



# A FIRST CLASS LEARNING SOLUTION AT SSP

In the first of four articles, this case study by Peter Gray shows how food travel experts SSP met multiple challenges to deliver measurable ROI.

**S**SP employs 30,000 people globally, providing food and beverage services to travellers worldwide. Working closely with The Working Manager (TWM) since 2010, SSP aspires to provide a 'Best in Class' online learning and development solution for its people. This has, over time, overcome the huge challenges presented to any organisation trying to integrate learning technology into the L&D function.

SSP operates more than 2,100 units in travel locations in 30 countries, including 140 airports and more than 250 rail

stations. With a heritage stretching back 60 years, the firm now has 30,000 employees operating restaurants, bars, cafés, food courts, lounges and convenience stores – serving over a million customers every day. The company's brands include Upper Crust, Starbucks, Caffè Ritazza, Burger King, M&S Simply Food, Millies Cookies, O'Learys, Caviar House & Prunier, Ajisen Ramen and Saboten.

Based in the corporate office in Weybridge, Lee Sheldon is the Director of L&D, supported by Daniel Mills, Group L&D Manager who has specific responsibility for

online content and multi-unit management development. Together they form part of a wider function of L&D support worldwide, responsible for developing 30,000 people with different leadership styles, cultural divides and language barriers.

The subtleties of different owner-operated or franchised brands, and the all-important need for individualised learning and self-development, all have to be accommodated. It's a big task in which technology has become an important enabler. In 2010 the food travel expert embarked upon a journey of its own, to

create a truly innovative, online and user-led L&D resource: SSP Academy Live. Prior to this and like so many other organisations, SSP had previously relied on the company intranet, internal 'shared drives' and e-mail, to communicate the key messages to new hires, or to those endeavouring to build their careers.

**CONSISTENCY AND INTEGRATION THROUGHOUT**

Key to this vision was the need to partner with a provider of technology solutions, to create impact through innovation. Daniel Mills says: "We knew that we needed a flexible technology partner. Someone we could work with in the clear knowledge that we would make mistakes and that these had to be acknowledged early on. TWM quickly became trusted advisors in growing the structure of our online SSP L&D Academy framework. I would advise any organisation starting out on a technology driven solution to get really close to their solution providers."

The technology solution should always provide a 'one stop shop' environment where learners can immerse themselves in a breadth of material. Yet, at the same time it should empower them to take control of their L&D pathway anytime, anywhere. Fellow L&D professionals will agree that when it comes to online learning environments, aspiration is important. It is also crucial that some 'non-negotiables' are understood. For example:

- Observe competitors in relation to the adoption of learning technology to understand how others are meeting similar challenges pertinent to the industry vertical
- Appreciate the gains to be made by including the existing offerings into a blended approach to the learning. Content

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must be fed seamlessly into the environment by best-in-class providers

- Stakeholder support is crucial to the adoption and implementation of technology-driven L&D solutions. Key to this (particularly in the boardroom) is the link between the L&D intervention and the business need. SSP's L&D team have adopted a tireless approach to working with internal stakeholders, to resolve these challenges

- An important objective was to establish a faster and more technologically efficient way of taking new joiners from their Day One training to being fully operational members of the team. The firm wanted to meld the widely diverse approach in corporate styles around the world to create real L&D visibility, and to show that every individual that they are part of the L&D cycle.

Based on a three-year plan rather than a one-year budget, SSP Academy Live (driven by TWM's D2 platform) launched in 2010. Since then the site has grown into a multiple faceted, content rich, online learning environment, and is making a significant contribution to employee retention and development.

It has provided a secure and robust environment for employees to complete the statutory training. The Academy has made huge and measurable cost savings in management development across the L&D function worldwide.

**GROWING AND RETAINING TALENT**

*Discovery* is an award winning management development programme that has created a global talent pool primed for career progression within the company. Previously, it was acknowledged that the firm recruited too many external candidates to manage the catering units.

Chris Rayner, Director of HR: "Discovery is the engine that enables us to appoint more managers than ever before from within the organisation. Now over 50% of Unit Management appointments are made from internal candidates. Clearly promotion and growing people from within is much better."

A mainly classroom-based programme was already in place in SSP UK to help supervisors into their first managerial role. In partnership with colleagues, Lee and Daniel wanted something with more credibility and online transparency. The idea of a National Qualification appealed (in this case, Level 3 Apprenticeship) and underpinned the 'credibility factor'.

The formal qualification has raised the expectations of the managers-in-training. The L&D team set about mapping the new bespoke online *Discovery* programme to the national qualification framework for content and assessment. The assessment protocols have proved to be one of the biggest gains of the whole project.

"I knew that having developed 'SSP Academy Live' with TWM, there would be the potential for us to work closely together and create this entirely new offering using the site as the core of the project," says Lee. "The government requirement to ensure correct audit processes and protocols for the apprenticeship scheme was not a problem. We were already sitting on huge audit capability with the Academy."

**PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS**

Partnering with third party supplier iCan Qualify was key to the development of *Discovery*.

This supported the precise requirements necessary for the Level 3 qualification audit process. Gaining the co-operation of the internal National Apprenticeship Manager was also critical.

"It is integration challenges of this nature," says Lee, "which make your choice of technical partner so critical. In TWM we



have a contractor that understands our needs. The company provides an integrated solution that matches our needs, dealing on our behalf with the technical conversations of one company to another.

"Not only that, we pull in content from a range of providers; for example, e-Learning from Hemsley Fraser. All of this is integrated into a single log-in for SSP Academy Live, to make the process as straightforward as possible for the learner, removing the barriers to development."

The final *Discovery* solution provides a course that has reduced the need for offsite workshops from six to four, with all the inherent savings on travel and accommodation. But without question, it's the assessment part of the solution that has added the greatest value to what is now being seen as a seamless and fluid learning experience for new managers.

#### THE LINE MANAGER WINS TOO

The Academy provides line managers with real time access to their people. TWM's workbook tool allows them to see work conducted by their team anytime, anywhere, and facilitates real involvement of line managers in the development

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process. Lee picks up the story:

"Transparency for the line manager has given everyone more confidence that our new managers are where they need to be. The fact that we can see this process happening, while it's happening, is invaluable."

Bringing the whole assessment process into the online environment has other benefits too: imagine a daily evaluation being given by a manager in training. Before SSP Academy Live and *Discovery* this may have needed to be conducted 'face to face' in the presence of the line manager. It can now be done virtually, at arm's length, and recorded by way of audio or workbook assessment, then uploaded into the site. The line manager can check out the briefing and evaluation at the most convenient time for the business.

The programme makes use of all the

existing learning assets within the SSP Academy Live portal, provided as part of the D2 solution. Around 75% of *Discovery* candidates are regularly returning to SSP Academy Live.

The programme has helped these new managers to obtain a nationally recognised and audited qualification and has helped to build a wider organisational learning culture. People are enjoying the process and are planning to engage with it in the future.

*In Part Two: Find out how the digital generation fares when joining the SSP workforce.*

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