Fast Food for Thought

McDonald's shift to cloud-based training improves e-learning and reduces costs

by JOHN MORELL

How does one operate a McDonald's restaurant? The company puts franchisees and managers through its extensive Hamburger University program to familiarize them with company procedures, practices and culture, then those people train line workers in their individual stores. It's a system that's worked well throughout the company's long history, and it's complemented by an extensive continuing education program.

However, continuing education became increasingly unwieldy. Each restaurant receives a set of binders loaded with more than 1,000 pages outlining corporate procedures, followed by periodic updates that need to be filed inside. Several years ago the company implemented Fred@McD, an intranet-based system that allowed personnel to access a PDF version of the binders, along with multimedia learning tools about procedures, on computers in the back of each store. While that was an improvement, McDonald's thought it could do better.

'SHOULDER-TO-SHOULDER' LEARNING

"The biggest issue was that the e-learning system required the employee to sit in the back and watch about 10 hours of video on the cooking processes and other procedures," says Rob Lauber, vice president and chief learning officer for McDonald's.

"It was tied to specific hardware in a

specific location in the restaurant. They were learning, but in our surveys we saw that employees learned best when they were working with someone else on the floor."

The challenge then was how to incorporate that "shoulder-to-shoulder" experience of learning from an experienced crew member into a format that could be quickly and easily used at more than 36,000 restaurants in over 100 countries.

"We really had to think about this," Lauber says, "because we could picture what we needed but didn't have the right tools or platform to implement it."

Through conversations with a former colleague who managed learning programs for Comcast, Lauber was introduced to the work of Inkling, a company that moves corporate content into a digital format that's enhanced for mobile platforms.

"Comcast had a similar challenge in reaching a distributed population of field technicians, so we decided to see what Inkling could do," he says.

Started in 2009, Inkling is riding the explosive growth in mobile platforms for
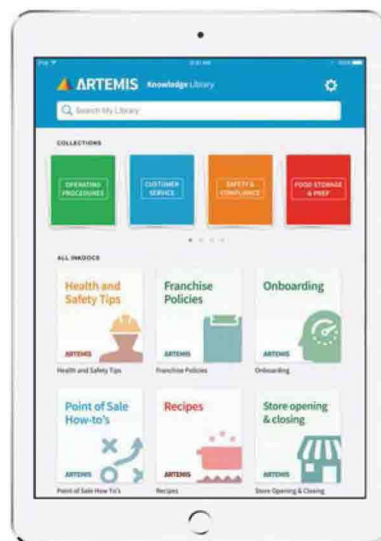
businesses. "There are a number of factors that are changing how companies interact with their employees," says Matt MacInnis, Inkling's co-founder and CEO.

"Service industries are seeing an influx of Millennial-age workers who are accustomed to mobile platforms, and the cost of mobile devices has decreased and will continue to go down."

As companies look to replace their outdated "binder and desktop" training platforms, Inkling offers a system that is more interactive. "It's getting the employee education out there in a format that works and is easily accessible," MacInnis says. "We wanted to show them how to do every task in the restaurant on a mobile platform."

He says the platform helps companies meet their customer service objectives. "If the training is straightforward and easy to access, the result is a more educated workforce that tends to be happier with their jobs. That attitude comes across the counter to the customer."

For the McDonald's project, Inkling took some of the training information and created a prototype for Lauber and his staff. "We showed it around the company to get their feedback on some inexpensive Kindle devices and they were blown away," Lauber says. "It caught fire from there."

ENHANCED LEARNING

Inkling went to work formatting the 1,500 pages of McDonald's official operations and training manual. "Our vendors are able to take these types of documents and upgrade them into an HTML5 format fairly quickly and inexpensively," MacInnis says. "For the McDonald's project, it took about three days."

Inkling also incorporated videos from the training website, and arranged it so the company can easily modify or change the content.

"From a user-friendly standpoint, it does all that you want it to do. There's a document composition environment that allows you to make additions or changes, and an analytic engine where you can see who's accessing the materials," MacInnis says.

"Since it's cloud-based, you can update one part of a document without having to upload the entire document."

Another advantage is the ability to incorporate additional information that helps provide context and company tidbits. "We can add videos on how our potatoes are sourced, how Chicken McNuggets are made, little things that help employees learn about the whole company," Lauber says.

The program allows for management to correlate store performance with training. "Is a restaurant under-performing on a particular item, or do they appear to be going through too much product compared to similar stores?" MacInnis says. "You can look up and see who has been looking at parts of the O&T manual and see if everyone's on the same page."

Text changes to documents can be approved, as well; a change made to the cooking temperature of french fries, for example, can be reviewed by other members of the operations team, and discussed before the alteration goes live.

One critical area regarding employee training is potential legal implications — a company's lawyers may not approve of corporate documents that could be easily altered, for instance. "The platform support keeps track of every change," MacInnis says. "It shows who made the change and when, so if there are any questions there's a record."

The result, according to Lauber, is "our procedure guide on steroids." Instead of learning in the back of the restaurant, team members can stand at a fry station and hold a tablet showing a video walking them through the steps of operating the equipment.

"This type of learning doesn't replace the shoulder-to-shoulder experience, it enhances it. There's a productivity gain since they're not stuck in the back office, and a consistency gain since they're learning from crew leaders and a dynamic multimedia platform at the same time."

PREPARING FOR MOBILE

The Inkling platform has been incorporated in about half of McDonald's U.S. and Canadian restaurants, and plans are for a rollout to franchisees worldwide by 2018. Many of the company's restaurant owners are still using the older desktop-based system and McDonald's wants to allow them to transition gradually.

The platform currently runs on the restaurant's Wi-Fi; many owners are upgrading their systems to allow for the new operations. "In some restaurants the Wi-Fi is great in the dining area but not so good behind the counter," Lauber says. "So a network upgrade is necessary to get it going."

The Inkling system is platform-agnostic, meaning it operates on virtually anything that can engage Wi-Fi. "Just hearing that they only needed inexpensive tablets to get into the system got many of our franchisees on board," Lauber says. "There's a big difference between a $40 Kindle and an $800 laptop."

Maintenance is easily handled by McDonald's learning department staff, and the platform doesn't require much in the way of instructions. "It's very intuitive," Lauber says. "Anyone accustomed to using apps would find it easy to use."

Response from the restaurants using the platform has been overwhelmingly positive. "It's a modern, inexpensive way to address our training needs," Lauber says.

"Just being able to use the search function and look up information quickly and easily while you're in the kitchen is extremely valuable. Looking ahead, this technology will be very useful as mobile use grows around the world." STORES

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