Enterprise Corporate Training with the FirstClass® Application Server

Profile

JCPenney was founded in 1902 by James Cash Penney in the mining town of Kemmerer, Wyoming and grew to become a well-known and successful chain of department stores. Since its founding, the company has grown and diversified dramatically to include over 360,000 employees at over 2,400 locations. This very large and diverse workforce is divided into several organizations, hundreds of departments and thousands of highly specialized jobs.

The Challenge

In the competitive and ever-changing landscape of today's economy, companies must be able to quickly develop new programs, policies, procedures and techniques. This new information must then be rapidly and effectively communicated throughout the organization; training is the most effective way to accomplish this task.

JCPenney has always operated with the core belief that the company's success depends directly on the quality of its workforce. As Communication and Human Resources Development Director for JCPenney, Deborah Masten is charged with creating programs that develop the maximum potential in each employee across the company's radically diverse job spectrum.

JCPenney's training programs are built on interactive teaching in which associates debate and discuss specific real-world questions, problems and case studies under the watchful moderation of instructors, managers and experienced peers. Deborah's experience has been that this interactive method is far superior to simply publishing new information with the hope that employees will be able to apply it to their work.

JCPenney needed systems that could accommodate large numbers of associates, diverse training programs and a variety of instructional tools. In addition, this system had to be organized so that a small group of training staff could effectively manage associate/instructor ratios on the order of thousands to one.

The Solution

JCPenney turned to distance learning with FirstClass to allow their Human Resources Department to implement training at thousands of locations with tens of thousands of active associates. Using the FirstClass Application Server and FirstClass Rapid Application Developer (FirstClass RAD) technologies, Deborah Masten and 6 Degrees Software and Consulting, Inc. worked in cooperation to build a training system around Deborah Masten's vision, which included the following crucial components:

- Moderated Problem Solving Organized by Topic
- Case Study for Groups
- Statistical Analysis of Associate Activity
- Training Program, Class and Account Management
- Automated and Distributed Associate Enrollment

The FirstClass Intranet Server offered Deborah Masten the best combination of remote access, ease of use, group-based privileges and document publishing, but required extensive customization to perform the specialized training tasks that were essential to the system's success. To create these highly specialized systems, 6 Degrees used the FirstClass Application Server and FirstClass RAD technologies to develop relational database-driven systems to manage system content, user interfaces, classes and user accounts.

Moderated Problem Solving Organized by Topic:
Questions and Comments Interface

Problem solving is an essential skill for employees of JCPenney. JCPenney required a method for presenting users with a number of standard training topics, which are tailored for each training program. Under each topic there is a series of questions that are specifically related to the topic. Associates, instructors and managers are encouraged to participate in threaded discussions on each question.

Associate discussion and debate drives this interface, while instructors focus less on giving answers and more on guiding associates to the best conclusions. For each question in this application, instructors may then publish a correct answer, recommendation or analysis of the training group's work.

This system has been a very successful tool for getting associates to problem solve cooperatively and build personal problem solving skills. An unexpected additional benefit of this application was realized as associates began using this interface as a knowledge base or FAQ for real-world problem solving in their day-to-day work.

Group Projects:
Case Study Interface

The Case Study interface is used to present small focus groups of associates with a single complex problem with its related background information and relevant data. Associates then work together on resolving this problem in the Case Study interface under the guidance of an instructor. The interface is specifically designed to make project contributions simpler and more focused than traditional FirstClass conferencing. Instructors guide the associates' progress in the case study and offer suggestions or corrections to individual users' contributions. When the group has completed the project, the instructor offers an assessment of their work.

The greatest success of this application has been its ability to get small groups of people from a wide array of locations working together on a system that has thousands of users. This kind of personalized and team-oriented training has been very popular among associates and has created more opportunities for cooperation and knowledge sharing.

Statistical Analysis of Associate Activity

The Questions and Comments interface continuously collects statistics about user activity. It gathers a history of each user's question, comment and browsing habits. This tool makes it possible to create statistical profiles of associates, like the following examples:

- Strong participator
- Avid browser, but hesitant to contribute
- Non-participant
- Non-browser, frequent contributor

The most important benefit of this system is that it gives instructors tools for building an understanding of individual associates, which is essential to bringing out their best performance. These statistical profiles can be used to improve training by contacting associates directly and offering them encouragement to improve on their weaknesses as well as providing positive re-enforcement for strengths. This system can also help spot motivated associates, which can be used in considering an associate's advancement.

Training Program, Class and Account Management

JCPenney's FirstClass system is used to simultaneously facilitate the training for a wide variety of programs. The FirstClass Application Server and data systems are able to simultaneously maintain and deliver a virtually unlimited number of distinct and separate training programs. These programs include essential classes for Retail Store Managers, new retail store recruits, Loss Prevention Officers (security guards) and more.

This FirstClass Application Server-based class management system is designed to be highly automated and very easy to use so that it can be completely maintained by an instructor in a few minutes per week. The system automatically maintains all of the information relevant to a training program, including associate population, Case Study workgroups, Questions & Comments access and statistics.

Maintaining program and class information in a database makes it much easier to manage all of the users in a particular class. Changes may be applied to an entire program, rather than per-user, group or class. The system automatically makes sure that all of the application interfaces, statistics and other class-related information remain intact and secure from the beginning of the program to its closure. For example, when a class is completed, all of the user accounts, statistics, interface content, etc. can be instantly archived and removed from the active system by selecting a program and changing its status to 'completed.'

Automated and Distributed Associate Enrollment

FirstClass RAD and FirstClass Application Server have helped JCPenney distribute the burden of enrolling associates into programs. The system allows designated managers or groups of users to enroll new users in a training program. These users, many of whom are computer novices, are insulated from the typical responsibilities of managing FirstClass users and groups. Users simply enter the new associate's information, select the training program and add the user. The system automatically verifies and validates all of the information, and automatically creates the new FirstClass user account with all of the correct groups and privileges.

Future Plans

During the summer and fall of 1999, JCPenney will roll out a newly revised FirstClass system created by 6 Degrees. This system will include numerous improvements to existing systems and a wealth of new functionality.

New Corporate Training Tools

This system will continue to be a center for distance learning and will benefit from wider integration with other training resources and systems as well as new tools for carrying out training. These new systems will include:

- FirstClass-based online testing
- Searchable resumes
- Integration with 'Grade Book' reporting system
- Surveys

Executive and Managerial Communities

In addition, FirstClass will become JCPenney's first system to offer community-building networks designed to bring together managerial and executive staff company wide. These tools will leverage the successful interactive tools already included in the training server for a new purpose, knowledge sharing.

Further Automation and Integration with Training Management

Development will also be dedicated to managing the rapid growth of JCPenney's FirstClass system. FirstClass will become more integrated with the company's PeopleSoft Human Resources systems and JCPenney's training management system (TMS). This change will allow for training programs managed under the TMS to be completely integrated with FirstClass, which will allow for virtually 100% of FirstClass administration tasks to be automated.
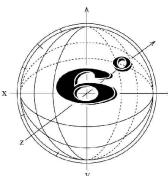
Conclusion

JCPenney's FirstClass and FirstClass Application Server-based training system has been an essential part of JCPenney's training since 1996. FirstClass and the FirstClass Application Server offer a uniquely effective tool for bringing training to very large corporations.

> According to Deborah Masten, *"SoftArc's FirstClass Intranet Server is one of the most powerful training tools a Fortune 500 company can use. JCPenney, with the help of customization from SoftArc's Development Partner, 6 Degrees, 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 text-based electronic manual, but also allows students to interact with their instructors and peers in a way unprecedented – and they can do it asynchronously."*

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