

First Student

Headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio, First Student is the second largest provider of transportation services to school districts in the nation. The company operates over 18,000 school buses, employs about 22,000 workers, and transports over one million students each day.

When First Student received word from Kronos that it was phasing out the Simplex time and attendance system, they took the opportunity to not just replace their old system, but to find something better suited to their needs.

First Student inherited the Simplex system as part of their acquisition of Ryder Transportations Services in 2000. The other 225 First Student locations used a variety of time and attendance methods, from swipe cards to Excel spreadsheets. The company did not have centralized reporting capabilities, and information was collected and compiled monthly, which meant managers could only react to problems that had already occurred instead of addressing them immediately.

Ron Howard, senior region vice president over four regions that have made the transition to First Student, was on the original committee charged with finding and implementing a new time and attendance solution. "At first, we were just looking to replace our old Simplex system. But as we moved forward, we decided that ultimately, we wanted the possibility of a global solution that would give us consistency company-wide, as well as better control over payroll."

Special Challenges

First Student faced several unique challenges in looking for a new system.

Multiple Variable Shifts: Most time and attendance solutions are designed for traditional nine-to-five workdays. First Student employees are assigned split shifts that mirror the school day, and can work between two to three shifts a day.

Multiple locations: Over 80 percent of First Student employees are bus drivers or driver support staff, such as monitors, aides or mechanics. Many work at locations other than their home location, which means costs need to be properly allocated between operating sites.

Variable Pay Rules By Location: With 275 locations across the country, many First Student sites face local differences, including union regulations, holiday schedules, and methods of calculating pay for work, etc., that affect how and when employees work and get paid.

The Search

First Student's search committee evaluated the company's needs and determined criteria for the new time and attendance software. First Student needed something that provided consistency, but at the same time was flexible enough to adapt to individual locations' needs. The team also wanted better insight into and control over their payroll process, which is the company's number one controllable expense. And finally, First Student was looking for more than a vendor. They wanted a partner, with great references, a good reputation, that was both professional and interested in creating a long-term relationship with First Student.

Choosing Qquest

The selection committee collected proposals from several time and attendance vendors, including Kronos Qquest and ADP—First Student's payroll processing vendor. "Ultimately, we chose

Qquest's TimeForce ASP product because it met or exceeded all of our criteria—especially in the flexibility area," said Howard. "The other solutions were more off-the-shelf, with take-it-or-leave-it models. Qquest's biggest selling point was definitely its flexibility. And the fact that it was an ASP configuration ended up being an added bonus."

Implementation: A Complicated Success

Because of the special challenges First Student presented, the selection committee and managers knew implementation would be a complex process. "For some locations, this was their third venture into automated time and attendance, so we knew it would be an undertaking" said Howard. "And we also knew that we wanted more than a replacement, we wanted an enhancement."

To ensure the long-term success of the implementation, First Student spent significant time up front fine-tuning internal procedures and rules before beginning the Qquest implementation. "We wanted to make the final process as tight and time efficient as possible," said James Kelble, operations compliance manager at First Student. "We looked at our policies and procedures and made adjustments to help ensure managers would spend as little time as possible on time and attendance when it was all said and done."

All of this up-front work paid off. The process was complicated, but with the help of the Qquest implementation team, each challenge was addressed quickly and successfully. "When we rolled out our first pilot, we encountered a few hiccups, which Qquest remedied very quickly," said Howard. For subsequent rollouts, we continued to work closely with Qquest, and we trained super users to help with implementation and training. We have now really streamlined the process."

Benefits

“One our biggest challenges in implementing a company-wide system was our lack of a consistent infrastructure,” said Kelble. “Many of our sites are located in industrial areas, not office parks. Sometimes this means that we don’t have the same access to cable and other basics that most companies take for granted. With Qquest, the ASP model serves as a company-wide infrastructure that allows us to all be on the same page.”

The ASP model also enables Qquest to support the product via the Internet and First Student managers can access information for a single site, or multiple sites, from just about anywhere. In addition, First Student has made significant strides in other areas. For example, because many drivers and support personnel work at several locations over a pay period, it was very difficult to ensure an individual employee’s time was billed to the correct location and job code. If everything went smoothly, the driver’s original location would charge back the employee’s time to the actual location where he/she performed the work. Most times, however, this didn’t happen, leaving accounting personnel to try and sort out discrepancies. With the TimeForce product, however, managers can make these changes at any time, even in advance.

Some locations use the Pay to Schedule feature of TimeForce. This allows supervisors to pay their employees to schedule. Exceptions are then reported to supervisors, approved and recorded.

A notes section is included with the feature so managers can record the reasons employees are adjusting their schedules, and respond immediately. “Our numbers are much more accurate now,” said Kelble.”

An unexpected benefit of using TimeForce has been a better understanding by First Student managers of processes and procedures. “At First Student, we hire the best person for the job and not necessarily according to their technical skills,” said Kelble. “Some managers come from a professional background. Some come up the driver ranks. Some have never even used an electronic spreadsheet, so asking them to use an automated payroll system can be a challenge.

Qquest is easy to use, and provides “big picture” insight into how things work, and how certain rules tie into our business success. Our managers now have a better understanding how and why their people get paid the way they do, and why it affects our bottom line.”

One of most wide-reaching benefits Qquest provides is a much higher level of control over the payroll process. “With Qquest, we have a complete audit trail,” said Kelble. “Managers have real-time information right in front of them. We used to have to wait until the end of the month to get this information. Now, our managers get the information and can respond immediately with adjustments. Qquest also integrates seamlessly with our ADP payroll system. As a result, we have much better control over the entire payroll process, and are maximizing our employees’ time. And when you’re controlling minutes and hours, you’re ultimately saving real dollars.”

In the future, First Student expects to continue to roll out Qquest’s TimeForce to other locations and divisions of the company. But whatever comes their way, First Student has a partner in Qquest. “Any payroll system is complex. Ours is even more complex,” said Howard. “Even when we encountered challenges, the Qquest team responded quickly and enthusiastically. There was never a ball we threw at them they could not hit. They have stood behind us every step of the way.”