# SN plus

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# Is Your Team
# TECH-HESITANT?

Help your staff overcome fear of the "new," gaining the confidence they need to leverage the full potential of new technologies.



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**Although Nutrition Services Director Raquel tries to visit school site kitchens in her district at least once a week, it can take several months for her to cycle through them all.** Today, she is checking in at Sycamore Middle, eager to see how the new tilt skillet that had been installed there during summer break last year is working out. It is particularly ideal equipment for prepping the next day's hearty chili lunch. So, imagine her shock when she discovers this expensive kitchen equipment is being used to store cartons of paper goods, while large pots simmer on the stovetop!

At her monthly managers' meeting, Raquel reminds everyone that inventory reports are due. Three of the managers proudly hand over printed tables created in Microsoft Word detailing the up-to-date tallies of all ingredients and supplies. Raquel is flummoxed. On one hand, she appreciates that these managers met the deadline, but they were *supposed* to use a software module for inventory management that had been implemented at the start of the school year.

At the same meeting, Victor, one of the high school managers, asks Raquel for advice: He wants to establish a breakfast kiosk station located close to classrooms, but even after a demonstration, all his employees make excuses about practicing with the wireless tablet required to access the POS system outside of the cafeteria— and he can't spare the time to staff the kiosk himself.

The efficiency, potential and overall success of Raquel's school nutrition operation is being held back by her team's resistance to adopting new technologies.

*Technophobia* is the constant and persistent fear of technology. But that's a pretty extreme level of aversion. What's more common is insecurity around technology, combined with a general disinclination toward change, leading to a "hesitancy" when it comes to learning and applying technology in different areas of our professional and personal lives. Sure, there are some people who will eagerly line up for the next release of the latest smartphone, ready to explore all its bells and whistles. But how often do you groan in frustration when your favorite website changes its design and navigation? Even more telling, do you know the purpose of—and actually use—all the buttons on the TV remote control?

Choosing to stick with tried-and-true systems, develop workarounds geared to our personal comfort level and forgoing or postponing upgrades for as long as possible is one thing when it comes to our home life. But it's another thing altogether in a work environment. While we each have an individual responsibility to just suck it up and learn any new technologies that are required to do the job, managers and supervisors shoulder the greater responsibility of supporting staff in making that leap.

And with today's labor crisis, *support* is a more critical concept than ever before. You likely don't have the luxury of drawing a hard line in the sand when it comes to insisting everyone get on board with new technology. Most of you literally can't afford to alienate the staff you have right now. Besides, this is the school nutrition segment, where most of you *are* already inclined to supervise with proverbial carrots, rather than sticks.

How do you help your team members overcome any hesitancy they have about different types of new technologies? What strategies are most effective? *School Nutrition* asked a few school nutrition directors and trainers to share some best practices.

## TECH STRESS SOURCES

A good first step is to recognize that tech anxieties aren't all rooted in the same causes. Similarly, an individual who gets stressed, say, by exploring the different features of Microsoft Excel, may not have any hesitancy when it comes to following the sequenced instructions of a POS system. Tech aversions are unique to each individual—and addressing them on an individual basis can present real challenges to

the supervisor or trainer tasked with getting dozens or even hundreds of people up to speed. But by being aware of the common causes, you can be more alert to what's going on with your team and also be better prepared to tweak your approach accordingly.

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You can expect that many of your late-adopters may be driven by one or more of the following factors:

- **Feeling intimidated by new technology; anxious that understanding it will be beyond one's capabilities.** "I'm not smart enough." "I will make a mistake, and there will be terrible consequences."
- **Impatience or frustration with the necessity of learning something new.** "I don't have time to learn and practice this to get it right."
- **Satisfaction and comfort with what's most familiar.** "I can be faster and more efficient with the old system because I know it so well."
- **Genuine difficulty when it comes to learning tech-centric topics.** "The trainer was very patient, but I just don't get it."
- **Fear of asking questions.** "Everyone else gets it; my question just shows how stupid I am."
- **Poor instruction from one trainer influencing future expectations.** "Trainers use too much jargon without explaining it." "They go too fast."
- **General resistance to change.** "If it's not broke, why fix it?"

## MISTAKES *WILL* BE MADE

In the experience of Michael Francis, the newly promoted Director of Child Nutrition Services at **Spring Branch Independent School**

**District in Texas,** many school nutrition team members are, indeed, uncomfortable with new technology. "They are afraid of the idea of doing it 'wrong,' of pressing the wrong thing and a 'bomb' is going to go off," he reports.

Aaron Smith, Director of Culinary Services, **Seattle Public Schools,** concurs. "Yes, staff can be reluctant to embrace new technologies, especially software," he says. "The root of the hesitancy seems to be a general lack of confidence." This attitude can linger after training, Smith notes, with many still feeling intimidated, not trusting in their own capabilities. "They're apprehensive about making mistakes."

Plainly, one key training tactic must be clear and repeated reassurances that the consequences of making a mistake are *not* terrible. "I *want* them to 'break' it," says Francis. "I want them to push themselves and discover that it's okay—even if they do make a mistake. Everything can be fixed."

Hallie Berutich, RD, SNS, is Implementation Manager for K-12 Services at **Horizon Software International.** She brings a unique perspective to this role as a former director of foodservice for Maschio's Food Services in New Jersey. As she helps current and new customers upgrade and expand their software platforms, she offers an experienced perspective. "Remember, mistakes happen, and there's nothing that can't be fixed," Berutich says. "My motto as a nutrition director was always: If the kids were fed, the rest we could sort out!"

## RAISE THEM UP

But it's important to be aware of a parallel fear that is often at work: the fear of embarrassment. This can impede learning, as well as be another reason behind resistance to putting new technology into action. Verna Scully, System Application Technician at **Jefferson Parish (La.) Schools,** points out that "sometimes employees don't want to ask questions in a group training setting." When "everyone else" seems to understand a concept and you don't, your confidence can be further eroded, and you'll actively avoid circumstances that may make you "look dumb" in front of others. A good training and/or supervisory strategy, advises Scully, is some one-on-one follow-up in private. "It can be beneficial to those who need it," she says, urging time and patience.

For some of her staff, "Knowing that they *can* call me, and I will help them, is what keeps them moving forward."

## THE REASONS WHY

Within Jefferson's team of 50+ foodservice managers, Scully also observes other factors at work when it comes to adopting new technologies. "It's not uncommon to see some resistance to change, especially among

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those who have been doing things one way for a long period of time. Some of our veteran managers tend to like things the way they are." Berutich extends some pragmatic affirmation: "Change *is* hard. Taking on something new is daunting, whether it's a new form of production records, a new oven or new software." This is often the case even when team members are frustrated with the limitations of old systems.

To address this resistance to change, context is critical. "Sometimes, people need [a trainer or supervisor] to explain *why* we are doing it in this new way," Scully says. Employees may not have all the information needed to see a big picture. What's "wrong" with the current operation? What are the benefits of adopting new technology? Why is it important to the overall success of the department? Will changes have a direct benefit on their own workload and job satisfaction? Without seeing how a technology change is a jigsaw piece that fits into a larger puzzle, they may think that they are going through the frustrations associated with change just "because"—because someone in authority likes shiny, new things or because it's trendy and everyone else is doing it or because of some other capricious reason or personal preference.

Francis takes pains to emphasize how adopting new technologies can help his staff grow. "It's how we get them to the next step in their career. Anyone can follow instructions, but I want to be sure they understand *why* this is better, why it works, why it's important to be more efficient and why it's important to our school nutrition mission," he says.

Scully's role in the foodservice department is to be the liaison with the software vendor and help to train all managers. Like Berutich, she brings the advantage of past experience in foodservice operations to her role. "I came from being a manager at two schools, and I believe that's helped me understand common problems and how they arise," she says. She's in a prime position to provide context for tech-based changes with the authority of one who's been there. "Helping our managers understand the reasons behind tasks is so important," Scully affirms.

## TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Berutich recognizes that there is also a link between implementation hassles and change resistance. "There is *never* a perfect time to make an operational change!" she notes, pointing out the value in making sure vendors collaborate with key staff members to determine an implementation and training timeline that takes *their* scheduling needs into account.

Ida Daniels, MEd, CWWS, is Coordinator of Food, Nutrition & Wellness for **Florida's School District of Hamilton County.** While she is personally comfortable with technology, Daniels recognizes that poor planning around its adoption can exacerbate tech-related stress among her staff members. Notably, miscommunication around the recent implementation of a new POS system

meant that district-level staff did not receive targeted training until a week before the start of the new school year—and individual staff did not receive the training until the *day* before students returned. Daniels advises that school nutrition leaders take every step to tighten those communication lapses, because "downtime is rare in school nutrition. Every minute counts for the successful adoption of new technology."

## TEACH TO DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

Employees might have the self-doubts about their tech abilities confirmed if training/support doesn't take into account varied learning preferences and needs. In addition to three umbrella styles—visual, auditory, kinesthetic (tactile movement)—learning can be hampered by other factors. Can everyone see the trainer demonstrate the new equipment or software? Can they hear the instructor? Are there distractions in the room? Might language, accents or literacy be a factor?

Consider offering the primary training in one style, but provide follow-up support in other ways. For example, after conducting hands-on training with remote-access software, Scully created a training manual for managers to use as a reference. "I find that the step-by-step instructions—with screenshot pictures—are most effective," she reports, adding that she encourages staff to reach out to her by phone, as well.

"Some staff are able to learn and pick up new training with a simple video meeting, while others do require a bit more hands-on support," observes Smith, who also works with his supervisors and other staffers to provide individual support, when needed, either in-person or by phone. "We let staff know that help is available anytime during their workday," he says.

Smith is grateful to have an unofficial "tech ambassador" on his staff "who does an excellent job of explaining new technology to staff members needing extra support." Daniels, who has a master's degree in instructional technology and a certification in data processing, takes on this role personally in her own district. "Because of my background, I am not intimidated by new software," she says.

Indeed, it's another smart strategy to identify individuals on your team who have a natural enthusiasm for all things tech, and then ask them to apply their attitude—and skillset—in addressing tech hesitancy among their peers. Ultimately, however, it's important that all staff at the district level be prepared to embrace the new technology, says Daniels. Francis agrees. "We need to make sure that *we* know it cold—and have all the tools for training—before we can be successful in supporting our staff," he advises.

## VENDOR SUPPORT

Training should always be part of the package when purchasing new technology like software, hardware and equipment. "We use that initial training from vendors as a base to extend the training we provide managers," says Scully. Insist on excellence, requiring that the vendor include a trainer evaluation instrument so your team can rate the effectiveness of the training they receive from the company's representatives.

Daniels recommends partnering with a vendor who "will make every effort to train staff as often as necessary." In her experience, summer is the best time for transitioning to new technology, with at least three initial training days: one immediately after installation, one a week later and the third during the week before school starts.

"Be sure to request that the vendor provide education and training materials that can be used once the implementation has been completed," advises Berutich,

pointing out how these resources can help when onboarding new staff, along with managing periodic troubleshooting. "Vendors should also provide a resource contact who can assist you quickly when challenges arise, be it a help desk, support email or direct contact," she adds.

## PATIENT PERSISTENCE

Even when you take all the steps to bring staff past their fears and frustrations of new technologies, skeptical grumblings may continue. Take heart, says Francis, as this, too, shall pass. "Staff will say, 'This is never going to work. It's too hard. I can't figure it out. Why can't we just do it the old way?' And then two months down the road—they have forgotten all about it. They come around pretty fast," he notes. And then you can use this reality check when it comes to the *next* big change. "You can remind them about what they said initially, and how it's now become second nature for them," says Francis.

Building confidence requires reinforcement and patience. Give continual feedback throughout the process, Francis advises. "Ask: 'Do you understand it now? Are you getting it? If the new thing really doesn't seem to work, let's discuss it and see if we can find a way to make the situation better together,'" he says, offering a suggested script. "I don't want robots on my team."
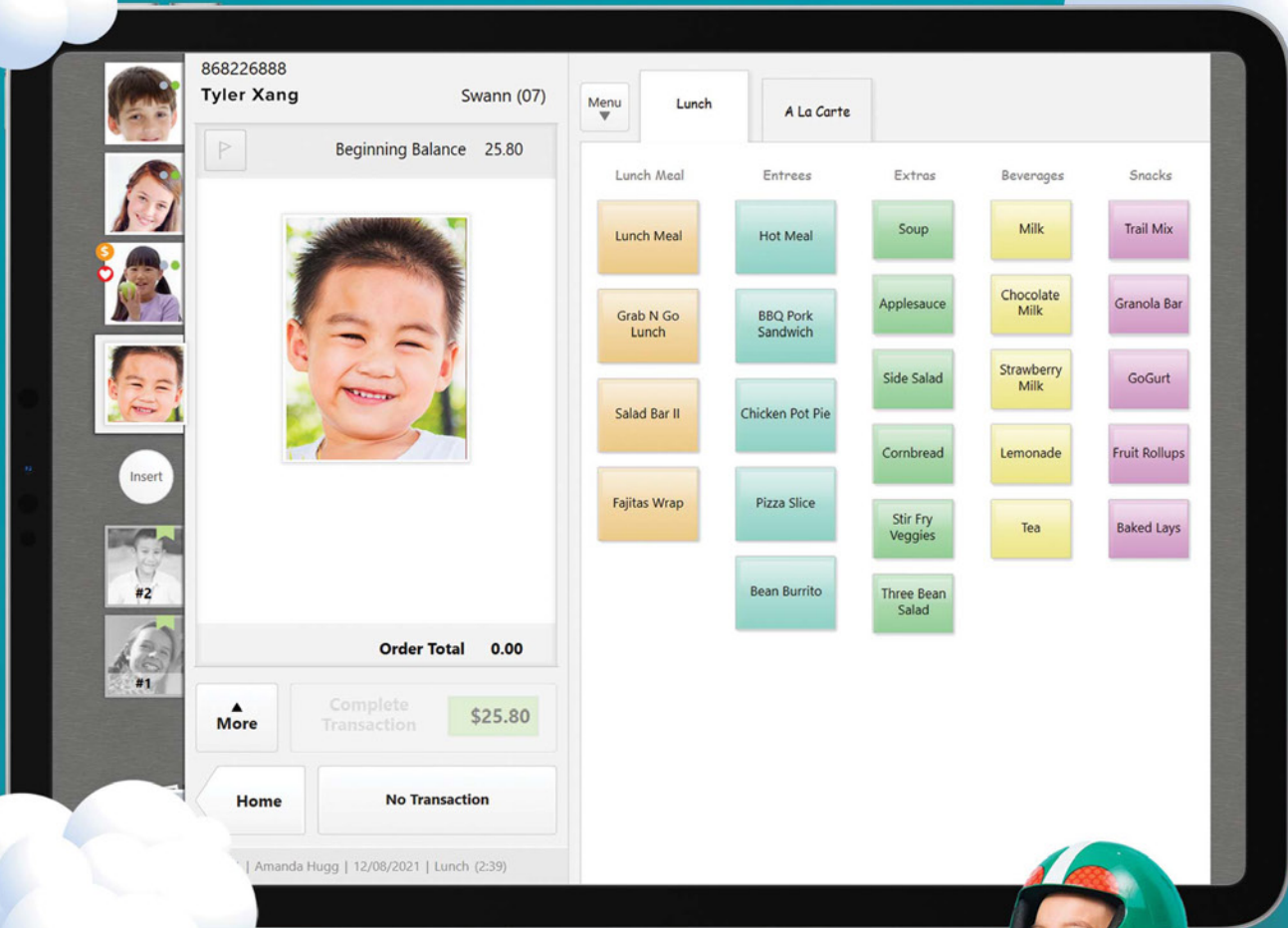
"You need to meet staff where *they* are," says Berutich. "Listen to their concerns,

challenges and fears." She recommends that representatives from a wide range of key users, from both the central office and site levels, meet with the vendor early in the process. "This helps us adapt and prepare training materials that are geared around each district's unique needs," Berutich explains.

"Adopting new technology can seem intimidating and daunting, but the rewards of having more efficient systems in place that help with different processes and workflows far outweigh any initial challenges," says Smith. He emphasizes the value of committing to an inclusive process of ongoing discussion and feedback that allows everyone to "see the benefits of learning and using new technologies to reach our team's goals."

Francis offers a good reminder to all involved in adopting new technologies: "It's about what's best for the students. Not just for our team, but for getting kids into the cafeteria." **SN+**

*Patricia Fitzgerald is Editor of School Nutrition.*