



Cultivating Talent

Training has morphed into career-long learning and loyalty-building development.

By Mark Wright

McDonald's has its Hamburger University. The Walt Disney Company has its Disney Institute. And some savvy self storage industry players now have their own immersive learning experiences for new hires and seasoned hands alike.

For them, training isn't only about quickly getting someone up to speed. It's about putting new hires on a career path to hopefully retain them longer. And it's about forming individuals into true team members committed to helping the company succeed and grow.

Robust training programs have also been vital for adapting to the post-pandemic tight labor market, which — despite headline-grabbing layoffs by some big-name tech companies this year — has continued to complicate hiring across many industries.

Above: Extra Space Storage employees receive some of their training in the company's National Solutions Center in Salt Lake City, Utah.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in April (the latest available before SSA's press deadline) that the March 2023 labor force participation rate had ticked up to 62.6%, and the employment-population ratio had edged up to 60.4%, but noted that those numbers were still below their pre-pandemic February 2020 levels of 63.3% and 61.1%, respectively.

"Because the market has been so difficult, we've had to take a look at all [recruiting] avenues — churches, colleges, interns. Our people are coming from all walks of life, just like our customers," said Christina Rita, chief operating officer at StoragePRO Management in Walnut Creek, California.

Rita has noticed changes in how employees want to work, as well. Instead of everyone going full time as in years past, she's now seeing more part-timers. She said some people don't want to work a full five-day week, while others prefer working only weekends. So, StoragePRO has been offering more flexibility over the past couple years.

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Cultivating Careers

Despite the labor-supply crunch, hiring people from outside self storage is not a new phenomenon, explained Mitch Pope, VP of operations support at Extra Space Storage in Salt Lake City, Utah.

“The norm is that most of our employees do not have self storage experience — and that was true even before the pandemic,” said Pope.

Where are they coming from? At least for Extra Space, it’s mainly from the customer service industry, especially retail, according to John Matthews, the company’s director of learning and development.

“Self storage is very attractive to people who have lived in the retail world,” said Matthews. “Because whether you’re talking about selling something in the retail environment or selling storage, it’s all about the human connection. So we find that piece very easily transfers to our environment.”

Regardless of their background, all the company’s new hires go through the same onboarding process, explained Doug Anderson, Extra Space’s senior director of learning and talent development. That process consists of 10 days of formalized training, conducted by one of the company’s 350 district team leads around the U.S.

“They actually go to that team lead’s location and get trained in their store,” said Anderson. “After that, it’s a lot of hands-on support from store managers, from district managers, involving the new hire in their onboarding process.”

That process went virtual during the pandemic, but Anderson said they returned to in-person about a year and a half ago.

At StorageMart Management Co., Adam Steckler, president of the company’s truSTORAGE Property Management arm based in the New York City metro, similarly said a lot of their new hires have no previous self storage experience.

“We look for people with customer-facing experience, hospitality experience, and/or previous sales skills,” said Steckler. “We know friendly people with good customer service skills make a great founda-



StoragePRO Management takes a team through its StoragePRO University.

tion. We will teach the product knowledge of self storage.”

He said they use a learning management system, which has many short, easily digestible video modules that walk an employee through the entire onboarding process.

“Additionally, the local on-site manager and their fellow colleagues work with new employees one-on-one to directly answer questions, make sure they understand the sales process, and review other job requirements,” said Steckler.

Likewise at Absolute Storage Management, Inc. (ASM), Justina Kempksi, lead training specialist based in Canton, Georgia, said the company onboards people from a variety of work backgrounds.

“Many of our tenured team members never came from storage backgrounds, so for our company this is very common,” said Kempksi. “We find that a mix of virtual new-hire training mixed with hands-on training with our on-site team is the best combination.”

Kempksi said ASM has “a very well-thought-out 0-90 day training plan that we implement through our Learning Management System. This helps our team members understand the industry in what we call ‘bite size’ pieces each week until they understand how to run a property confidently and successfully.”

Each company has its own training philosophy, but the development process is rarely one-and-done.

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For example, Extra Space offers internal programs and certifications to keep “high-potential talent” learning and growing, said Doug Anderson. That includes an executive development program, a leadership development program, and seed programs that enable individuals to pick and choose their own learning path.

“Every new leader here at our corporate office goes through a launch that trains them on how to lead others, how to coach,” said Anderson. “We typically use the GROW model. We teach them the situation behavior impact (SBI) model. And we invest a lot of time. We really want to provide them with the very best tools and resources so that they are successful.”

Focusing on Growth

Anderson said he believes all that effort is paying off in lower turnover. “I was looking over a list of DMs [district managers] that we’ve hired in the last year from March to March,” he said. “We’ve hired quite a few — and we’ve lost only two.”

Pope and Matthews added that the REIT’s growth has provided employees with a way to visualize their career trajectory.

“There are examples of people here, even up to the VP level, who started in stores,” said Pope.

Matthews observed: “In some retail organizations, people are waiting for someone to retire before they can move forward. But with our constant



An Extra Space Storage team lead trains a new employee at her store.



Using a combination of learning experiences keeps training fresh. | Image courtesy of StoragePRO Management

growth, they can see, ‘Yeah, I can have a career here, it’s not just a job.’ ”

Of course, no matter what their experience or skill level, different people learn better in different ways, be it audio-visual, classroom, or field-based hands-on instruction.

Absolute’s Kempski noted that virtual training is never going away — not necessarily for public-health reasons but because of her company’s expansion.

“We are growing into more states, and for us it makes sense to stay virtual,” she said. “This isn’t always the most ideal for some of our team members, which is why we do a mix of visual, audio and hands on.”

She said the virtual part of the training gives new hires the foundational knowledge they will need to implement during their hands-on training.

“We aren’t just talking to our new hires,” Kempski explained, “we are having them interact with training trivia, reading reports and having them take control of the screen to navigate different scenarios. After a lot of experimenting and changing, we have received very positive feedback.”

Carrie Holbert, Absolute’s director of human resources, added that while the company’s core training was all developed internally, some employees choose to supplement Absolute’s offerings with other learning experiences.

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Leveraging SSA Resources

"We have had a few of our team members go above and beyond and earn the CSSM [SSA's Certified Self Storage Manager designation] in the past several months and have been very outspoken in encouraging others to work on the certification as well," Holbert said. "Growth and development of our team is one of our main pillars, so we have put a large focus on both large and small/micro learning opportunities."

Steckler of StorageMart agreed that SSA resources are a value-add for companies and employees alike.

"We think national SSA shows and state SSA shows are a great way to expose our regional managers and district managers to the larger industry," he said. "They let our field staff see what's new, learn what the new ideas are, and attend educational sessions to understand why we do things the way we do. Having our employees talk to their peers in the industry helps them grow as employees and makes our company better."

In addition to those industry-wide experiences, Steckler said his company brings its regional managers from around the world together at its headquarters for a week-long Regional Manager Academy, where they spend time with every department learning about revenue management, business intelligence, the call center, and more.

"It's also an opportunity for these regional managers to share what they are experiencing

in the field, living face to face with customers, good and bad," said Steckler. "This feedback lets us improve operational processes and determine what works with customers and what doesn't."

Balanced Approach

Feedback has been important to StoragePRO's training evolution as well, said Rita. She said the company has done a lot of surveys over the years, which have provided two big takeaways. The first one had to do with the company's benefits package, and the second focused on development.

Employees said they loved StoragePRO University, which takes each assistant manager and store manager through a multiple week program about understanding storage and their day-to-day tasks and helping them understand "the StoragePRO way" of providing clean, safe, secure storage facilities. But they also said they want to continue to further their development, taking their careers to the next level.

Rita said the company has had to take a balanced approach to satisfying the varying goals and styles of different generations of employees, from baby boomers to Gen Zers and everyone in between.

"We did a lot of virtual learning during the pandemic, and then it just came full circle," she said. "We found you need to have a little bit of everything — in person, virtual, training seminars. Otherwise, some generations quickly become tired with redundancy, so you have to keep it fresh." ♦