

EASING THE BURDEN ON OPERATORS DURING A PANDEMIC: How Cotton Patch Cafe Simplified Recipe Management and Employee Training



About Cotton Patch Cafe

Cotton Patch Cafe is an American homestyle restaurant chain best known for their made from scratch, Texan-style food, such as chicken fried steak, fried pickles, and Dr. Pepper Chocolate Cake. Founded in 1989, Cotton Patch went on to open locations around East Texas, and today has 48 full-service kitchens throughout Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico along with a remote kitchen in Texas. Cotton Patch prides itself on its three pillars: being wholesome, being Texan, and being local.



Photo courtesy of Cotton Patch Cafe.

The Challenge

Like many restaurants at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cotton Patch was overwhelmed by the constantly changing restaurant landscape. An initial major decision was to determine whether to keep their dine-in service or implement a take-out only model. At the same time, Cotton Patch was navigating how to balance company safety policies with public safety measures, figuring out how to handle contact tracing among their staff, and deciding how to best introduce an alcohol-to-go service offering.

As the pandemic progressed, Cotton Patch had to continuously update various policies across multiple jurisdictions. These challenges were made more complex because the Cotton Patch Cafe Support Center had a specific set of needs.



Photo courtesy of Cotton Patch Cafe.

“We had to balance supporting our operators by making space for them to run their restaurants with as little interference as possible,” explained Ashley Helkenn, Cotton Patch’s Senior Manager of Learning and Development. “Our goal was lots of support with little interference while also meeting the needs of the departments who support them. But we all know that during times of change, everyone needs something – and usually, that something is time. We worked hard to keep this from becoming a tug-of-war.”

Implementing TalentLink

With the pace of change becoming harder to keep up with manually, Cotton Patch went online. Not only did all of Cotton Patch’s cafes have to make the leap to digital, but the Cafe Support Center did as well. The ultimate goal was to keep things simple for their teams. For Cotton Patch, simplicity meant not having to search emails for the most recent update to a policy or procedure, not having to hope that the recipe the team was working from was the most updated, and helping managers engage team members early by shouldering some of the knowledge transfer to new hires.

Cotton Patch turned to TalentLink to help migrate their training and resources online. TalentLink is Crunchtime’s comprehensive talent development solution that includes a learning management system designed specifically for the hospitality industry and a library of interactive, customizable courses.

The first step Cotton Patch took was to launch TalentLink’s LMS with compliance training and a digital recipe system at the same time.

“While this may seem like a strange combination, it was a strategic move to get teams onto the platform,” explained Helkenn. “We stopped printing recipes and moved them all online. We instructed Area Directors to toss out any recipe books. This helped our back of house teams gain experience logging into the system, and just as important, there was no more wondering if teams were working off the correct recipe or following the most updated procedure.”

“As a Cafe Support Center, we knew we had to live up to our name and support our Cafes. With our ops teams bombarded from every direction, simplifying operations for managers became our number one priority.”

The ability for managers to check all the compliance boxes online was an early win for the team. The cafes didn’t have to monitor program attendance or track when their teams were due for certification because the system did it for them.

Along with compliance training and digital recipes, Cotton Patch began to utilize TalentLink’s platform to publish hourly position training, videos, webinar recordings, and certification trackers. They then used the resource gallery to add newsletters, website links, and resources for operations. As they continued adding more tools and resources to the platform, comfort with the system grew.

“Operators saw us trying to simplify things for them,” Helkenn explained. “They could get information on a new recipe and their only directive was to open it. No more printing it and storing it in the right place or making sure it was swapped out. We couldn’t slow down the pace of updates and changes, but we could take the complexity out of properly executing those changes.”



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Outcomes

Cotton Patch saw quick improvements to their retention and employee training soon after implementing TalentLink: retention rates skyrocketed in their cafes, their 90-day turnover decreased by more than 50%, and their 6-month turnover also decreased by over 50%.

Cotton Patch also saw an increase in training completed among their cafe staff. The number of team members who completed their food handler certification within their first two weeks of employment doubled. They also saw an increase in completed training across the board.

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When asked what Cotton Patch saw as their biggest win, Helkenn said, “The biggest increase we saw was in the trust from our operators who could see we were working to help them run their Cafes while respecting their time.”



Photo courtesy of Cotton Patch Cafe.

Next Steps

Now that Cotton Patch’s operations teams are comfortable with TalentLink, they prefer having all their resources on the platform.

“Everyone wants everything on TalentLink, so much so that ‘let’s throw it on TalentLink’ is now a common phrase around the office,” Helkenn explained. “So instead of begging people to see what the training department is doing, we are having to hold them off. We have a promise to keep it simple. And for us, simple means accessible, organized, updated. Our goal is to provide our Cafes with everything they need but only what they need, exactly when they need it.”

Today, departments that want to add resources to TalentLink have to make a case for it and show a plan for maintaining their content on the platform before they can add items. “To be honest, it’s kind of a cool problem to have,” Helkenn said with a smile.

About Crunchtime

Crunchtime is how the world’s top restaurant brands achieve ops excellence in every location. Our software is used in over 100,000 locations in 100+ countries to manage inventory, staff scheduling, learning and development, food safety, operational tasks and audits.

For more information visit www.crunchtime.com

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