



Beyond Press Training: Transcontinental Mexico Reaps Multiple Benefits from Press Simulation

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What do you do when you expand into an entirely new geographic market that does not offer deep training for critical press operators? If you are Transcontinental, you purchase a press simulator. Transcontinental, headquartered in Montreal, Canada, is the largest commercial printer in Canada. Transcontinental operates both web (WebSim-Heatset) and sheetset (SheetSim - SHOTS) simulators. While simulator training is available companywide, the largest user is its subsidiary Transcontinental Mexico.

In 1998, Transcontinental expanded into Mexico, first by purchasing the majority share of a family-own company called Refosa (Reproducciones Fotomecánicas s.a. de c.v.) in the region of Azcapotzalco in Mexico City (ultimately, it purchased the remaining shares four years later). At the same time, it started building a new plant in Toluca. In 2002, Transcontinental purchased another family-owned company called EOSA (Editorial Offset s.a. de c.v.) in the region of Xochimilco, south of Mexico City.

Transcontinental Mexico now has 850 employees in three locations and specializes in commercial print related to retail, newspapers, books, magazines, and catalogs.

Building an Employee Base

“Expanding into Mexico was a real challenge because while the teams in place were skilled, the changes resulting from the major investments in technology meant that their skills needed to be upgraded. A prompt, in-depth and effective training program was required,” says Francois Ouellet, director de manufactura (vice president of manufacturing and operations) for Transcontinental Mexico. “When I was visiting Transcontinental’s plant in Boucherville (just south of Montreal) and saw someone using a press simulator from Sinapse Press Simulators, I said, ‘This is fantastic!’”

Soon after, Transcontinental signed an agreement with the Montreal Institute of Graphic Communications Canada (ICGC), which distributes the Sinapse’s press simulators in Canada, to use them in the group and in its Mexican plants. Transcontinental Mexico has since become the largest user of Sinapse press simulators within Transcontinental.

Press simulators recreate the experience of running a press much as a flight simulator recreates the experience of flying a plane. They allow press operators and trainees to experience a wider range of press conditions than they see on a daily basis on a live press. They are also able to make adjustments on “press” and see the results without incurring actual production costs.

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Train the Trainer Model

For its initial simulator training, Transcontinental Mexico sent seven employees from production, prepress, and human resources to ICGC for a week of training. These employees then returned as trainers to their local facilities.

During ICGC's training, pressmen learned to create their own simulator exercises. Once they returned home, they used that knowledge to add to Sinapse's standard library by developing exercises particularly suited to their local markets.

"In Canada, our plants are highly specialized, but in Mexico, every plant is running a wide range of commercial work," says Ouellet. "We run three shifts, and we go through a lot of paper, ink, and fold changes in every shift. With that level of variation, it is very hard for press operators to develop experience at any depth. WebSim-Heatset and SheetSim-SHOTS simulators expose them to situations it might take years before they experience on press."

Transcontinental Mexico employees spend between 10-15 hours per month training in simulators, depending on the plant. In total, according to Ouellet, between 50-60 people have been through the training over the past four and a half years.

Expanded the Use of Simulation

Transcontinental Mexico had two initial goals for use of the simulators. It wanted to refine the skills of its existing press operators and bring "first register" employees (the equivalent of press helpers) to a level at which they could run the presses. This process took six months to a year.

Once these goals had been met, Transcontinental began finding other uses for the simulators. This included putting many of its customer service, prepress, and salespeople through the training to increase their knowledge and sensitivity to press issues when talking with clients. "When you go on press, you have to be sure the output will be perfect because any variation affects the waste level," Ouellet explains. "In this competitive market, you cannot waste anything — ink, paper, or time."

Transcontinental Mexico also has frequent client visits to its locations and encourages these clients to spend time on the simulators. This often is a very eye-opening experience, and these clients quickly develop greater respect for the printing process and the requirements on press.

Supervisors, who may not have in-depth print production knowledge, train on the simulators, as well. "Sometimes they come through other areas in the company, such as the bindery, so they are not very knowledgeable about printing," says Ouellet. "Putting them through the simulator helps them better understand the entire department."

Using Press Simulation for Hiring

The simulators also have been a benefit in hiring. They allow Transcontinental Mexico's hiring department to test an interviewee's skill level before the actual hire. "We pair interviewees with someone who knows how to run the program, then set them to work on the problems," say Ouellet. "Very quickly, we find out if they are real pressmen with experience."

The WebSim-Heatset simulator, in particular, proved valuable in 2009 when Transcontinental installed its new Goss Sunday 2000 press. Although these presses are installed in other plants in Canada, it was the first installation in Mexico. "It was brand-new technology," says Ouellet.

“Goss provided training on the press, but we needed to select which existing operators to put through the training. Then we needed to upgrade other operators to fill those vacant positions.”

This was a critical hiring decision. In the end, the press operators who had the best results on the simulator were the ones the company sent to the training. “One year later, we are very pleased with our choices,” says Ouellet.

On an ongoing basis, performance on the simulator is used to justify pay-scale adjustments, as well.

Opening the Eyes of Clients

Transcontinental is also pleased with how the running cost counters on the simulators have opened the eyes of its employees to the financial consequences of their decisions.

“When you waste too much paper, when you take too long in makeready, or when you do not get to color right away, the counter goes bananas,” says Ouellet. “The WebSim and SheetSim-SHOTS simulators are a great tool for helping employees understand how their choices affect the bottom lines. Their ability to control costs enters into the their performance evaluations.”

Looking back, Ouellet is impressed by the wide range of benefits the company has gotten from the simulators. Initially, Transcontinental Mexico signed the contract to train press operators and help existing operators improve their skills. “But over time, we have found many different uses we could not have imagined,” Ouellet says.

Transontinental’s experience with press simulation has been so positive, in fact, that they are expanding number of simulators to be able to train even more people at the same time.

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