

IRT Living Adopts Simulation Maintenance Training to Upskill and Promote Associates



Key Successes

- Effectively scaled a new standardized maintenance training solution across the company:
 - 87% of Interplay courses started are completed by users.
 - 5,525 courses have been completed since the program's re-launch.
 - 8,579 Interplay training hours completed by all users, an average of 13 hours/user.
- Created a career progression program with continuous and engaging upskilling:
 - Upskilled entry-level techs in 6 months.
 - Reduced average work order completion times within 5 months of re-launching the training program.
 - 91% of employees found Interplay's training courses engaging.
 - 92% of employees report Interplay's courses are relevant and applicable to their roles.
- Tied incentivizes and promotions to professional development:
 - Awarded 24 internal promotions since program re-launch that were directly related to Interplay's training and are on track to triple promotions next year.

Goals for their Maintenance Training Program

- Invest in cutting-edge technical maintenance training in HVAC, plumbing, electrical, and appliance repair.
- Create better career paths and visibility into skillsets.
- Increase engagement, confidence, and performance of their maintenance teams.
- Provide faster job growth to increase promotions within their maintenance workforce.

About Independence Realty Trust

- Publicly traded real estate investment trust, 12+ years in business, headquartered in Philadelphia
- Own and manage 121 communities and 35,000 units in 14 states across the Southwest and Midwest US
- Manages the apartment homes of approx 55,000 residents
- Merged with Steadfast Apartment REIT (STAR) in 2021, expanding communities and maintenance workforce to 350+ maintenance employees
- 350+ maintenance associates using Interplay

Summary

- After merging with STAR, the companies combined training tactics to roll out an improved maintenance training program with Interplay's technical courses at its core.
- Integrated Interplay's training into IRT University, enabling scalable, on-demand training to rapidly close skills gaps in HVAC, plumbing, electrical, safety, and appliance repair across communities.
- Interactive 3D training simulations and video content provided engaging and unlimited hands-on practice opportunities that employees could immediately apply on the job.
- Continuous skill pathways gave associates a clear and objective roadmap to rapidly level up their skills and management visibility into job promotion considerations.
- Dedicated weekly development hours and incentivized learning challenges boosted training adoption and motivated employees at all skill levels to continue growing their maintenance careers with IRT.



Challenges

- The growing skills shortage presented difficulty in attracting and retaining skilled maintenance talent, resulting in increased hiring of “green”/inexperienced new hires.
- Critical skills gaps in employee safety knowledge created legal concerns and potential for risks to the overall health of employees, team members, and residents.
- Foundational knowledge gaps persisted due to difficulty scaling the delivery of standardized technical training.
- On-the-job training yielded slow results from inconsistent exposure to troubleshooting practices in HVAC, plumbing, electrical, and appliance repair.
- Lacked a clear and continuous career training roadmap to upskill, retain and promote associates into advanced maintenance tech roles.

Results

- Integrated Interplay’s technical courses into IRT University to deliver scalable, on-demand virtual hands-on training to onsite employees in all communities.
- Established three custom career pathways and 16 skill paths for continuous upskilling from entry-level to advanced management roles.
- Standardized maintenance associates’ baseline knowledge, increased in-person training effectiveness, and developed advanced skillsets in-house.
- Encouraged and incentivized learning with dedicated training time and engaging challenges that rewarded training adherence.
- Tied training to promotions and pay increases, motivating training adoption and employee retention.





Managing an Underskilled Workforce

IRT Living and STAR faced similar pre-merger challenges with attracting and retaining skilled maintenance workers. The growing skills gap left them with an inexperienced talent pool from which to hire, placing the responsibility on the management companies to recruit, hire, and develop the skills of their maintenance workforce.

IRT and STAR were no strangers to maintenance training and the challenges inherent in building a thriving maintenance training program. In addition to hands-on training, both companies offered general training workshops, vendor training, and basic safety courses through in-person classes and online, using their Learning Management Systems (LMS).

Their associates, however, needed even more ongoing training support, practice, and just-in-time resources to fill critical gaps in HVAC, plumbing, and electrical knowledge. Green new hires required more foundational knowledge and time to gain efficiencies quickly; experienced techs needed to be more engaged in training on advanced skills, specifically where their knowledge gaps lie. One size didn't fit all.

Persistent skills gaps led to slow and ineffective hands-on training sessions, taking time away from experienced technicians to complete jobs. Further, employees struggled to perform their duties timely and effectively, creating unhappy residents, costly errors, slowed ticket completion, and often bloating budgets. With these known issues, the facilities teams at each company sought to strategically uplevel their individual teams, bringing Interplay on board to supplement and enhance hands-on training, level up their associate's foundational skillsets, and gain visibility across their portfolio.

Relaunching Bigger and Better - Learning as a Company Priority

In 2021, IRT merged with STAR. When the L&D and Facilities departments came together to plan their maintenance training strategy, they were thrilled to discover that both companies had invested separately in Interplay. Since they each utilized Interplay in different capacities, they were eager to learn tips and best practices from one another to maximize their investment and training success.

With the collective goals of leveling up their maintenance associates' foundational skill sets in-house and building long-lasting maintenance careers, IRT's L&D and Facilities teams relaunched a bigger and better post-merger maintenance training program with Interplay at its core.



Jacquie Hafele
Learning & Development Content Manager



James Olson
Facilities Operation Manager



Gaining Maintenance Training Adoption - Program Breakdown:

By implementing the following six best practices into their training strategy, IRT demonstrated a significant commitment to their employee's career development and gained impressive maintenance training adoption.

1. Universal Socialization

With executive buy-in established and a strong bond forged between the L&D and Facilities teams, led by Facilities Operation Manager James Olson, IRT began communicating the new program to stakeholders. Jacqui Hafele, IRT's Learning & Development Content Manager, explains how communication was key to adoption success.

"A key piece to socializing the program was a strong hand-in-hand partnership between the L&D and Facilities teams. This wasn't just another training that L&D was telling people to take; both departments bought into its importance.

With Facilities personnel on-site, they had boots on the ground in various operational roles. Having their support to help socialize it in meetings and in person was instrumental in making it successful.

Another key piece to socializing the new training to maintenance associates was creating an email campaign. Before launch day, everyone knew what Interplay was, what it looked like, how to use it, and how it would support their career growth. By launch day, people were just excited it was here."

2. LMS Integration

IRT integrated Interplay into their existing LMS. The additional resource supplemented hands-on training and rapidly closed gaps in foundational knowledge in HVAC, plumbing, electrical, safety, and appliance repair. Jacqui shares:

"Interplay gave them a way to get the foundational knowledge under their belt and get everyone at the same baseline, so in-person training is next-level and more effective. Now, onsite training is more productive because they can jump right into practical application."

3. Custom Learning Paths

Three custom career skill paths were created and assigned to each employee based on their positions— Assistant Service Technician, Service Technician, and Service Manager. Pathways are assigned to new employees as soon as they complete their onboarding.

Within each of the three career skill paths are 4-6 skill pathways filled with video and 3D simulation courses. The courses continue to build on existing knowledge, providing additional hands-on practice opportunities that mimic job scenarios.

Skill paths continue to auto-assign as courses are completed and competencies are achieved. The paths increase in difficulty and complexity of job responsibilities until employees have completed all the courses required to graduate to the next career skill pathway.

As employees complete their skill paths, IRT gains an ever-growing in-house skillset and faster, more confident technicians that can tackle jobs the first time. Mike Szramek, the Facilities' Senior Vice President, explains:

"Interplay doesn't get overly complicated with troubleshooting something. It takes them in steps where they completely understand it, and the classes are in short enough increments that you're not going to lose someone's attention.

You can learn in small chunks, and it keeps them engaged. Plus, it's interactive. They're not just sitting there watching a video. They have to move the test probes when looking at electrical voltage on something. This is the next best thing, short of hands-on and physically touching equipment."

Mike continues, *"Because the training is directly related to what our techs see and do daily, we have seen our average work order completion times reduced over the past six months. I do expect to see this trend continue with make-ready's resulting in quicker turns, few callbacks, and ultimately fewer year-over-year work orders."*



4. Dedicated Employee Development Hours Contribute to Increased Performance

Every employee gets two hours of paid development time a week. Maintenance associates are expected to complete at least one hour of Interplay training during this time. Offices are closed during these hours, and IRT- issued tablets and laptops are available to use. Mike shares:

“We made a huge commitment to this program. We are giving folks career opportunities and a career path, but more importantly, the time to do it. In a forty-hour week, we’re sacrificing two hours of productivity to enable them to better themselves and their careers. We want to ensure we give them all the tools to succeed.”

Mike continues, *“With Interplay, we have seen our entry-level techs better prepared and eager to learn more as they transition into their next skill level in as few as six months. As that training is put into practice, the confidence levels soar, and the quality of work has a noticeable improvement.”*

5. Tied Training to Promotions

Employees who complete their regular training and those who go above and beyond to train in their own time are more favorably considered for promotions and pay increases. Mike shares,

“We had this one young Service Tech; he was pretty green when he started with us but hungry. He got through all of his courses, took most of them on his own time at home, and got certifications on his own dime instead of waiting for us to give them during certain quarters of the year.

He wanted it so bad that he did everything he was asked to do in accelerated time. This is a perfect example of a tech that trains to succeed, and he will soon be receiving a promotion to Service Manager.”

Mike continues, *“Since re-launching this program, we have seen 24 internal promotions directly related to Interplay’s courses. Having just re-launched the training program eight months ago, this is great penetration, and we expect this number to triple by next year.”*

6. Employee Feedback

After completing each skill pathway, associates are auto-surveyed about their training experiences to ensure the content is new, engaging, and relevant to their role. The L&D team then uses the results to refine and improve the next quarter’s training experience.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

“I found the courses engaging.”

Assistant Service Technicians	89.25% Agree or Strongly Agree
Service Technicians	92.83% Agree or Strongly Agree
Service Managers	90.34% Agree or Strongly Agree
Overall Average	91%

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

“The course is relevant to my role and/or I will be able to immediately apply the information learned in this course.”

Assistant Service Technicians	86.5% Agree or Strongly Agree
Service Technicians	92.5% Agree or Strongly Agree
Service Managers	96.49% Agree or Strongly Agree
Overall Average	92%



When it comes to usage, Mike has been blown away by the adoption response in all maintenance positions. *“The learning modules of Interplay are hands down the best I have used in my 40 years in multi-family. The feedback from our teams also backs this up. The training courses are set up to serve the inexperienced up to the advanced, and it’s easy to understand; step-by-step instructions along with interactive 3D simulations make this a memorable experience.*

Of all the courses we offer through IRT University, the maintenance folks are more engaged than any other group. I think it's because they can see themselves benefitting from them daily.”

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Incentivizing Learning - Your Knowledge is your Bounty

To further increase training motivation among maintenance associates for 2022 year-end, Mike and the L&D team turned their training paths pirate-themed.

Skill paths became treasure chests, and certain levels contained hidden knowledge coins. Mike explains, *“Once techs collected their knowledge coins, I would personally phone the matey to congratulate them, get their course feedback, and send them pirate treasure like gift cards and t-shirts.”*

Initiatives like these made learning fun, interactive and engaging, leading to an uptick in end-of-year usage.

Training Pays Dividends

While it can be challenging for employers to motivate and maintain training momentum, IRT Living has implemented several best practices to ensure success in training adoption. With thoughtful investments into building their workforce and growing onsite skillsets and careers, their maintenance associates are increasingly motivated to remain upskilling with IRT. Mike shares,

“We have more and more team members asking about additional training and how they can accelerate their learning for additional advancement considerations. This tells me that training matters to our team, and they understand that career advancement is tied to job knowledge.”

Jacqui adds, *“I would recommend Interplay to other multi-family organizations because I think it has strong content and material for a scalable way to level up your associates. Nowadays, you can spend a lot of money to fly someone around the country for hands-on training. But in a really scalable way, this online content and how Interplay has presented it is as close to repeating an in-person experience as I think you can find. I think that's why it resonates with our onsite associates.”*



Mike Szramek

Facilities' Senior Vice President

Schedule time with a training expert to learn more.

Contact: sales@interplaylearning.com

Existing customers please contact: customersuccess@interplaylearning.com