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CASE STUDY

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Johnsonville Sausage Adds ACT Solutions to Its Recipe for Success

THE ORGANIZATION:

Johnsonville Sausage, LLC
Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin

THE CHALLENGE:

- » Improve the quality and retention of newly hired team members
- » Ensure that team members seeking promotion or new assignments possess essential skills

KEY COMPONENTS:

- » Job profiling to develop detailed task lists and conduct task and skill analyses for hourly factory positions at the company's Sheboygan Falls plants
- » KeyTrain® curriculum to help individuals prepare for workplace skills assessments
- » National Career Readiness Certificates powered by three ACT WorkKeys® assessments:
 - » Applied Mathematics
 - » Locating Information
 - » Reading for Information

THE RESULTS:

- » 18 months after the pilot implementation began, 100% of all new hires and 100% of all promoted team members are being assessed.
- » Johnsonville Sausage has sent 229 individuals to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (WI DWD) Job Center in Sheboygan Falls for testing. Of the 221 who took the assessments, 218 earned a National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC™). About 75% of those tested were external applicants for positions at Johnsonville, and the remainder were individuals seeking a position change or promotion.

18	Bronze	8%
116	Silver	53%
80	Gold	37%
4	Platinum	2%

- » Retention of new hires has improved.
- » Team leaders report that they now have a better understanding of new team members' skills.
- » Johnsonville Sausage was named the 2011 National Employer of the Year by the National Association of State Workforce Agencies for demonstrating positive impact on its workforce, industry, and community.

COMPANY OVERVIEW

Wisconsin-based Johnsonville Sausage produces and distributes the leading national brand of brats, Italian sausage, smoked-cooked links, and fresh breakfast sausage links. Johnsonville employs approximately 1,300. Each team member takes ownership of product quality to ensure the excellence of Johnsonville products. Founded in 1945 by Ralph F. and Alice Stayer, the company remains privately owned.

THE CHALLENGE

“About 18 months ago, we began looking at our hiring process for hourly factory positions,” says John Schwantes, Johnsonville Sausage director of Plant Member Services—the term Johnsonville applies to its human resources team. “We envisioned a pyramid of selection factors that would fit our commitment to attract people who can stretch, grow, and excel. At the base of the pyramid is a solid foundation of workplace skills, and layered on top are physical ability and individual integrity. While we have plans for a local clinic to do our physicals, and we currently use an outside firm for integrity assessments, our foundation layer was in need of some additional attention.”

About that time, Jodie Senglaub and Heather Levandusky of the Plant Member Services team saw a flyer distributed by the WI DWD promoting ACT’s WorkKeys assessments and the National Career Readiness Certificate for job seekers and employers. “We thought this just might be the tool that could help us be more confident of applicant skill levels and readiness to learn the specifics of what we need to train them to do,” recalls Senglaub.

“I was intrigued when they brought this idea to me,” says Schwantes, “even more so when I learned that the testing would be done at the local job center at no cost to the job seeker or to the potential employer. As we learned more, we signed up for the pilot and jumped on board.” Johnsonville Sausage was the first employer in Sheboygan County to implement the NCRC program.

“THE JOHNSONVILLE WAY”

Company culture is key at Johnsonville. Employees are called members, and supervisors and managers are termed coaches. Any workplace conflicts are expected to be worked out by the members involved with the assistance of a coach, if needed. More than one statement in “The Johnsonville Way” pledge mentions personal growth and superlative performance. Accountability to the team and an unending commitment to stretch, grow, and excel is also highlighted.

Interviews for new team members are conducted by several current members of the team, and this team interview is one of the most important hiring criteria. “Existing team members have a vested interest in getting the best possible individual to join the team,” explains Schwantes. “We hire to fit our culture; if applicants are not truly team players, they will self-select out of the hiring process when they sense the importance of team during the application and interview process.”

The reward for finding excellent team members is tangible at Johnsonville. “We have a profit-sharing program called Great Performance Share,” says Schwantes. Through this program, members have the potential to earn a financial reward based on the company’s profitability, safety, customer satisfaction and delivery metrics. Senglaub explains, “We don’t want our members to just clock in and clock out. We want their ideas and suggestions for improvement. We want them to ask the ‘what if’ questions. Everyone’s contributions are valued, as each improvement can help us all grow and excel as we strive to better serve our customers each day.”

IMPLEMENTATION

The pilot involved sending 30 Johnsonville team members for NCRC testing. Of those 30, 87% earned a Silver Certificate or higher. An extensive survey asked these individuals about their testing experience so both Johnsonville and WI DWD would have specific metrics and feedback to improve the process following the pilot. Nineteen of the 30 individuals responded to the survey:

- » 74% used ACT’s KeyTrain curriculum to help them prepare for the assessments, and 100% of those individuals would recommend KeyTrain to other examinees.
- » 62% found the tests either easy or very easy; 44% said they were difficult; no one found them very difficult.
- » 89% rated the exam experience as good.

» 94% would encourage friends and coworkers to take the NCRC assessments.

The survey invited comments by the examinees; here are some of those impressions:

KeyTrain:

» “I think it’s good preparation for the real test. It helps you brush up on things you may not have done in quite awhile.”

» “I feel it was essential to doing my best on exam day. I really felt it made a difference for me.”

Difficulty:

» “It took me almost the whole time to finish the tests. So it wasn’t too easy. It also wasn’t too hard.”

» “The test brought back a lot of skills I haven’t used in a long time, and it was really a good refresher on skills I should be applying every day.”

Value of testing/certification:

» “The tests ask a lot of common sense-type questions that I feel most people should know. If they don’t, they might have a hard time with more challenging items in our workplace.”

» “There is no way to lie about knowing or not knowing these skills when they are tested this way.”

Recommending the NCRC to others:

» “It’s worth the preparation. You can use [the Certificate level] on future applications or add it to your resume.”

» “I think it gives a sense of what you do/do not know. It can help you figure out what things you need to work on and can also help when looking for jobs.”

» “It’s a great way to know where you stand and where you fit in.”

Johnsonville Sausage invited an ACT-authorized profiler to develop two in-depth job profiles to identify the tasks, skills, and minimum skill levels needed to succeed. The analysis of these hourly factory positions showed that a Bronze-level NCRC would define the minimum skill level. Subsequently, Johnsonville opted to state that they “prefer” an NCRC from all applicants.

“We’re seeing a lot of momentum in our area for support of the NCRC,” says Schwantes. Senglaub adds, “I’m beginning to see it on applications more and more. It’s really taking off.”

RESULTS

“There is no doubt in my mind that we’re getting better-quality applicants when they come to us with an NCRC,” says Schwantes. “Our turnover rate has improved, and our team leaders and coaches tell me regularly that this is a good tool for the foundation of our hiring process.”

One of those team leaders, Chris Stanton, adds, “The quality of our applicants has improved. Their Certificate level is not the end-all, or the one thing that will dictate whether they get the job, but it has definitely raised the quality of candidates we’re seeing.”

“Prior to the NCRC testing, we required a high school diploma or a GED, but some individuals made it through the system without essential reading skills,” recalls Schwantes. “Now we don’t worry about whether the applicant has documented skill levels since WorkKeys and the NCRC are validated by a respected testing company.”

Senglaub adds, “Now that our team leaders have seen the value, they definitely look for the individual’s NCRC level when they consider a pool of candidates. It’s pretty neat that the Certificate is helping them make a good decision.”

Stanton explains the process: “I don’t see an applicant’s Certificate level until after the team interview debriefing. Team fit is my most important concern, but it’s definitely helpful to have confidence that the skill levels documented by the NCRC are there.”

Echoing Stanton’s remarks, Schwantes reiterates the importance of the team interview. “We look at a number of factors and we use a number of tools when we make hiring or promotion decisions; the NCRC is just one. But it’s one we know we can count on.”

NEXT STEPS

Another of ACT’s WorkKeys assessments, Applied Technology, is currently being pilot tested by Johnsonville Sausage for possible use with their maintenance position applicants. Applied Technology focuses on reasoning and is designed to measure the skills people use when they solve problems with machines and equipment found in the workplace.

Given the success experienced in Sheboygan Falls, Schwantes is also exploring expansion to the company’s other locations.

Now that Johnsonville Sausage has seen positive results with the NCRC, Schwantes and Senglaub have been helping spread the word to other Wisconsin employers. “I tell them that although the talent pool is large given the current economy, the number of talented individuals is small,” says Schwantes. “We’re always looking for the right people to join our teams, but if you have a stack of 100 applications for a single job, how do you begin to sort through them? We need some tools. The NCRC is one of those tools. I remind them that the state is promoting it, it is recognized nationwide, and it will enable better decisions.”

Schwantes is also interested in how skills assessment scores may be used to identify leadership potential among team members. “We have a tuition assistance program for postsecondary education opportunities, and we need to help our people set goals based on their skills and aspirations so they may realize their potential.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

When asked about cost savings or return on investment for implementing this approach at his company, Schwantes asks in return, “Consider the cost of longer training times and high turnover. Beyond that, consider the cost of a *single* quality issue, or a *single* safety issue. And then ask yourself how can you afford *NOT* to add a tool like this to your selection process.”

“The National Career Readiness Certificate was absolutely the right tool at the right time for Johnsonville Sausage,” concludes Schwantes.

Interview with an hourly team member at Johnsonville Sausage about earning an NCRC:

Employee: Sarah Bogart
Position: Universal Packager, Riverside Plant,
Sheboygan Falls

Sarah was originally hired as a second-shift hourly team member. When she decided to apply for a first-shift opening, the company asked her to test for an NCRC.

What was the testing experience like?

“It was nerve-racking because I was up against two other team members who had also applied for the position.”

Were the tests challenging?

“Some parts were. The fact that the tests are timed was the hardest.”

What value do you see in taking the assessments?

“I learned where I was in terms of my skills and have a better idea of what I might need to work on to advance at Johnsonville.”

Aside from your packaging team role, you are also a backup for positions in the Micro Lab at Johnsonville. Do you think your NCRC level helped you in being selected for this role?

“I’m sure my scores weren’t the sole deciding factor, but they must not have hurt me either. Working in the lab has encouraged me to think about going back to school to get a degree in food science so that I might qualify for a salaried position in the lab.”

What would you tell others who might be hesitant to take the assessments to qualify for a job or a promotion?

“I think the assessments are definitely worthwhile because they allow you to assess yourself and help you see where your potential might be.”

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