

# A Culture of Corporate Unity

**New orientation training puts Simon employees and on-site contractors on the same team.**

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OPENING THE DOORS to approximately 2.4 billion shoppers a year, Simon Property Group understands the value of its people.

Simon, a recognized leader in the shopping center management industry, oversees the ownership, development, and management of nearly 300 regional malls and community lifestyle centers in the United States and abroad. Simon attributes its continued success to the company's dedication and common focus of its employees.

The organization retains 5,000 staff directly, and has another 8,000 workers at its malls and centers. These additional workers are employed by firms that specialize in property security, maintenance, housekeeping, and landscaping,

but to shoppers they are all viewed as employees who contribute to the overall shopping experience. Simon's goal is to sustain a team environment among all personnel in multiple locations. To do this, they provide a training program to reinforce the team focus, career advancement philosophy, and other attributes of their corporate culture.

"We're firm believers in training. Simon is interested in the growth of its people, and putting training at the disposal of all employees is a tangible way to demonstrate commitment to our workforce," says Carol Franket, director of HR field personnel at Simon.

**Creating e-learning success**

As an early adopter of e-learning, Simon has been delivering online training to its employees since the mid 1990s. With Element K as its learning provider, Simon combines off-the-shelf training in desktop applications and business skills development with various custom courses designed to address proprietary systems and career path objectives. Simon currently uses its training program to advance employees at all levels of the organization down three separate career paths: management; marketing, which includes sales and guest services; and leasing, which covers financial operations and in-house systems training, as well as policies and procedures for lease creation and management. Employees can access training at any time through Simon's online training portal.

"The e-learning solution set provides us with consistent training across our portfolio. For example, we use e-learning to set clear baseline expectations for our guest services representatives, which improves our service to guests and increases sales of the Simon Giftcard product. The giftcard program nationally represents in excess of \$465 million, and the majority of our giftcard transactions take place at the guest services booths in our malls," says Amy Noll, director of marketing information management.

The proprietary courses were developed specifically for the three career paths. However, Simon wanted to provide a more general level of e-learning as a springboard into the more advanced training program areas. With a planned launch of a number of new initiatives such as policy and procedure updates, Lotus Notes training, and benefit program reinforcement on the horizon, Simon decided to implement a new employee orientation strategy that would reach everyone in the company. In addition to communicating various HR matters, the new training would demonstrate Simon's corporate objectives, culture, and history.

Simon decided to create an orientation course to reestablish and promote a sense of unity among its workers, and to inform employees of the many long-term career training paths available to them.

**Building a team**

Simon outsources security, maintenance, housekeeping, landscaping, and a few other operational functions to agencies that perform these services as their core competency. It is critical to Simon that these agencies foster a strong team atmosphere among everyone working at their locations, regardless of who employs them. "Every person coming into our malls or shopping centers is a customer, so every person working to support those locations represents Simon, no matter if they are mall managers or security persons assisting customers and ensuring their safety," says Franket.

To create a team-oriented workplace, the company provides new orientation training to outsourced employees upon hire. Simon wanted to ensure this training conveyed the corporate culture in a way that was accessible and relevant to a wider audience. "We needed to design this course so that it fit a broad audience. It was crucial that the contractors viewing the material felt like it was relevant for them too, breaking down the barriers of title or employer," notes Franket.

## Providing consistency

Because of the geographic dispersion of their offices and the challenge of providing and maintaining current orientation materials at remote locations, new hires often learn about basic policies and corporate culture from a mentor—typically their predecessor on the job. Because some offices operate with as few as five management employees, mentors have limited time to devote to training and do not necessarily possess specialized training skills.

Stories associated with corporate culture are often picked up from coworkers, instead of the channels that would give them a true picture of the Simon history. Simon wants a method to ensure that every representative of their company is exposed to a consistent message that in turn can be assessed and validated through a company-approved e-learning program. In addition, since the training is one hour in length, it is imperative that it presents the material in an engaging, interactive way.

## Personalizing a learning solution

Having a long history with Element K, Simon outlined the new training goals and immediately set to work with its learning partner. The orientation needed to be more than a training tool. It had to be a vehicle for team unification spanning different organizations and job roles, and serve as a resource that people could refer to when necessary. Simon also made it a priority to fill the course with pictures and references from a large number of its properties, adding a personal element to which all workers could relate.

While many of Simon's more advanced courses placed emphasis on simulations and interactivity, the company felt that a purely narrated orientation would strike the proper tone with viewers. Due to the material's unique cultural component, the script for the organization's welcome message and segments on corporate culture needed to be precise. Simon looked to Element K to ensure a well-measured and engaging delivery.

"Being entirely narrated, the speaker had to have just the right emphasis on certain words. We worked through multi-

ple iterations, often sending copy to Element K after hours and getting new versions back for review first thing the next morning," says Franket.

The training would also inform new hires about Simon's HR materials and provide an overview of available training and access to its education site. "In our experience, once people get acquainted with the training we offer, they are eager to use it. The challenge is to create awareness about the program and ensure it is broadly accessible," adds Irv Kravitz, senior vice president of human resources.

Employees utilize training either on-the-fly or via a set development path. Simon's array of highly-focused, 15-minute training courses, QuickTrain, is available for guest services representatives to access as a just-in-time learning resource.

Employees pursuing the management career path undergo a more extensive set of training modules, taking 12 to 18 hours worth of courses over a span of months or years. This latter development path aligns training goals with practical, on-the-job objectives as managers move from smaller locations to larger centers commensurate with their experience. Regardless of their career path, Simon employees now rely on the orientation training for direction into future opportunities within the organization.

## Ensuring success

For the orientation training, Simon reported that more than 70 people took the course before it was officially launched at their annual convention in March.

Mirroring the positive internal response, employees of the external agencies have also reacted well to the training, due in part to the well-paced narration and integration of on-location references. Although those agencies have somewhat different HR policies, the administrators appreciated the benefits of a more team-oriented approach to property management and actively encouraged their own employees to make use of the new training.

All employees are required to complete the course before the end of the

year, ensuring that every employee has the opportunity to see the program. Simon also plans to create an updated version designed specifically for new hires to improve the original training.

As a next step in its enhanced employee training and communication efforts, Simon plans to implement Element K's usage tracking and incentive-based learning programs. Simon also has a new mall management training program being designed for future rollout.

Simon's new orientation course underscores its commitment to career development, job satisfaction, and a team-oriented environment. By delivering its corporate culture and history to all on-site personnel regardless of employer, the scope of Simon's training has reached new levels of audience relevancy.

"With this orientation, people really see that it's not the employer, but the goal that we all have in common," Franket concludes.