

# A Training Investment With Strategic Rewards

**How a unique training program helped motivate, train, and retain the right employees.**

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THE LAST FEW YEARS have been tough for telecom equipment providers. But some of those providers are now leading the pack because of innovative business solutions that have never been tried before. And some, like Shared Technologies, have found that when they focus on employees, they can benefit at a very strategic level.

Shared Technologies, a leading provider of installation and maintenance services for telecom customer premise equipment, had been through years of turmoil, layoffs, and cultural changes. It was taking years to overcome the catastrophic drop in the industry. As a result, employee loyalty was low and turnover rates were high. Shared Technologies found itself investing significant resources in training programs for its service technicians who, once trained, would leave to work for a competitor.

“We were becoming part of a vicious cycle,” explains Tony Parella, CEO of Shared Technologies. “As a company in a highly technical field that is dedicated to our employees, we knew that training and workforce development were critical. However, we didn’t want to continue paying to train and certify service technicians who would leave to work for our competitors—we never wanted to lose another skilled technician. It was time to put our energy and resources into developing a program that would enable us to keep our skilled technicians motivated and happy.”

Having traditionally enjoyed high levels of success and customer satisfaction, Shared Technologies had more than just a reputation to uphold. It needed to preserve its signature model in the industry.

The company’s future success was, in a very large part, tied to the performance and loyalty of its field technical force. Consequently, the company’s leadership wanted to reassure its technicians that their careers were safe and that their contributions to the business were vital.

To that end, Shared Technologies’s senior leadership recognized that the business should focus on improving several areas, including workforce development and training, and more important, employee retention and loyalty.

“We don’t manufacture anything—our business is based on service, and technology never stands still,” explains Parella. “For that reason, we can never take our eyes off the customer. Technicians armed with the latest technical expertise are what set us apart, and keeping these technicians motivated is critical to the success of our business.”

While management recognized that a comprehensive and strategic training program could address all of those goals, they were uncertain where to start.

**Select a partner**

As a supplier of Nortel Networks’s equipment, Shared Technologies sought advice

and counsel from Nortel. Recognizing the importance of training and certification, Nortel turned to Global Knowledge. As a Premier Training Partner for Nortel, Global Knowledge develops and delivers classroom and e-learning for Nortel in North America via an outsourced arrangement.

After an initial brainstorming session, the three companies spent months working through the strategy and logistics required to develop and implement a comprehensive training program specifically customized for Shared Technologies’s objectives. A framework for the solution was created by using Global Knowledge’s proprietary SOLVE methodology.

**Surround the business challenge**

Global Knowledge started with an exhaustive analysis of the training histories of the company’s more than 300 service technicians, and then recommended training tracks for Nortel certification. By doing that, the company determined which technicians were best prepared for Nortel’s 60 certification exams as well as the additional training that would be required at an individual level.

In addition, Shared Technologies solicited insight from its employees. The need for more training was verified, as well as the need for Shared Technologies’s executives to be actively involved in ensuring employees stay abreast of new products and technologies in the industry.

**Originate technical advancement**

With all of the data assembled, Shared Technologies and Global Knowledge moved quickly to create and customize a tailored Technical Advancement Program to motivate and train employees. This program would entice employees to attend training courses and earn certifications to strengthen their knowledge base.

Through TAP, each service technician began with a skills assessment review, enabling Global Knowledge and Shared Technologies to develop a customized

training curriculum tailored to meet the professional needs of each individual. Employees were selected for specific certification paths, and then provided with a blended learning track that would get them prepared as efficiently as possible.

Upon the completion of a new certification, technicians would be paid 25 percent of a two-phase bonus payment. On the one-year anniversary of their certification completion, they would be paid the remaining 75 percent.

### **Deliver to the workforce**

With field technicians operating out of 34 regional offices, Shared Technologies needed a flexible delivery strategy that would enable technicians to take training courses at their convenience. Global Knowledge proposed an innovative, blended-learning solution that offered classroom and e-learning courses. A multitude of courses were made available as web-based training, and Shared Technologies's employees could access the courses by going to a custom-made company web portal.

Participants would be pre-registered and receive an email alerting them to the courses they should take and a timeframe for doing it. Once they completed the training, they were offered an end-of-course assessment. After they passed a Nortel certification exam, they could progress to the next level with a fresh batch of courses and a new timeline.

Shared Technologies's web portal was complemented with additional services, such as an e-mentor, which allows technicians to send questions directly to an instructor and sends course satisfaction surveys to students. It also includes an online reporting tool for administrators, which shows them the students who are accessing courseware, their dates of access, and their pass and fail rates.

Classroom courses were also scheduled at the Global Knowledge Training Center in Dallas, Texas. These hands-on courses allowed participants to install and configure live equipment.

### **Launch the program**

The best training programs can't succeed without employee buy-in. So to generate

awareness and excitement for TAP, Global Knowledge, Nortel, and Shared Technologies hit the road in October 2004. For five straight weeks, representatives from all three companies visited every office to launch the program.

"The partnership approach we took with Global Knowledge was well-received by the technicians," says David Fritsche, Shared Technologies's director of internal development. "Having Global Knowledge experts at the launch meetings for questions and feedback helped to alleviate concerns, and assured them we were all working together to improve their careers."

Shared Technologies's senior leaders introduced the program and reiterated their commitment to service technician education and training. Global Knowledge discussed the training curriculum and walked technicians through web portal access. Service technicians were enthusiastic about the program, and were relieved to see that Shared Technologies was investing in their career advancement.

### **Validate and measure**

Just six months after implementation, Shared Technologies was quickly assured of TAP's success. Nortel's Elite Advantage 2004 Customer Satisfaction Survey reported stellar results, highlighting the expertise demonstrated by Shared Technologies service technicians. In nearly every category of the Nortel-sponsored survey, Shared Technologies improved its scores from 2003, and demonstrated higher marks than most Elite Partners' average scores.

"The astounding results of our customer satisfaction survey reaffirmed the benefits of working with Global Knowledge. If you want to run a world-class service organization, you have to invest in training," concludes Parella. "Global Knowledge brought the resources and expertise we needed to grow our business exponentially."

Global Knowledge and Shared Technologies developed and implemented TAP in less than three months. After the first six months, more than 57 Nortel certifications were awarded and an additional 195 technicians enrolled in the online courses.

The retention rate also improved. "In the eight months since the TAP program rolled out, our employee turnover rate is now less than one half of one percent, which is unheard of in the service business," explains Parella.

Additionally, the Technical Advancement Program resulted in significant cost savings for Shared Technologies. The company estimates that the unique web-based approach designed by Global Knowledge allows them to save at least \$1,200 per employee for each week of training by eliminating travel and expenses associated with classroom training.

Before implementing TAP, Shared Technologies's certification pass-fail ratio was estimated at 10 to 90. Fritsche now estimates their ratio is nearly the inverse at 80 to 20, with 80 percent of students passing and only 20 percent failing.

### **Evolve**

After a successful launch, Shared Technologies continues to work with Global Knowledge to evaluate and assess the successes and challenges associated with the Technical Advancement Program.

"Evolving the TAP program is an ongoing process," explained Fritsche. "As our service technicians continue to progress through their customized curricula, we continue to work with Global Knowledge to shape and mold the program to meet their changing needs. Global Knowledge has proven time and again their ability to make recommendations and shift strategies to continue improving this program that has become critical to the success of our business," Fritsche concludes.

The program is improving performance, employee retention and loyalty, and customer satisfaction. By using the SOLVE methodology, key points were built in from the start: buy-in from the technicians, involvement from Shared Technologies's executives, continuous monitoring of activity with messaging to technicians, a phased-in course implementation, and structured motivational rewards.

**Have a success story and want to tell us about it? Contact Eric Brandt at 703.683.8175; ebrandt@astd.org.**