Case Study

Dorset Software: driving efficiency and productivity across retail

Waitrose

Employing over 27,000 Partners distributed across more than 180 branches, Waitrose is one of the UK's leading supermarket chains. It has an unusual culture of worker co-ownership and teamwork.

Solution Snapshot

A sophisticated, yet easy-to-use Partner Training Database. The Head Office Application was developed using Microsoft ASP.NET technologies connecting to a central MS SQL Server database. The in-branch Application was developed using Microsoft.NET technologies.

Key Benefits

- Improves organisation and administration at branch level

- Allows for a reduction in the costs associated with face-to-face training

- Vastly improved visibility over and control of training

- Helps to educate the wider business on the importance of training

- Allows management staff greater capacity to plan future training initiatives

- Assists in compliance with Health and Safety legislation

"The system absolutely exceeds our expectations. I'm very, very happy with it."

Andy Gabella, Training Design and Production Manager, Waitrose

The Challenge

With limited opportunity for incorporating improvements, Waitrose realised that its existing Partner Training System was coming to the end of its life and that to ensure continued compliance with complex Health and Safety legislation and to enhance the management of training activity, a new solution needed to be found.

It wanted to be able to ensure that scheduling for, control of and visibility over training activity could be achieved through flexible data manipulation and reporting capabilities. An ideal opportunity for replacing the existing system using improved technology arose through Waitrose's decision to upgrade IT infrastructure.

The Solution

Dorset Software developed the sophisticated, yet easy-to-use Partner Training Database. Unlike the previous system where each branch had a separate database for training records, the new system is centrally located at Waitrose Head Office in Bracknell.

Each branch has two PCs on which partners undertake multimedia training. Branch managers easily access reports on the partners at their branch and the training that has been, or needs to be undertaken. Regional and central management use the central database to view individual and cross branch reports.

The Benefits

The Partner Training Database is helping Waitrose to maintain compliance with Health and Safety legislation and provides proof of due diligence. Improvements in productivity are evident through the reduction in organisation and administration at branch level.

Both Training and Personnel are already benefiting from vastly improved control and visibility over training activity. Training on the system is also greatly simplified with Branch and Personnel managers fully prepared in just two hours. Finally, the availability of the application on desktops business-wide is helping to educate the wider business on the importance of training.
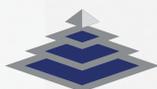
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The Challenge

Waitrose wanted to be able to ensure that the right people do the right training at the right time and that scheduling for, control of and visibility over training activity could be achieved through flexible data manipulation and reporting capabilities. Additionally, in a culture where feedback is encouraged, Personnel and Branch Managers were readily suggesting ideas for improvements but there was no possibility of incorporating these into the existing training system, further supporting the need for a new solution.

An ideal opportunity for replacing the existing system using improved technology arose through Waitrose's decision to upgrade branch IT infrastructure.

Having developed the existing training application and its three previous versions, Dorset Software had the expert knowledge that Waitrose needed to develop a new partner training application. In developing custom software Dorset Software recommends following its proven methodology, which helps to ensure that solutions at least match client requirements, often exceeding expectations.

> *"We enjoy a great relationship with Dorset software. Everyone that we come across is highly competent and professional."*
>
> Andy Gabella, Training Design and Production Manager, Waitrose

The first phase of the process involves a comprehensive requirements gathering exercise. In this stage, Dorset Software consultants worked closely with Waitrose managers, existing users, the IT Department and the third party multimedia provider to ensure that both Waitrose and Dorset Software knew exactly what was required from a new solution.

With the requirements agreed upon, the next phase of the development process was embarked upon: the design process. In the design process Dorset Software presented concepts of a solution to Waitrose. The concepts were explored in detail and all possible permutations were considered. Andy Gabella, Training Design and Production Manager at Waitrose notes "Even in the design sessions our requirements evolved as we better understood what we could achieve with the new application.

It was amazing how many times someone said 'wouldn't it be good if....?', and Dorset Software demonstrated that we could. Its team brought challenge and creativity to the table."

The Solution

Unlike the previous system, where each branch had a separate training database for branch training records, the new system is centrally located at Waitrose Head Office in Bracknell.

Each branch has two PCs on which partners undertake multimedia training. Branch managers easily access reports on the partners at their branch and the training that has been, or needs to be undertaken. Regional and central management at Head Office are able to use the central database to view individual and cross branch reports, a feature that was not previously possible.

The Partner Training Database also supports the performance management system by including competency frameworks and new starter inductions.

Functionality

The Branch Application creates the operating environment for a CD-based training package commissioned by Waitrose supermarkets and developed by a third party supplier. To ensure a memorable training experience, video footage of well-known personalities is used to get specific messages across, with successful completion of each element of the training verified via a series of questions at the end.

The Partner Training Database operates from dedicated PCs within each branch and comprises a separate CD for each area of competence. Recognising that not everyone being trained will have a high degree of computer literacy, the software is specially designed to run on top of Windows, providing screens which are clear and easy to use.

Technology Snapshot

The Partner Training System has two elements. A Head Office Application, which was developed using Microsoft ASP.NET technologies connecting to a central MS SQL Server database and the Branch Application, which connects to the same MS SQL database, and was developed using Microsoft.NET technologies. It runs and interfaces with third party multimedia interactive training CDs.

The Benefits

Waitrose has a responsibility to ensure the continued safety and security of anyone (partners, customers, visitors or contractors) that sets foot in one of its buildings and training is a way to help guarantee this. Gabella comments "The Partner Training Database is a mechanism for ensuring that each Partner does the correct training at the right time. The application provides proof of successful training completion which amounts to proof of due diligence."

The Partner Training Database is utilised by almost 85,000 Waitrose staff members.

In addition, the easy-to-use system is improving productivity through reducing organisation and administration at branch level. Branch and Personnel managers can simply create reports on outstanding training or training due for individuals and can plan branch training schedules. He adds "Administration and Personnel users love the simplicity of the system. They are very pleased with it and find it incredibly easy to use. The simplicity of the software belies the complexity that lies beneath."

Undertaken at the Waitrose Training Centre in London, training on the new system is also greatly simplified. Andy believes it "shows the quality of the solution by the fact that Branch and Personnel managers can be trained in just two hours and comfortably navigate the system when it goes live at their branch".

At Waitrose's Head Office access to the Partner Training application is available to everyone on their PC and Training managers think that this is helping to educate the wider business on the importance of training. Both Training and Personnel managers are already benefiting from vastly improved control and visibility over training.

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