

Case Study

Ajinomoto's Enhanced Cross-training Helps Retain Employees



Background

Ajinomoto Foods North America is a leading manufacturer of frozen foods with nine U.S. plants and more than 2,800 employees working around the clock. Like every manufacturer during a historic labor shortage, Ajinomoto is challenged to hire and retain enough workers to meet demands.

But unlike other U.S. manufacturers that lure employees with signing bonuses and call it done, Ajinomoto focuses on its employees' wellbeing,

safety, and development with innovative cross-training and pay-for-skills programs.

The company's facility in Joplin, Missouri is an exemplary snapshot. The Joplin plant maintains a 24-hour production line to create foods like fried pickles, onion rings, and mozzarella sticks sold to restaurants and grocery stores. Joplin is home to several other manufacturers, creating a highly competitive market to attract and retain workers with a limited labor pool.

Ajinomoto Training Administrator Audra Shelton knows what workers want, having started with the company on the production line and later advancing

to become the training administrator for the plant's more than 300 employees.

"We know that we're competing with other manufacturers in the area that at any time might offer bigger signing bonuses or more money," she said. "But we also know they need more than just money and perks. Employees want the ability to grow within the company, feel valued, and know they're working in a safe environment."

But Shelton knows from her time on the production floor that it isn't easy to see opportunities. There was no clarity on what it would take to earn more responsibility or become qualified for new positions. And even if someone found their way to a new position, operational job training *"was just all tribal knowledge, there was no standardization,"* she said.

The need for a stronger cross-training program was apparent. *"We have some people who want more responsibility,"* said Chris Erdiger, EHS Manager at Ajinomoto Joplin. *"They want to move up in the company and aren't content with just being where they're at."*

Dave Lambert, Senior EHS Manager, Ajinomoto North America, summarized the challenge: "The problem with tribal knowledge is you have an employee who was trained one way some time ago, who is now training a new employee. But he's doing it different because he found it's easier to do it that way. *So, by the time you get to the third or fourth generational training, they're leaving out three or four important steps."*

The Solution

Ajinomoto has been working with Intertek Alchemy for several years to deliver critical safety training and onboarding to get workers ready for the floor. So,

when they needed better cross-training and skills development, Ajinomoto expanded their Alchemy platform and tapped into unutilized elements.

A key component was the introduction of Alchemy Playbook, a mobile tool that makes it easy to create, deliver, and qualify job-specific training on the production floor.



The Alchemy Playbook app can be used on any tablet or phone to record video of any Ajinomoto process or piece of equipment and turn that information quickly into a course. Employees can take instructional courses at the production stations where they will work. The technology is designed specifically for manufacturing settings and can function without a WiFi connection.

This approach makes it easier and quicker to cross-train employees on the floor, creating an easier path to advancement and greater pay. It also helps employees and supervisors share knowledge and skills so best practices don't walk out the door when someone quits.

Additionally, Alchemy Playbook tracks job qualifications of every employee so supervisors can quickly fill gaps by identifying who is trained with specific skills.

Shelton said Ajinomoto employees feel more valued when they are presented with more opportunities, and the chance to engage with supervisors on a

meaningful level. And the employees agree. “It’s definitely very important to me,” said Rachel Baine, who works general utility on the floor. *“Any time the company uses their money and time to invest back in the people on the floor, it speaks volumes about the company and how they value us.”*

The Results

Providing Consistent Access to Training and Development

With Alchemy Playbook, every employee has access to the same training, allowing them to learn and do more. And Ajinomoto is able to successfully end tribal knowledge passing through the production floor, eliminating shortcuts and costly mistakes.

Training on any piece of equipment or process is provided on the spot. Because it’s recorded, the content and demonstrations are precisely the same for every employee who is then credited for completing the courses.

“Before adding Playbook, the challenge we were facing was lack of hands-on training documentation,”



explained Erdiger. *“The ability to consistently and evenly provide and document all their training shows us what they’ve done, and it tells them what they need to achieve to move up to the next level. That is huge for them and us.”*

Cross-training Early and Providing Growth Opportunities

Utilizing Alchemy Playbook, Ajinomoto created an employee cross-training program that starts during the first few months on the job. In addition to learning their initial job, they have an opportunity to train for a different part of the manufacturing line. This allows employees to engage with co-workers outside their stations and understand operations for the entire production line.

As a result, they are up-skilling faster. Some employees who have been with Ajinomoto for as little as three or four months are already training as backups for more technical positions. *“It makes the process a lot easier and quicker for them to learn,”* confirmed Shelton. Cross-training also provides a break for employees who might otherwise remain at the same station for days or months at a time.

Erdiger agrees. “It’s important for employees to cross-train, so they don’t feel like they’re always stuck in one spot. *When we cross train and let them gain knowledge, we provide a means to move into higher positions and develop a career instead of just a day-to-day job,*” he said.

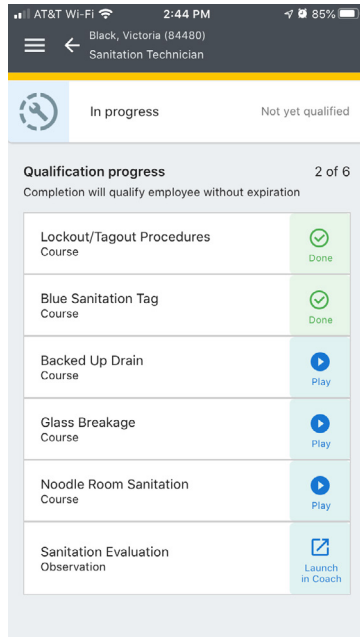
Playbook enables this mobility by allowing employees to see training on a tablet in front of the machines they’ll use. The structure Playbook instills in upskilling initiatives makes it easier for employees to see the opportunities in front of them.

For Baine, Playbook provides a snapshot of Ajinomoto’s broader operations and the importance her job plays in the company’s success. *“I love being cross-trained. I’m a big-picture person, and I want to know how the whole line works front to back. It helps me understand our company better and gives me more opportunities in the future to move up in the company,* which is definitely

important to me career-wise and my overall happiness at work.”

Filling Shifts Quicker and Easier

Playbook enables Ajinomoto to know what training every employee has right down to what specific jobs and tasks they are qualified to perform. It also shows which employees are in progress for certain new jobs and tasks, and what is still left to complete their qualification. Thus,



leaders can complete the employee’s new skills training and provide it on the floor with a tablet in front of the equipment they’re using.

Shelton said it is now far less stressful to replace a worker who calls in sick. *“The leads no longer have to scramble around to figure out how they’re going to get someone thrown into that position and be safe. They can just look at Playbook and see instantly who is qualified for that position.”*

Rewarding Skills Development

Ajinomoto developed a tiered pay-for-skills program using Intertek Alchemy that provides higher pay for employees who take on new skills. It tracks their learnings and the courses they complete, resulting in pay increases.

“We feel this is important because it helps compete on the pay level with other companies, and it rewards employees who learn more and take on greater responsibilities,” Shelton said. “The Alchemy platform plays a huge role in our tiered pay-for-skills program

by organizing all the training required for each position and providing a view of the growth plan that employees can look forward to. *It pulls everything together and makes sure that each employee receives the standardized training needed to develop more skills and advance within Ajinomoto.”*

Up Next — Aiding Company Expansion

Success at Ajinomoto means expansion. The plant is building a fourth production line that will introduce new equipment and procedures to make products never made in Joplin before. Shelton and team are mapping out their operational training for the new line. *“Playbook will make this the smoothest expansion we can imagine,”* she said.

Ajinomoto will use Playbook to record the process of setting up the line as they build it. The recordings will transform paper-based work instructions into interactive courses. And as leadership cements the operational processes, they will record it with Playbook, again creating job-specific training courses easily and effectively.

“Playbook really revolutionizes our ability to succeed as we bring in an entirely new process, not to mention new employees in mass in order to meet the added production,” says Shelton. *“We’re excited about the future. There’s not a lot of limits with Alchemy. Anything that you can imagine, you could do it with Alchemy.”*

For More Information

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