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Company/Organization: Image 4

Challenge or Opportunity: In the face of demographic and market changes, Image 4's employees and management recognized we have to change the very design of the employee-company relationship.

Approach or Solution: Create a new model for work by increasing employee engagement, and improving operational effectiveness to deliver "Delight" to our customer.

Life Style Changes Drive Workplace Changes

Social and demographic pressures, as well as personal preference, combine to create mal-alignment between the operating hours and physical location of our business plant, and the talent pool from which we draw. The 7-3/3-9 M-F schedule no longer works for our clients who are scattered across 7 time zones, nor for our employees or business partners who are resident in 5 time zones.

Our staff members are in a constant state of personal change; some are starting families, some have children or parents who require added attention, a few share both employment and education schedules, and at least one is an insomniac. In order to retain and grow this hard-won talent pool, Image 4 redesigned our business processes and changed our expectations of work.

Collaborative Incremental Change

Our first step was to gather all staff members and investigate the possibility and ramifications of flexible schedules. This required a change in thinking and in management from "task-oriented" management to "outcome-oriented" management. We all agreed to accept personal responsibility for accomplishing the change and to support one another in the process.

Incrementally, most staff members were allowed to post desired personal schedules. Each core practice within the company managed their own team schedule and negotiated conflicting desires. We created a cross-functional "hit team" from HR and Operations to address and solve issues quickly.

Operations management was guided by the mantra “Delight the Customer”. If an internal schedule accommodation put a client project at risk, then we would not accommodate that request.

We monitored change, effectiveness, cost and acceptance with weekly, then monthly review huddles. Once we were sure that the company was at least as productive and the customers were equally well supported, we codified the changes into our Employee Manual.

Ultimately, we have found that flex schedules have reduced overtime cost, smoothed vacation/PTO coverage, enhanced employee satisfaction (and retention) and have not put projects at risk.

Success Made Us Bold

Based on our year-long migration to flex scheduling and shared job tasking, we decided to implement working at distance. Although we long had West Coast staff, they were not as integrated as we felt they could be.

The same cross-functional team convened to research and deploy cloud-based project management software, video conference technology, Skype, file sharing and other tools to enhance our ability to communicate at distance and to remain connected. Rules related to security of customer, personal and financial data had to be re-written and reporting tools were developed.

We made the decision to push the project management and communication management system out to our mission critical supplier partners. This was a very challenging task and ultimately only half our critical supply chain chose to support this initiative.

Internally, incremental change and review proved valuable. By ramping the change in a controlled fashion we were able to address issues quickly and at a scale that did not risk client satisfaction.

Critical to the success of this initiative is a robust project management and time tracking platform. Interestingly, we discovered that by facilitating our staff to track their billable time, our recovery of billable hours improved. Sharing business process and success metrics empowered our staff to make decisions to help improve our financial execution.

This change took about a year to accomplish and we now have 50% of our workforce taking advantage of remote and/or flex interaction with work. Again, our overtime costs dropped, as did claims for travel and meals reimbursement. Employee satisfaction soared and the stress level dropped as “outcome-based” metrics eliminated the need for a time clock and other non-aligned measures of performance.

Challenges were Worth Overcoming

The project to change the relationship of employees to our business is ongoing. In the face of the macro-success there were certainly challenges and setbacks.

The first challenge was one of trust. It’s not that we had a distrustful environment, it was more that we were going into the unknown without a roadmap. We had to trust one another to step up to make this work in order for all of us to benefit. Management invested a lot of communication time in explaining, reporting, encouraging and correcting.

The second challenge came about four months into the “work from home” project. We hit a place where too many staff took too many flex and home days at the same time and we nearly missed a customer critical deadline. Fortunately, a few committed souls changed their plans and worked diligently to put the project back on track. The issue highlighted weaknesses in our plan and management of that plan, as well as the importance of personal responsibility to communication and scheduling. The next huddle meeting was difficult as we all worked through our experiences, but the “trust well” was very deep by this time and we worked out the issues.

A third challenge is in client perception of Image 4 as a solid, 30-year old “Company” entity as opposed to a collection of freelancers. We have to be proactive in communicating our operations model to our clients, and in assuring them they are welcome to connect with us in multiple locations at various times as their needs require, and that in turn, Image 4 employees are in robust and valuable contact with one another under all situations affecting client projects. Broadly, this is a generational affect, as our under-30 staff and clients have little problem with this mental process.

Impact: Measurable improvement in several operational metrics and in overall profitability. Reduction in overtime hours and improved management of PTO. Increased employee satisfaction, employer differentiation and improved talent acquisition.

Our business process has become more flexible and accommodative both operationally as well as mentally. By challenging ourselves to allow and support flexibility, we became more flexible in our approach to customer requirements.

Image 4 has also become more robust. We have acquired both permanent and temporary staff members in London; Portland, OR; Miami; Madrid, Spain; Ohio and other places where we would never before have been able to search. Our business platform is now distributed and is at less risk due to weather or local affects.

Because we have eyes and ears “on the ground” in many locations, we hear about project opportunities we may not have recognized, and our mental flexibility encourages us to jump on a plane or in the car with an expert team to attempt to land the project – making us a truly national provider of design and production.

Most important, this project could not have succeeded without the initiative and involvement of the entire staff. Collaborating so closely enhanced communication and developed a well of trust and understanding that has dramatically improved the working environment throughout the company.

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