

Walmart uses virtual reality to test new store managers

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Walmart Inc, the country's largest private employer, is using virtual reality headsets to test which employees have the aptitude for middle management positions.

The VR headsets place Walmart associates in real-life situations—like calming an angry shopper or giving new employees a store tour—that test knowledge of store departments, decision-making, leadership capacities and soft skills to place employees in the best-fitting job, says Drew Holler, Walmart's [senior vice president](#) for associate experience.

The situations can then be virtually replicated and standardized for hundreds of employees, eliminating bias while placing employees in positions that best fit their skill sets.

"What we measure is how they engage with us," Holler said. "There's no right or wrong, but it gives an understanding for their level of maturity when it comes to leadership, as well as how they view [customer service](#)."

STRIVR, a company based in Menlo Park, California, designed Walmart's [virtual reality training](#) using \$250 Oculus Go VR headsets. Oculus is a VR company owned by social media giant Facebook.

Walmart and STRIVR's partnership started three years ago. In 2017, the VR headsets first rolled out in 30 Walmart Academies where associates were trained to handle situations from the everyday, like managing the produce section, to the rare, like Black Friday madness.

Since then, the Oculus Go VR headsets have expanded to all Walmart storefronts and 10,000 of the 1.2 million employees have undergone the skill management assessment as of February, according to Holler.

How it works

32-year-old David Arias, a 12-year employee of a Walmart in Economy, Pennsylvania, earned a promotion and 10% pay raise one month ago after being tested with the VR technology.

He said one of the VR scenarios required him to act as manager and assist a store [employee](#) and customer searching the aisles for mascara. Based on his handling of the situation, his hiring manager and the VR technology determined he had equal strengths for teaching and leadership.

"Our environment truly is 360 degrees, so a move to VR is a superb choice in keeping up with the times," Arias said. "You get a better feel for what it's actually like to be in those shoes."

Holler said the VR assessment is only one of the "data points" used during the hiring process. The final decision is still made by the hiring director.

A virtual workplace

However, Walmart isn't the only company to dive into the virtual, augmented or mixed realities.

Johnson & Johnson launched a new surgical training program for doctors and nurses using VR headsets, Farmer's Insurance trains its agents how to appraise damages using the technology and Ford designers sketch car models in real-time with co-workers living across the country.

"As people, we think naturally in 3-D," says Maria Fernandez Guajardo, the head of enterprise for Oculus VR and AR. "Because we've been reduced to a 2-D surface, we've constrained the way we think."

Virtual reality goes farther than Walmart's immersive training, Fernandez Guajardo said. More companies implementing the technology in small segments expand 3-D design and collaboration once the technology is in place.

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