

## Sowing the Seeds for Learning at Southern States

Since its beginning as Virginia Seed Service in 1923, Southern States has been at the forefront of agricultural advances. Owned by more than 300,000 farmers, the cooperative has used the findings from its research arms to educate farmers in new ideas and more efficient production methods. As a result of its leadership role in agriculture, Southern States has continued to expand, and today encompasses some 1,200 retail locations.

### The Situation

Southern States made it a strategic initiative to increase its focus on employee development, but with a geographically dispersed and aging workforce, it knew it wouldn't be easy. The company offered several certification programs for employees, such as Gromaster for crop advisors, and Feedmaster for dairy and equine specialists, but its training materials consisted mostly of books housed in the corporate headquarters, and didn't get much use. With employees scattered across 23 states, shipping resources was an ineffective approach.



*Brands you trust.  
People who know.*

In addition, Southern States required compliance and other forms of employee training, but had challenges tracking completions due to the effort involved with manual record-keeping, and the remoteness of some store locations. The company wanted to switch to more of a blended learning solution, but knew that many older employees had limited technical experience, and were quite new to the idea of online training. There was not only an impending generational training gap to address, but a sizable effort required to overcome common e-Learning myths and change work habits to include time online.

Carter Iseman, Manager of Corporate Learning Services at Southern States said, "We wanted to bring the company up to date with learning and development. Acquiring an LMS was the obvious next step to building a stronger, more flexible program, and putting our employees in touch with technology."

### The Element K Solution

Southern States decided to partner with Element K to address their learning challenges, based on the strength of the learning company's easy-to-use learning management system, KnowledgeHub, and the quality of their training content. The two partners developed a strategy to overcome myths about e-Learning at Southern States, and worked to make training accessible to employees through the use of quick links from the company's intranet. They also rolled out several business and soft skill libraries to retail channel employees, and quickly began tracking training results via the reporting capabilities offered by KnowledgeHub.

Southern States then set to work developing a package of training that included onboarding, sexual harassment, code of conduct, orientation, privacy and other mandatory topics. Much of this training was required on an annual basis, though certain employee segments needed monthly safety training. In all cases, attendance could now be carefully monitored, generating accurate transcripts.

In addition, several new development paths were created for managers, mill workers, sales persons and other positions, leveraging a mix of Element K training and custom modules built by Southern States. "Not every employee has an email account, so there is no good way to push training messages out to employees. To keep people coming back to the training site, we publish two new courses per month, and promote them heavily around the company," said Iseman. To date, the training team has built around 40 product-specific and soft skill custom courses.

## Promising Results

Since Southern States launched its e-Learning program to the retail segment in October of 2009, 68.5% of their employees have logged in. In the first six months of the program, KnowledgeHub tracked approximately 16,000 logins, with 8,500 courses completed. “We are very proud of our users. People were resistant to the newness of e-Learning, but after an initial adjustment period with Element K, it has completely taken off,” noted Iseman.

The company is also encouraging vendors to collaborate on product specific training as a means to drive sales and increase product awareness. So far, Bonide®, a pest and weed control company, has developed a product module set to be released later this year. Southern States expects other vendors to soon follow, since program feedback shows that employees feel more comfortable selling products after completing the relevant training. Iseman notes, “The new e-Learning program has made employees more accountable for their own knowledge. *‘Brands you trust. People who know.’* That’s our tagline, so our people need to be knowledgeable, and we need to be sure they are competent. Now that we’ve made it easy for people to access courses, there is a heightened level of confidence at Southern States.”

The program still has obstacles to overcome, but usage numbers indicate that the old barriers to e-Learning are quickly being removed, as employees realize the value of the modules. By making courses universally available to their staff, Southern States has seen a great deal of cross-training, with employees gaining important skills that often fall outside of ordinary job descriptions. “For people with a personal interest in learning, we offer total control over career development. Training and technology are important at Southern States, and we’re giving our teams the tools they need to service our customers, and develop their own area of expertise,” said Iseman.