



Holiday employment in retail trade

By Osman Alhassan

The holiday shopping season comes along every fall with increased business activity. To accommodate holiday shoppers, employers in retail trade often hire seasonal workers from October to December. The industry cannot sustain the expanded workforce, and, for this reason, layoffs follow from January to February.

This **Beyond the Numbers** article examines seasonal employment buildups and layoffs in several retail trade industries based on data from the [Current Employment Statistics](#) (CES) survey. These changes can be used to analyze [seasonally adjusted](#) data. Seasonal adjustment removes predictable seasonal patterns in data (for example, hiring for the holiday season), allowing users to analyze the underlying trend without the influence of typical seasonal hiring and layoffs.

Historically, eight industries have driven holiday-related employment in retail trade: furniture and home furnishing stores; electronics and appliance stores; health and personal care stores; clothing and clothing accessories stores; sporting goods, hobby, book, and music stores; general merchandise stores; miscellaneous store retailers; and nonstore retailers. Henceforth in this analysis, any reference to employment in retail trade applies to these eight seasonal industries.

Employment buildup

An employment buildup table (using not seasonally adjusted data) provides an account of an industry’s net employment growth during a particular holiday season. This table allows meaningful analyses of underlying trends and provides comparisons with previous holiday seasons. Table 1 shows seasonal employment buildups in retail trade from 2010 to 2018. The level of employment in September serves as a base for comparisons of seasonal hiring. Over-the-month employment changes (from October to December) largely account for seasonal hiring, and percentage changes facilitate comparisons with buildups in prior years.¹

The magnitude of employment buildup for any specific month during the hiring season is partially a function of timing between surveys. The CES reference period is the pay period that includes the 12th of the month. Either 4 or 5 weeks occur between the weeks of the 12th in any given pair of months. The presence of an extra week usually results in stronger seasonal hiring than a 4-week period, as employers have an additional week to hire seasonal workers. As a result, hiring is weaker the month after a 5-week interval. In retail trade, the presence of a 5-week interval between October and November resulted in a much stronger employment buildup in November 2012, 2013, 2017, and 2018, when employment gains represented 5.1 percent or more of base employment. In comparison, the 4-week seasonal gains in November represented 4.7 percent or less of base employment.

Although hiring varies with timing differences during the buildup period, considering the entire buildup season provides an overview of the underlying employment trend. Total seasonal hiring had trended up each year from 2010 until peaking in 2013, at 9.3 percent of base employment. Every year since that time, the buildup has decelerated, whereby employment buildup from each holiday season is less than the prior year. Over the 2018 holiday buildup period, employment in retail trade increased by 583,000, which accounted for a 7.0-percent share of base employment. In fact, employment in retail trade showed little net change after seasonal adjustment (-22,000) during the holiday shopping season.

Table 1. Holiday season employment buildup in retail trade, 2010–18 (Not seasonally adjusted, in thousands)

Year	Sept. level	Oct.	Percent buildup in Oct.	Nov.	Percent buildup in Nov.	Dec.	Percent buildup in Dec.	Total holiday buildup	Percent holiday buildup
2010	7,968	149	1.9	330	4.1	161 ⁽¹⁾	2.0	640	8.0
2011	8,107	128	1.6	379	4.7	161 ⁽¹⁾	2.0	668	8.2
2012	8,105	132	1.6	456 ⁽¹⁾	5.6	103	1.3	691	8.5
2013	8,205	142	1.7	435 ⁽¹⁾	5.3	184	2.2	761	9.3
2014	8,291	169 ⁽¹⁾	2.0	392	4.7	158	1.9	719	8.7
2015	8,372	175 ⁽¹⁾	2.1	389	4.6	127	1.5	692	8.3
2016	8,480	148	1.7	358	4.2	145 ⁽¹⁾	1.7	651	7.7
2017	8,410	122	1.5	432 ⁽¹⁾	5.1	39	0.5	593	7.1

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Year	Sept. level	Oct.	Percent buildup in Oct.	Nov.	Percent buildup in Nov.	Dec.	Percent buildup in Dec.	Total holiday buildup	Percent holiday buildup
2018	8,358	100	1.2	469 ⁽¹⁾	5.6	14	0.2	583	7.0

⁽¹⁾ This number represents 5 weeks between reference periods.

Note: The reference period is the pay period that includes the 12th of the month. Retail trade industries include employment from furniture and home furnishing stores; electronics and appliance stores; health and personal care stores; clothing and clothing accessories stores; sporting goods, hobby, book, and music stores; general merchandise stores; miscellaneous store retailers; and nonstore retailers.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Employment Statistics survey.

Employment layoff

After the holiday shopping season, employment in retail trade tends to decline. A layoff table measures seasonal employment declines after the holiday shopping season. (See table 2.) This table facilitates the analysis of a series' underlying trend and allows comparisons with past layoff periods. It depicts seasonal employment layoffs from 2011 to 2019. The table consists of base employment levels for each September, total buildup data, over-the-month changes for the layoff period, as well as buildup and layoff percentage changes.

Strong layoffs occur in January, succeeded by additional layoffs in February. The presence of a 5-week period between December and January provides an additional week to lay off more seasonal workers in January. For example, layoffs represented 6.2 percent or more of base employment in January 2014, 2015, and 2016—all 5-week intervals. When 4 weeks occurred between December and January, seasonal declines accounted for 6.0 percent or less, except in 2013 when layoffs amounted to 6.5 percent of base employment. Due to the stronger employment declines in January, layoffs in February are usually smaller, and the presence of a 5th week between surveys does not appear to affect the magnitude of layoffs.

Total seasonal employment layoffs accelerated each year from 2011, and ultimately peaked in 2014 at 9.8 percent of base employment. Every year through 2018, layoffs trended down. In 2019, retail trade laid off 683,000 seasonal workers, which made up 8.2 percent of base employment. After seasonal adjustment, employment in retail trade showed little net change during the layoff period (-25,000).

Table 2. Holiday season employment buildup and layoff in retail trade, 2010–19 (Not seasonally adjusted, in thousands)

Buildup-layoff year	Sept. level	Total holiday buildup	Percent holiday buildup	Jan.	Layoff in Jan as a percentage of Sept. Level	Feb.	Layoff in Feb. as a percentage of Sept. level	Total layoff	Layoff as a percentage of Sept. level
2010–11	7,968	640	8.0	-477	6.0	-167	2.1	-643	8.1
2011–12	8,107	668	8.2	-484	6.0	-219 ^[1]	2.7	-703	8.7
2012–13	8,105	691	8.5	-525	6.5	-205 ^[1]	2.5	-730	9.0
2013–14	8,205	761	9.3	-577 ^[1]	7.0	-224	2.7	-802	9.8
2014–15	8,291	719	8.7	-554 ^[1]	6.7	-190	2.3	-744	9.0
2015–16	8,372	692	8.3	-517 ^[1]	6.2	-175	2.1	-692	8.3
2016–17	8,480	651	7.7	-456	5.4	-235 ^[1]	2.8	-691	8.1

See footnotes at end of table.

Table 2. Holiday season employment buildup and layoff in retail trade, 2010–19 (Not seasonally adjusted, in thousands)

Buildup-layoff year	Sept. level	Total holiday buildup	Percent holiday buildup	Jan.	Layoff in Jan as a percentage of Sept. Level	Feb.	Layoff in Feb. as a percentage of Sept. level	Total layoff	Layoff as a percentage of Sept. level
2017—18	8,410	593	7.1	-499	5.9	-169	12.0	-668	7.9
2018—19	8,358	583	7.0	-469	5.6	-215	12.6	-683	8.2

[1] This number represents 5 weeks between reference periods.

Note: The reference period is the pay period that includes the 12th of the month. Retail trade industries include employment from furniture and home furnishing stores; electronics and appliance stores; health and personal care stores; clothing and clothing accessories stores, sporting goods, hobby, book, and music stores; general merchandise stores; miscellaneous store retailers; and nonstore retailers.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Employment Statistics survey.

Net effects of buildup and layoff

Typically, the number of seasonal employment layoffs in retail trade has been slightly more than seasonal hiring during the buildup period. (See chart 1.) However, stronger layoffs occurred during the 2017–18 and 2018–19 buildup–layoff periods.



2018–19 seasonally adjusted employment changes

After seasonally adjusting the data, employment in retail trade edged down by 47,000 during the entire 2018–19 buildup–layoff period. Job losses occurred in general merchandise stores (-28,000), health and personal care stores (-12,000), and electronics and appliance stores (-12,000), while employment showed little net change in other seasonal retail trade industries. (See table 3.)

Table 3. Seasonally adjusted employment changes in retail trade, October 2018–February 2019 (In thousands)

Retail trade industry	Oct.—Dec.	Jan.—Feb.	Oct.—Feb.
Total changes	-22	-25	-47
Furniture and home furnishings stores	3	1	4
Electronics and appliance stores	-12	0	-12
Health and personal care stores	1	-13	-12
Clothing and clothing accessories stores	-12	6	-6
Sporting goods, hobby, book, and music stores	-23	17	-6
General merchandise stores	7	-35	-28
Miscellaneous store retailers	14	-6	8
Nonstore retailers	0	5	5

Note: Retail trade industries include employment from furniture and home furnishing stores; electronics and appliance stores; health and personal care stores; clothing and clothing accessories stores, sporting goods, hobby, book, and music stores; general merchandise stores; miscellaneous store retailers; and nonstore retailers.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Employment Statistics survey.

Summary

Total seasonal hiring in retail trade peaked at 9.3 percent of base employment in 2013. Since then, seasonal hiring during the buildup period trended down every year. Likewise, total seasonal employment layoffs peaked in 2014 at 9.8 percent of base employment, and then, declined through 2018. During the layoff period, retail trade employment changed little after seasonal adjustment (-25,000).

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NOTES

¹ Buildups (or layoffs) examined using the percent changes rather than the nominal changes allow analysts to report differences as the base level of employment changed over time.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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