Migrating Seasonal Team Member Promotional Process into the Six Flags Learning Management System

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April 28, 2014

Introduction

I am the Training and Development Manager at Six Flags St. Louis. My responsibilities include the development of any Seasonal Team Members who progress from front line positions into Seasonal Management roles within the park.

Six Flags St. Louis promotes between 200-250 Seasonal Team Members each year. In addition to those who receive promotions, there are even more who apply but do not get the desired position.

In Spring 2014, I proposed to move the management of the promotional process inside of the Six Flags Learning Management System.

Problem

The promotional process consists of several steps handled by five different departments. Previously only the HR Coordinator was responsible for managing the entire process.

Here are the steps needed for a promotion to occur.
1. An applicant applies for an open management position using an online form.
2. The HR Coordinator forwards the application to the corresponding department.
3. A department representative reviews the applications and selects finalists for the interviewing process.
4. After conducting the interviews, the department delivers a promotion progress report to the HR Coordinator. The paper form details the name of the person offered the promotion, the names of those interviewed but not selected, and the reasons behind this selection.
5. The finalist must then complete two additional interviews. The first is a Loss Prevention interview. This interview is similar to a background interview.
6. The Safety Department conducts another interview that consists of a drug screening.
7. As the applicant completes these final checks, each area (Loss Prevention and Safety) physically signs off on a Team Member change form and they deliver it to the HR Coordinator.
8. The applicant is also required to attend the necessary training courses. If someone receives their first promotion (called a Lead), they attend an "Introduction to Theme

Park Management" course. When a person moves from Lead to Supervisor, they attend the first in a series of courses called "Management Core Series".

Having completed all of these steps, the Team Member's promotion takes effect.

I identified three main reasons why this process required a change.

1. Applicants often became very frustrated with the process on a whole. Not only were they frequently unaware of where they were in the process, there was no place for them to learn about the steps in the first place. This resulted in numerous people visiting HR and department offices inquiring about their status.
2. The departments themselves were often frustrated because they believed all of the necessary steps were completed, but the Team Member's promotion had still not taken effect. They often felt as though they were not in control of the how the process was handling their staff.
3. The process itself did little to prepare individuals for their new role or adequately address what skills they are lacking if they were passed over.

Intervention

I proposed an overhaul, not of the process itself, but of the process management. As an administrator of the Six Flags Learning Management System (LMS), I believed that it would adequately support this process.

By making this change, my goal was to remove frustration felt by many as well as enhance the development of those Team Members seeking to enter the management ranks.

The Six Flags LMS is capable of supporting not only learning activities, but also tracking of tasks. As part of the LMS, the flow of the process now works like this.

- A Team Member seeking a promotion enrolls in the "Six Flags Promotional Program" within the LMS. Department heads have access to view applicants at any time. Previously the HR Coordinator had to forward email applications to the departments when she had time.
- The program contains the following items:
  o A new introductory message from the Park President congratulating the Team Member on pursuing career advancement
  o A new online course entitled "Preparing for Promotion" that details the skills and work habits Six Flags looks for in our Seasonal Management Team
  o The promotional application itself (no longer a simple online contact form)
  o The Loss Prevention and Safety interviews appear as tasks to be completed. They are visible to the Team Member and contain instructions on how to get

those interviews scheduled. After each is completed, an LP or Safety representative indicates that the Team Member has passed each screening.
- o A new calendar of upcoming Management Training dates and the ability to enroll in the next available course
- o A task indicating the promotional progress report has been received by HR is now included.
- o A new congratulatory message from numerous members of management welcoming them to the management team and outlining their basic expectations
- o A task indicating the promotion is now effective

- For those promoted to Supervisor, two additional on-demand online courses are required before the promotion takes effect:
  - o Conducting Seasonal Team Member Evaluations
  - o Radio Procedures and Etiquette
- Each department has a new section where they have the opportunity to add any additional requirements they may have such as job shadowing or certification tests directly into the LMS. Depending on the department, this section is either directly after the "Preparing for Promotion" course or before the congratulatory message.

Removing Frustration
By moving the process into a centralized location and making it accessible to all affected parties, much of the mystery surrounding the process vanished.

Applicants can now log in at any time to view their progress and discover who they can contact if they have questions during any part of the process.

From the department perspective, they retain more control over the process by also seeing where each applicant is in the process as well as adding their own specific material where needed. In some cases, the paper form with this information would get literally lost in the mail travelling from office to office.

Preparing for Promotion
I have included additional preparatory items. For example, even those not promoted have the opportunity to view the "Preparing for Promotion" course. By explaining the skills sets we are looking for, they now have something to work on as they wait for future promotional opportunities.

Personnel Role
Another consequence was relieving the HR Coordinator of much of the responsibilities of the process.

The HR Coordinator continues to ensure the completion of the promotional progress report and entering the promotion into the Human Resources System. The responsibility of tracking of all other items now resides with other individuals depending on their role in the process.

I will continue to be responsible for developing all additional learning content as well as setting up and managing the program inside the LMS.

Change Plan

In order to ensure a successful transition, I followed Everett Roger's Innovation-Decision Process Model.

Knowledge

Due to the large number of people that are part of the existing process, I arranged meetings with each of them to describe how their specific role was going to be affected by this change as well as where they fit in the overall plan.

Persuasion

Based on my experience with the process, I correctly assumed the departments, Loss Prevention, and Safety will support this change with only minor issues.

While most of the HR Department supported the change, the HR Coordinator, however, perceived the change as an affront to her performance. To alleviate her concerns I sat with her one on one, walked her through the steps, and demonstrated how her role fit into the revised process. I assured her that she was integral to ensuring the process moves forward as well as following up with departments or applicants who appeared to be holding up the process.

I also explained how this process could positively affect many of the problems we observed.

Decision

After conducting the meetings, we implemented the change on a trial basis during the Spring promotional session.

Implementation

This process took approximately three weeks to deploy with a few elements still in development.

The completed items include creating the application, adding all necessary tasks, writing the scripts for the introductory and congratulatory videos, filming the videos, and setting up the necessary notifications.

Due to the time commitment, the video elements are currently only text and images. Filming is complete, and editing is ongoing. They are scheduled arrive in time for the next round of promotions.

Again, because of the timing, departments have not yet added their additional specific requirements. They are in the process of developing them, and this step will take effect in January 2015.

Confirmation
The largest number of promotions occurs in the months leading up to park opening. I conducted a test of the process during that period, and conducted an evaluation to determine if it was appropriate to continue utilizing the new process.

Evaluation Plan

Throughout the trial period, I closely monitored how the process was flowing. As individuals completed the process, I conducted an evaluation using the following methods of inquiry.

- I conducted surveys with ten Team Members who entered the promotional process. I was able to meet with eight people who received promotions and two who did not. The individuals came from four different departments. My questions included how they felt we managed the process, how HR and their department handled questions about their status, how beneficial they felt the additional learning materials and videos were, and what other items they thought would be useful to add to the process.
- I conducted face-to-face meetings with department heads to discuss how they felt the process met their needs to ensure an effective and efficient promotional process.
- I met with Loss Prevention and Safety stakeholders to address any concerns they had on their role.
- In addition to updates during regular HR staff meetings, I held a special session with the HR staff to discuss the process at the end of the trial period.
- I maintained an ongoing list of technical or procedural questions that came up during the trial. Fortunately, there were no emergency issues, but I did get enough feedback to create an FAQ to include in the next round.

Findings

In general, this project was successful, but still in need of refinement. In this section, I look at the results of the evaluation plan as well as add my own personal observations on the process.

Team Member Perspective
While logistical reasons were important, hearing how the process affected the Team Members took on a higher precedence. To begin with, none of the ten I surveyed had anything overly negative to say about the process other than that it took longer than they expected. Some of them commented that they did not realize there were so many steps involved so they found the "checklist" informative.

In terms of having to log in and check their status, three of them said they did not log in at all to check the status of the various tasks. After the initial application and welcome items, they only

went back to enroll in the Management Training when someone told them they needed to do it. A few of the more eager applicants said they checked the course shell almost every day to follow their progress. The rest said they felt they knew where they were in the process, and only logged in when they knew they had completed a step just to ensure it registered correctly.

None of them expressed any technical concerns with the online aspects. Some checked from their mobile device, which was not something I had considered, but was glad to hear they had no issues with the LMS on those devices.

Most said they did not ask many questions of their department. In a few cases, however, they did check in when they felt something was missing from their status (something completed, but not checked off). Some did say their managers seemed a little disconnected from the new online process.

All of them said they found the additional messages and learning materials beneficial. I explained that soon videos would be replacing the messages and they felt that would make things better. Only two of them accepted Supervisor promotions and had to complete the online "Evaluation" and "Radio Procedures" courses. They did not give me a lot of feedback on the content, but did like that it was available on demand.

From the eight Team Members offered promotions, I did not receive much in terms of suggested process improvement. Of the two not offered positions, however, one expressed a desire to know more about why he did not get the position and what he could work on for the next round.

Management Perspective
While I placed more value on the opinions of the Team Members, ensuring that Management was engaged in the process was also important. This group consisted of Loss Prevention and Safety representatives as well as individual department management (Rides, Retail, Culinary Services, Security, etc).

The Loss Prevention Manager had no issues with the process except it meant many of his interviewers needed to have administrative access to the LMS. Initially I only trained him and one other person how to check off the completion of their interview. He did not pass that knowledge on to others so he felt overwhelmed at times to get everything keyed correctly.

The Safety team on the other hand did not like having to log in and check things off. Again, I got the feeling this was because they did not feel entirely comfortable with how to do it. Like LP, they have several people participate in their part of the process and some did not receive the information. In two cases, the Safety Supervisor sent the applicant away and told them to get the old employee change form. In another case, the Supervisor simply did not communicate their potion to anyone, which caused obvious confusion.

From the department management perspective, none of them had any real complaints. As mentioned, some completely disconnected from the process, but that was a conscious decision on their part and unrelated to the change. The Rides Department already had a formalized process to begin with which, in fact, was an inspiration for me in the first place. Surprisingly, though they took some convincing to move parts of their process online. Once I walked them through everything and demonstrated how it made the applicants lives easier, they gradually came around. Other departments who did not have a formal process showed mixed interest in adding departmental items. Some of that was due to their lack of initiative and others did not feel it was necessary.

HR Perspective
The final perspective I considered was that of my HR coworkers. The HR Director was supportive of the process and helped champion it throughout. As covered earlier, the HR Coordinator did not take to the process immediately, but she came to see its benefits over the long term.

Another goal was to remove the literal paper trail and change it into an electronic one. This was not an easy hurdle to overcome. The HR Coordinator likes to print every email she gets that pertains to employees so convincing her that the final Team Member status change form was still going to be used helped calm some fears.

They were looking at things purely from an HR process standpoint whereas I approached it from a development perspective. Once they understood that I was adding those developmental elements in and not removing any of their steps, I had little opposition.

One other issue that I am constantly facing with online training is the notion of paying them for their time. They raised the question, "How much of this process should be paid?" For example, do we pay them to watch the introductory videos? Is that considered training? Ultimately, we decided that we would pay them for anything called a "course" (online or in a classroom), but we would not pay them for any other items we considered only part of the application process.

Conclusion
This project had been gestating in my mind for some time, but over the last 12 months, it became clear that now was the time to act on it. I consider the trial a success, but it is not yet complete.

There were several reasons the plan succeeded. The first came from an obvious need. I do not think you could find anyone (outside of the HR Coordinator) that felt the existing process was working. In that sense, it was an easy sell.

The second came from my tenure within the company. Having been with Six Flags for close to 25 years, I have earned trust from my colleagues and they will typically give me the benefit of

the doubt in these situations. In other words, I have a reputation of not leading people down the wrong path.

Recommendations and Next Steps

I have several recommendations and plans for this process.

A few things need to be finished up (completion of the aforementioned videos for example), but most items are edits or additions.

- How I am going to handle people who apply a second time for the same position? Currently, their information stays in the system so if they returned it would appear that certain tasks are already completed. I do not have a perfect solution to this, but have reached out to our LMS provider for some suggestions.
- The LMS has built in reminders that I am going to activate for the various parts of the process. The system can email applicants after so many days of inactivity to remind them to finish certain sections.
- Since applicants can see the entire process from the beginning, originally I had the final element be the "Congratulations" message. Of course, not everyone gets to that point. I am changing that section to a task called "Decision". This signifies the official end of the process. If they receive the promotion, the LMS automatically enrolls them in a new course that contains the additional training elements and the "Congratulations" messages.
- I need to create a "How To" or "FAQ" sheet to distribute to all LP and Safety supervision as well as department management to ensure they all know how to fulfill their duties within the process.

Some items require more than minor adjustments, but I do believe they can become part of the overall training and development plan for our Team Members.

- By 2015, I want all departments to have some kind of department specific items in the process. If I start now, that can become a reality.
- I need to create a method for those passed over to learn about ways to develop themselves for future promotional opportunities.
- I am currently working on a report to my training counterparts at other Six Flags parks explaining our process. No other park is attempting anything close to this scope, but I think some will take a chance with it.
- While this is part of a much bigger picture, I want to integrate this process as part of an overhaul to our existing "University of Six Flags" concept. Eventually I want to have "graduates" from our Management Program and this process helps to lay the groundwork for that future development (which also includes tracking all types and levels of training inside the LMS.

Lessons Learned

I personally learned that there is an interest in on-demand online courses, but only if the Team Members can see a clear benefit for themselves. In this case, they know a potential promotion is waiting for them.

As just mentioned, this gives me confidence in my plans to integrate the LMS fully into all kinds of additional learning at Six Flags. This particular process involved many people with different agendas and responsibilities. It was a risk worth taking, but because it has shown some success, future online endeavors will face less resistance. Moreover, most items will not be nearly as far reaching as this one so the circle of influence will be much smaller.

Finally, I recognize that I still have to develop my course creation skills. This process has given me practice and experience that will prove helpful going forward particularly as we transition even more Management training elements into an online format.

In summary, I believe migrating the seasonal promotional process into our learning management system has been a worthwhile endeavor that has not only solved many concerns about the promotional process, but also laid the groundwork for future online training opportunities.

Reference

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Note: Blatant Media's Absorb LMS powers the Six Flags Learning Management System. See www.absorblms.com for more information.