



Customer story
Absorbie 2024 winner

Sue Christensen **Senior Manager of Learning** **Consulting, OTEC**

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OTEC provides innovative tourism and hospitality workforce training with Absorb

OTEC (the Ontario Tourism Education Corporation) is a Toronto-based not-for-profit organization that delivers award-winning skills training, consulting, research, and insights to guide workforce strategy, enabling organizations in the tourism and hospitality sectors to empower their employees. (In fact, among its many accolades is the 2024 Absorbie Award for External Training Impact.)

The organization achieves this goal by offering a broad portfolio of solutions, including customer service training and leadership training, upskilling, reskilling, professional certifications and consulting services

In 2020, few industries were hit harder by the COVID-19 pandemic than tourism and hospitality. OTEC had to adjust to some major shifts in the marketplace to make sure their clients in those sectors continued to thrive and be sustainable.

“I'm sure it comes as no surprise to anybody that tourism and hospitality were hit brutally by the pandemic, and everything ceased. It literally stopped,” says Sue Christensen, Senior Manager of Learning Consulting at OTEC.

Even post-pandemic, Christensen notes, some short-staffed restaurants have had to reduce hours, attractions are running on minimum staff, and even airports have seen several challenges in recent years. “Also, the expectations of the consumers around tourism and hospitality as sectors have really risen. You know, we expect a lot these days.”

She says the organization recognized that given the ongoing challenges in recruitment, retention, onboarding, upskilling, and addressing customer expectations, there was never a better time to innovate its approach to training.

Supporting industry recovery

“The pandemic was a line in the sand,” Christensen says. “We said, ‘We need to do something about this. We need to come to the party and bring solutions.’”

High-quality training, especially around onboarding, is a vital tool in retention; however, the operational challenges of the sector often deprioritize training. It’s often impossible to lose staff for a few hours to train.



Delivering training in new and accessible ways was critical to supporting the industry’s recovery.

One of the crucial ways OTEC serves its clients is through a range of eLearning programs and content, but meeting the many challenges of the industry demanded a new learning platform. Training is delivered to a vast array of organizations and roles from attractions to restaurants, to provincial regions, universities, and more.

The organization was using two legacy learning management systems, which created barriers to participants seamlessly accessing their learning. It lacked a mobile interface and didn’t engagingly provide content. In addition, its systems provided no functionality for receiving feedback.

The organization saw it needed to upgrade its LMS to one focused on providing a smooth accessible learner experience, and one that could critically support a huge external client base.

“One of the biggest challenges is, how do I engage such a diverse audience when I do not have the direct line of contact with the end consumer, the end learner?” Christensen says.

Dealing primarily with external learners, engaging them wherever they were on whatever platform, including mobile devices, was a fundamental piece of OTEC’s post-pandemic recovery work. With so many of the people OTEC wanted to provide learning to being front-line, customer-facing service, their LMS platform needed to be accessible whether sitting at the front desk at a hotel or the kitchen of a restaurant.



OTEC's goals were fourfold

Christensen adds, “When deciding to address these challenges head-on by shifting to Absorb LMS, we set clear goals, with the primary focus on ensuring the end user has the best possible experience.”

“We needed to find a way to remove barriers, to find a way to make it super easy for anybody and everybody to engage with the training,” Christensen says.

The team transformed their learning programs for accessibility and engagement.

Relaunching its existing e-learning content in a simple-to-use format, using new tools to make its training programs more dynamic, interactive, and engaging.

Growing its learning catalog with new courses to address the sector's need for “just in time” training

Providing easy access to training -- exceeding accessibility standards -- to remove barriers to learning and support a diverse range of learners.

Re-engaging learners and improving completion rates through new tools and formats making it easy for users to engage with content and available support.

Adopting Absorb

Before making the move to a new LMS, the team needed to receive buy-in from key stakeholders, which it did through feedback from colleagues and clients that established a clear need for an updated, streamlined system and for OTEC to take the lead in workforce development. It used real-time feedback from stakeholders to determine the best approach to present its learning and training initiatives to the sector to maximize the impact its new approach would achieve.

OTEC migrated users of its legacy systems to Absorb over two waves starting in 2022, with the first taking place within the first eight weeks of setting up the LMS. “Both migrations were executed smoothly, supported by the implementation and client services teams at Absorb and leveraging the migration tools available,” Christensen says of the deployment.

In the past, users had to undergo a lengthy registration process but, by using the keys in Absorb, OTEC was able to retain a “by invitation only” feeling of exclusivity for learners while making it incredibly easy for organizations to have their teams enroll. This also significantly reduced training coordination time.

Communication **is key**

As part of the migration, the organization launched a communication campaign highlighting the upcoming change to Absorb, and the benefits users and organizations would experience ease of use, access on any device, and interactivity. This allowed OTEC to effectively re-engage with users and organizations who had challenges with the previous learning experience.

Communication is key

The organization achieved buy-in and built momentum by starting with core courses and key clients to demonstrate the improved learner experience. Seeing the improvements firsthand, many clients soon upgraded their learning content and increased their learner numbers.

In collaboration with OTEC's Business Development Team, the Learning & Development Team connected with a varied client base across the province, performing multiple demos and presentations. It also worked through various industry associations to raise awareness of the “new look and feel” for its online learning.

Course updates and expansion

At the same time, the organization took stock of its online learning catalog. Course design and functionality had been limited in its legacy platforms, but now with Absorb it could present training in more engaging and interactive formats, Christensen says. Several new courses were developed to take advantage of this.

Also, in addition to growing its client base in the tourism industry, Absorb has allowed OTEC to meet the needs of new clients in the academic and employment services sectors, greatly extending and improving the impact of its training.

Redesigning for post-pandemic

To meet the industry challenge of not being able to lose staff for hours at a time, OTEC designed its new program delivery of training into “bite-size” pieces that can be taken at any time and repeated as needed. By offering and promoting the training as fully mobile-enabled, it has dramatically improved its user engagement numbers.

And, with the growing customer expectations, and dissatisfaction, frontline workers must now contend with, the organization developed training in de-escalation and conflict management skills, available to be easily accessed and referenced at any time — right from their phones.

OTEC also leveraged Absorb to introduce blended training — combining self-directed and instructor-led courses — to accelerate learning to better meet the speed at which tourism and hospitality organizations need their teams trained. The organization is using this blended learning approach for its newly developed Accelerated Leadership program, taking advantage of a range of Absorb functionality. “This has been a phenomenal piece of work for us,” Christensen says.

Improving engagement and impact

OTEC has seen dramatic changes in engagement since its move to Absorb. It has seen an increase of more than 15% in the number of organizations using its training, and the number of active users has more than tripled — and numbers continue to climb.

Improving engagement and impact...cont

OTEC has increased the amount of training materials available, more than doubling the number of active courses since implementing Absorb, plus developing over 20 new courses. At the same time, the organization has leveraged Absorb to host and provide digital workbooks via the platform to cut down on physical printing and provide flexibility to its clients. In addition to its external training work, OTEC is also using Absorb to refresh and develop new internal training and onboarding practices for staff.

“Satisfaction rates have gone through the roof. Also, our completion rates have dramatically improved,” Christensen says. While OTEC previously had no means to capture user feedback, it now can by using Absorb’s built-in evaluation ratings.

OTEC is now using Absorb to build learning management systems for their clients, completely reskinned with vanity URLs, within their own LMS, and has plans to continually innovate with an eye on its original goals of engagement, access, and simplicity.

Adds Christensen, **“the innovations OTEC leveraged using Absorb have enabled us to have a measurable impact on the tourism and hospitality sector post-pandemic, providing new ways of delivering top-quality training and challenging the sector’s expectations in terms of accessibility, ease-of-access, and engagement in terms of delivering training content.”**



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