# Panda Restaurants: Blended Training Shows Big Results

California-based Panda Restaurant Group has 900 restaurants and 16,000 employees – it's the nation's largest Chinese foodservice provider. With an aggressive growth plan, Panda had one major obstacle to achieving its vision – a lack of consistent, targeted, skills-based training.

## The business need

Panda wanted a learning solution that would connect associates with skills and behaviors to effectively and consistently provide the best guest experience and strengthen the Panda brand. Training had been limited to working with managers at headquarters, and then filtering the information to associates. Panda wanted short, modular sessions so associates could learn just-in-time in the store environment. Panda leadership viewed training as a strategic solution to drive improved performance, so speed in creating these tools was critical.

## The solution

Panda had worked with Root on paper-based modules, but had not used electronic learning in its stores. In just six months, Root and Panda created a comprehensive, consistent, 40-module training system that:

— Provided custom training for Back of House, Front of House, and Chef associates (high potentials).

— Covered food preparation, food safety, customer service, and all other relevant areas.

— Created an intranet system for hosting the modules throughout the Panda system.

— Offered all modules in both English and Spanish, where associates could toggle back and forth between the languages, as well as hear the words spoken.

Root used its proven methodology of providing context, content, practice, and application. The electronic modules were used in combination with demonstration and coaching by managers and other associates to reinforce skills.

Although the focus was skills-based, Panda leadership felt that this project was also strategic because it built a line of sight between associate actions and company strategy, helping Panda build its brand. A secondary benefit was that the bilingual modules helped associates learn English – which was much appreciated by its diverse employee base.

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Clean the Chinese Cooking range, exhaust hood and the stainless steel walls.

## Results

Panda engaged a third-party research agency, E.M.P.A. (Employee Motivation & Employment Assessment, Inc.), to evaluate the impact of the new curriculum on business metrics. To gauge bottom-line shifts, the 40 modules were introduced initially to a test group of 16 stores. A "control" group was also monitored to ensure that any changes could be attributed to the new training.

The results were outstanding, with the test group outperforming the "control" group against several key indicators — increased number of transactions, total profitability before advertising, productivity, and total gross sales. The results showed that if the curriculum were rolled out system-wide, gross sales would increase by as much as $2.4 million annually for the Panda Group — a phenomenal return on investment.

In addition to the "hard" ROI data, Panda associates were very enthusiastic about the clarity and educational value of the modules.

> "I learned what Panda does for us and what we should do in return. When Panda grows, we grow as well."

Some comments:

— "Having the manager demonstrate after the module helps us to grow and learn."

— "I'm a cook, so I like to know about food safety, but I also want to know about customer service."

— "Panda is always busy, but this made it easier to find the time."

— "This program takes things we didn't know or that take a long time to learn and makes them easier to understand and more fun."

— "I learned what Panda does for us and what we should do in return. When Panda grows, we grow as well."

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**About Root**
Root is a strategy execution company that helps organizations engage people as a catalyst for change using a proven framework that consistently achieves clarity, ownership, and results.

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