Traditional Face-to-Face Training goes Online with FirstClass

"FirstClass is one of the most powerful training tools a Fortune 500 company can use."
Deborah Masten, Communications and Human Resource Development Director, JCPenney

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Organization: JC Penney
Industry: Retail
Application: Online Training of Retail Managers
Results:
• more than 20,000 users on a single server
• supporting staff at over 1,100 stores
• savings of $30,000 per year in distribution of print-based materials and staff travel
• flexibility to integrate with existing satellite delivery
• custom applications enable unique solutions tailored to the company's requirements
• low total cost of ownership

About JCPenney

JCPenney is one of America's largest department store, drugstore, catalog, and e-commerce retailers, employing approximately 250,000 associates. JCPenney operates over 1,000 department stores in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, as well as department stores in Brazil and 2,641 drugstores. The company's catalog and website are the largest merchants of general merchandise in the United States.

JCPenney's Human Resources Development department is responsible for training tens of thousands of associates in all 50 states, Mexico, Brazil and Puerto Rico each year.

The Communications Challenge

JCPenney faced many challenges that are common to large retail organizations. With thousands of employees in North and South America, and a dynamically changing retail landscape, programs, policies and procedures were being developed daily to help cope with competition and regulations. Traditionally, training was accomplished by developing video and print-based training programs at JCPenney headquarters in Dallas, Texas and transporting trainees to the head office, as well as distributing materials to stores across the country for local implementation. Such a large investment of time and resources in static materials made it nearly impossible to keep up with changing needs and requests.

In 1996, a major change in the approach to training took place when JCPenney adopted a Distance Learning program, which immediately began to take advantage of available technology. Satellite broadcasts and CD-ROM-based training were major steps in distributing more flexible materials. However, additional support for training was still lacking. For instance, satellite classes still needed text-based materials to support training.

The FirstClass Solution

The same year, Deborah Masten, Communications and Human Resource Development Director, made a discovery at a training conference that changed everything. The University of Wisconsin at Madison demonstrated how it used a groupware product called FirstClass to implement a successful online training program for its medical students. Masten immediately saw how the university's use of the leading-edge technology could be applied to the learning organization she was building for JCPenney.

FirstClass, a sophisticated communication and collaboration application, was adopted as the core complement to the other distance learning elements that had been put in place. Integrating FirstClass with satellite training gave JCPenney not only enhanced educational programs, but also a unique knowledge-management system. In a custom application created with the FirstClass Rapid Application Developer (RAD) tool, JCPenney uses FirstClass to give central control to nationwide training by allowing local managers to enroll students using a simple menu-driven interface. This field enrollment is then checked and confirmed by the Human Resource Development staff at the corporation's headquarters. By using this combination of decentralized enrollment and centralized management and delivery, eleven people effectively oversee the training of thousands of associates.

JCPenney makes extensive use of shared workspaces, called conferences, in FirstClass. The most popular training tool is a case study conference; here a work group is given a situation and asked to collaborate on preparing a recommendation. The class is divided into small groups of eight to ten participants. Because FirstClass is asynchronous, each participant is able to work on the training assignment as his or her schedule permits. They may log on and exchange information in a synchronous or real-time manner, or they may leave a comment or question and return in hours or even days to view others' responses. Because the system is tied to a central database, the Human Resource Development staff can produce reports at any time and analyze the quantity and quality of participation of any single student. So, even though there may be thousands of people in training at one time, an instructor can view the performance of any student and offer them one-on-one attention, if needed. The person with training responsibility at the store level can also have secure access to monitor the staff from their store who are currently registered in programs.

After starting with a very limited training community in 1996, the success of the FirstClass-based Distance Learning program has brought requests for participation from nearly every business unit in the company. FirstClass has helped JCPenney keep their managers in the field current with changing roles and procedures. According to Deborah Masten, "JCPenney is able to provide a knowledge management system uniquely designed to meet the needs of each core job classification. It not only provides a structured electronic manual, but it also allows students to interact with their instructors and peers in a way unprecedented -- and they can do it asynchronously."

To experience the power of FirstClass, call 1.888.808.0388 to arrange for a demo.

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