

Circle K Transforms Frontline Training into Measurable Performance



A Global Retail Brand Built on Everyday Convenience

Circle K is one of the world's largest convenience store and fuel retail brands. Owned by Alimentation Couche-Tard Inc. and headquartered in Laval, Québec, Canada, the company operates more than 14,000 stores across 27 countries and territories in North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

Circle K stores provide fuel, convenience merchandise, fresh food, beverages, car wash services, and other daily essentials, supporting the company's mission to make customers' lives "a little easier every day." The company employs nearly 150,000 people globally, including frontline store associates, fuel and logistics personnel, distribution employees, and corporate teams across retail operations, technology, merchandising, and supply chain.

Recent recognition includes the 2025 NACS Convenience Retail Technology Award Europe for the company's AI-driven digital people platform¹ and the 2026 Gallup Exceptional Workplace Award for employee engagement and workplace culture.²

A Business Growing Faster Than Its Training Infrastructure

In a business built on thousands of daily customer interactions, learning has to do more than transfer information—it has to shape the behaviors employees bring to every store, shift, and customer encounter. For Circle K, that meant building a learning ecosystem that could standardize priority behaviors, engage frontline employees, and give field leaders greater visibility into whether staff completed and applied the training.

Service Behaviors That Are Difficult to Standardize at Scale

Circle K's brand experience depends on routine, high-volume interactions across thousands of stores. Yet standardizing

¹ "Circle K Europe Honored with 2025 NACS Convenience Retail Technology Award Europe," Couche-Tard, June 20, 2025.

² "Couche-Tard Named 2026 Gallup Exceptional Workplace Award Winner With Distinction," PR Newswire, March 4, 2026.

Summary

Challenge

- Simplifying and standardizing learning across a large workforce spanning thousands of locations.
- Delivering essential training early in the employee lifecycle and keeping frontline learners engaged amid high turnover and numerous entry-level roles.
- Relying on solitary, e-learning-heavy onboarding, which limited engagement and immersion.

Solution

- Introduced game-based learning programs in partnership with Attensi to reinforce priority service behaviors and make learning more engaging for frontline employees.
- Built structured onboarding and development journeys that combine e-learning, simulations, hands-on practice, and manager check-ins.
- Expanded portal-based visibility so store, district, and regional managers can monitor employee training progress across stores and regions.

Results

- Increased field visibility into training completion across stores, districts, and regions.
- Reduced slips, trips, and falls through targeted safety learning tied to loss prevention and risk management priorities.
- Connected learning impact to store performance indicators, including service levels and average basket size.

service behaviors is difficult in retail because employees deliver them locally, moment by moment, across different markets, store formats, and customer situations. As Sue Vandersall, Couche-Tard's Vice President of Executive Succession Planning and Global Talent Development, explained, the company had grown through acquisitions and had "tended to let people do things the way they wanted to." Over time, that created a need to "simplify and be more consistent."

The issue was not a lack of training activity. Circle K had tried a range of learning methods, including technology-based e-learning, which employees were completing. However, customer feedback and satisfaction scores weren't improving, and the company wasn't seeing the expected impact on new-hire retention. For Circle K, traditional learning methods weren't creating the level of behavior change needed to improve customer and business outcomes.

A High-Turnover Workforce and Decentralized Training Delivery

Many store roles are entry-level, turnover is high, and the first six months of employment are often decisive for retention. To create a strong early employee experience, Circle K needed to bring new hires up to speed quickly—without letting the volume of information make learning feel static, overwhelming, or disconnected from the job.

The existing approach was not built for that reality. Video-based and static e-learning were difficult to sustain with a high-turnover frontline workforce that needed practical information quickly and consistently. Circle K needed a more interactive learning ecosystem that could scale across fragmented markets, support a largely mobile-first workforce, and help employees retain what they needed to perform effectively in-store.

Circle K's operating model added another layer of complexity. Store teams are small, often averaging 10 to 15 employees, and thousands of local managers delivered training rather than a centralized team. Because training depended on local execution, sustaining consistency was difficult without greater structure and visibility. Together, these conditions pointed to a learning infrastructure that had not kept pace with Circle K's scale, workforce realities, and operating complexity.

Building a Frontline Learning Ecosystem

Circle K's response was to build a learning ecosystem that could combine engagement, consistency, manager reinforcement, and business measurement. The approach evolved across three distinct phases over eight years of an ongoing partnership with Attensi, an AI-powered training and performance platform.

Each phase built on the last, making Circle K's broader people vision, Growing Together, more tangible across the organization. The ultimate goal was to create a scalable way for frontline employees to develop, practice, and perform consistently across a large, distributed retail network.

Phase 1: A European Pilot That Became a Global Program

The partnership with Attensi began in 2018 through a European pilot of gamified training simulations designed to make frontline learning more engaging, consistent, and practical for store employees. Circle K had been looking for a more interactive way to reach hourly store employees, and the pilot provided a controlled way to test whether simulation-based learning could improve engagement and consistency before scaling more broadly. The initial program ultimately became the foundation for Circle K's frontline learning ecosystem. See Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: Circle K's Virtual Frontline Training Environment



Source: Circle K, 2026

The first major program to emerge from the partnership was Train to Win, a 3D gamified simulation that re-created a Circle K store and enabled frontline employees to practice customer service, upselling, and sales behaviors. Each European market received a version adapted to its specific products, procedures, and language, and the program was rolled out across nine countries. Built mobile-first, Train to Win reflected Circle K's need to reach a frontline workforce more likely to engage through smartphones and tablets than desktop-based e-learning.

Circle K set three explicit key performance indicators (KPIs) for Train to Win: having at least 70% of staff report greater confidence and improved job performance, increasing average customer basket size through upselling, and reducing employee turnover. The company surpassed all three targets: 85% of staff reported that the training made them better at their jobs, exceeding the 70% target, while average basket size increased and turnover declined across participating stores.

Customer Star, another major Circle K training program, extended the model to service excellence across eight European countries. The program was designed as a five-module experience covering customer interactions from beginning to end, with free-roam environments that placed employees in realistic in-store scenarios. Early rollouts used high-energy campaigns to drive participation, including Beat the Boss, in which the company published the CEO's score and challenged employees to surpass it.

Circle K's approach differed from conventional e-learning rollouts. The company deliberately leaned into fun as a design strategy, using competition, scores, prizes, and executive participation to make learning feel visible and energizing rather than mandatory and administrative. That energy helped employees engage with the content and remember the behaviors Circle K wanted to reinforce.

Over time, however, Circle K also learned that gamification is most effective when used selectively. When every learning experience becomes a game, the novelty can fade, and the modality can lose some of its impact. The company therefore became more intentional about when game-based learning was the right approach, using it when practice, repetition, and engagement could directly reinforce priority behaviors.

Phase 2: A Crisis Test—COVID-19 Response Training

In March 2020, Circle K's European stores remained open as essential services as lockdowns began across the continent. The company needed to train thousands of employees on new COVID-19 protocols, including social distancing, sanitization, and customer sensitivity, immediately and consistently, with classroom training no longer an option.

Circle K designed a fully customized set of training modules and translated them into nine languages, all within four days from initial consultation to launch. Delivered through Attensi Skills, a mobile-first platform where employees complete gamified simulation modules on their own smartphones, the training reached thousands of frontline staff across Europe in record time.

From late March to mid-May, employees completed more than 80,000 individual training sessions. Within the first week, 3,000 staff had completed training and certification; by the end of the following month, that number had reached 6,000. Because the platform is designed for repetition, knowledge scores steadily improved with each attempt: by the time employees completed their final playthrough, the average knowledge score had risen by 87% compared with their first.

The COVID-19 response showed that Circle K had built more than a set of engaging games. It had created a platform capability with the speed, multilingual reach, and content flexibility needed to respond to large-scale operational needs in real time.

Phase 3: From High-Energy Games to Guided Journeys at Scale

In recent years, Circle K has expanded from high-energy standalone game campaigns (see Figure 2 on the next page) toward a broader portfolio of simulation-based programs that still includes the employee lifecycle, from new-hire onboarding and fuel operations to frontline leadership development. The shift reflected a broader evolution in the company's learning strategy: game-based training was no longer used only as a high-energy engagement tactic, but as one component of structured learning journeys delivered through a cohesive learning portal.

FIGURE 2: Circle K's Gamified Campaigns

Campaign	Purpose
CK New Star	New-employee onboarding, introducing Circle K policies, procedures, and basic store operations
Customer Star	Core customer service training, covering greeting customers, communication, and delivering a positive customer experience
Customer Star 2	Advanced customer service training, building on skills introduced in the original Customer Star program
CK Food Star	Food service training, covering food safety, preparation, hygiene, merchandising, and quality standards for food offerings
CK Fuel Star	Fuel operations training, including pump procedures, fuel safety, customer assistance, and regulatory compliance
Leading Star	Leadership development training for managers in training, assistant store managers, and store managers

Source: Circle K and The Josh Bersin Company, 2026

These journeys combine e-learning, simulations, hands-on activities, and manager check-ins, creating a more comprehensive development model than standalone courses or games. The portal also gives managers clearer visibility into completion and progress, connecting the employee learning experience with the field visibility leaders need to reinforce training across stores.

Designing for Practice, Not Just Completion

A key design choice in the learning journeys was to separate simulation from formal performance evaluation. Employees can repeat simulations as many times as needed to achieve a passing score and can continue experimenting even after they pass. The focus is on learning rather than judgment. This creates psychological safety, giving employees room to make genuine mistakes, test less-effective choices, observe different customer responses, and build behavioral readiness before applying new skills in the store. As Vandersall explained, "At the end of the day, what we care about is facilitating learning. It doesn't matter how many simulation attempts it takes to pass; what matters is that they leave the learning experience ready to do the work."

This practice-oriented strategy applies across the employee journey. For new employees, Circle K built My Journey, an onboarding experience that combines foundational instruction, simulations, hands-on practice, and manager review at key milestones. Gamified simulations reinforce

foundational instruction by giving employees a realistic setting to apply what they have learned. The same logic has since been extended to frontline leadership development through Essentials: Learn to Lead, Circle K's development journey for managers in training, assistant store managers, and store managers.

Connecting Learning, Visibility, and Business Measurement

The learning portal also gives field leaders the visibility they previously lacked. Store managers can see what employees have completed, district managers can review progress across stores, and regional managers can monitor completion across broader areas. The model also accommodates local operating differences, allowing business units in different markets to receive tailored content while still following the same underlying journey structure.

Measurement is embedded in the ecosystem's design from the outset. Circle K uses learning analytics to refine program design over time, adjusting content length, adding pretraining, or reconsidering modality based on how employees engage with the material. The company also connects learning to operational measures, such as service levels and average basket size, so that learning design, learner behavior, and business impact inform a continuous improvement cycle rather than a one-time rollout.

Results: Safety, Service, and Confidence Gains at Scale

Globally, Circle K's gamified training simulations have now reached 85,000 associates, including more than 65,000 in North America. The company measures learning impact where frontline training is expected to make a difference: safer stores, stronger customer interactions, and employees who feel more prepared to do their work.

Operational Outcomes: Safety and Service

After loss prevention and risk management leaders identified slips, trips, and falls as a costly store issue, Circle K introduced a safety-focused simulation to reinforce the right behaviors. Vandersall shared that the program produced "a substantial improvement" in safety outcomes, although the company did not provide specific numbers. When incidents later began to rise, Circle K relaunched the program with an updated design.

Customer-focused learning has also been linked to improved service levels and increased basket size, a key metric in convenience retail. Circle K compares these outcomes before and after major learning programs to assess whether training is translating into measurable impact in stores.

Confidence as a Leading Indicator of Readiness

Circle K also tracks whether learning helps employees feel prepared to perform. This is especially important for frontline managers, who must coach employees, make decisions during busy shifts, and support new hires. In Essentials: Learn to Lead, most learners reported greater agreement with the statement, "I feel comfortable doing my job." Circle K links this increase to repeated practice, scenario-based reinforcement, and a learning design that allows employees to keep trying until the behavior sticks.

“*Learning is becoming less about completing orientation or working through a training program and more about helping employees learn quickly, when they need it, and to the point.*”

Sue Vandersall, Vice President, Executive Succession Planning and Talent Development, Couche-Tard

Next Steps: Conversational, AI-Enabled Learning

Looking ahead, Circle K is adapting its learning strategy to reflect how employees increasingly seek information: in shorter, more immediate, and more contextual ways. Vandersall noted that learning now happens in "small bites," whether employees are quickly watching a video or asking an AI assistant for the information they need. This shift is shaping Circle K's exploration of AI-enabled and conversational learning, including tools that can support more natural dialogue and scenario-based practice. Over time, the opportunity is to move toward realistic customer simulations in which employees can practice conversations with AI that more closely mirror actual in-store interactions.

Lessons Learned

Over eight years of experimentation and evolution, Circle K's experience yields several practices for organizations seeking to position learning as a business capability rather than an administrative function.

- **Anchor learning to a business outcome.** Tie major learning programs to specific operational priorities, making learning easier to measure, refine, and fund.
- **Design journeys, not standalone courses.** Combining e-learning, games, hands-on activities, and manager check-ins into a structured sequence produces more complete development than any single modality alone.
- **Use gamification selectively.** Game-based learning can create energy and engagement, but its impact is strongest when used for the right behaviors and moments rather than as the default for every learning need.
- **Use simulation to reinforce application.** Gamified simulations are most effective after employees have learned the basics, when they can practice applying new behaviors in realistic customer, store, or leadership scenarios.
- **Protect practice from performance evaluation.** Separating simulation scores from formal evaluation gives employees room to repeat, experiment, make mistakes, and build confidence before transferring skills to real interactions on the job.

About the Author



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Jordan is associate director of research at The Josh Bersin Company, where she leads The L&D Roundtable and The Big Reset—executive networks that convene senior HR leaders to innovate the future of learning and work. Her research focuses on talent development, with particular emphasis on dynamic skilling, performance enablement, and AI-first corporate learning transformations. As a certified HR practitioner, Jordan brings cross-industry experience spanning commercial real estate, higher education, industrial automation, pharmaceuticals, retail, and transportation. Deeply passionate about the intersection of behavioral sciences and the modern workplace, she earned a BS degree in neuroscience from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, before completing her master's degree in human resources.

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