent year-on-year. The number of violent incidents also hit record levels with 1,350 attacks having been experienced by Co-op shop workers in the first six months of 2020. To help combat what the retailer describes as a crime and violence epidemic, it has turned to body-worn video as part of an ongoing commitment to invest a further

£70-million over the next three years in innovative technology to keep colleagues safe.

Co-op is equipping frontline staff with more than 1,000 Motorola Solutions VT100 body-worn cameras in around 250 stores initially, with the ability to stream video in real-time to the security operations centre of Co-op security partner, Mitie. The footage is used to identify criminals and provide evidence to secure prosecution. When a Co-op worker feels threatened by aggressive or violent behaviour, they can simply activate the BWC by a simple one-push activation, instantly recording footage to the camera itself, and streaming live video to the security operations centre, allowing for a quick response from security personnel or police. The cameras are supported by Motorola's cloud-hosted VideoManager software, which enables secure and efficient camera allocation, user administration and incident management.

Cheryl Houghton, Co-op retail security manager, explains: "Shop workers play an essential role serving communities, yet they have to contend with unprecedented levels of violence and abuse on a daily basis. As a community retailer we see the impact of social issues in our stores. I have never seen such high levels of violence and abuse, it's a societal issue that all retailers are concerned about and it's having lasting effects on the lives of shop workers – both

mentally and physically. It is not part of the job to be verbally abused, threatened or attacked and we're determined to make sure it isn't. We are calling for greater protection for shop workers carrying out public duties and for the root causes of crime in communities to be addressed."

## RETAILERS HAVE A DUTY OF CARE TO DO EVERYTHING THEY CAN TO MAKE WORKERS FEEL SAFE

Similarly, Asda became one of the first major retailers in the UK to use BWCs after a successful trial, which began in 2016. Motorola Solutions collaborated with CBES, Asda's preferred security installer, to design and install a tailored wearable CCTV deployment system perfectly suited to the retail giant's needs. Asda, along with CBES, identified the need to re-think its key security policy around challenging aggressive behaviour towards staff. In searching for a technology partner, CBES chose Motorola Solutions as its BWC provider, to deploy initially to the most affected stores. The aim was

to improve the safety of colleagues in public-facing roles and shoppers within the stores, while producing compelling evidence when needed.

There are now over 900 body-worn cameras being utilised in over 250 Asda sites nationwide, with more growth expected in the near future. As a result of this partnering strategy, which relied on both the innovative nature of the technology and communication between all parties, Asda has been able to improve colleague security, diffuse aggressive and volatile situations and reduce valued investigation time, thus reducing costs. Since the deployment, Asda has proven the viability of these cameras by securing numerous convictions relating to theft and violence against staff.

Retail staff, security teams, prison officers and Environment Agency enforcement officers are just some of the users of BWCs who have stated that wearing a camera makes them feel safer at work. When recording is activated it is made clearly visible to any potential aggressors, reminding them that their actions from this point can be captured as video evidence. False complaints are also greatly reduced for organisations using BWCs. A study by the University of Cambridge found that police complaints fell by 93 percent following rollouts of BWCs to frontline officers in the US and UK ●

**Richie McBride** was managing director and co-founder of Edesix Ltd, a global market leader in body-worn camera technology. When Edesix became part of the Motorola Solutions group at the beginning of 2019, Richie was appointed Director of Business Operations, Video & Analytics at Motorola Solutions UK.

**When a member of staff feels threatened they can activate their BWC with a simple one-push activation**

