

COMPANIES THAT CREATE A MORE ENJOYABLE OR REWARDING OFFICE ENVIRONMENT ARE FINDING THAT MORE SATISFIED EMPLOYEES TEND TO BE MORE PRODUCTIVE AND **LOYAL WORKERS.**

GOOD Vibrations

by Greg Hitchcock

When Frank Annese traveled up and down the New York State Thruway in the early 1970s, he would greet his customers as though they were a part of his extended family. From this humble beginning, Annese's business grew to 100 employees in nine offices across New York and New England.

Annese & Associates of Clifton Park is a family-owned business, and even though Annese gave up ownership to his four daughters, he left an imprint on the company's culture that's lasted since its founding in 1970.

"This is a family-owned business, but every employee and business partner feel they are part of a big family," says company spokeswoman Christina Nordquist. "We have the experience of a much larger company, but with a personal touch, and the more we grow and the more we change, the more we stay the same." This philosophy has paid off in dividends. This year, Annese & Associates was recognized as the third-best company to work for in New York State, according to an annual poll conducted by the Best Companies Group.

Nordquist attributes this to the family-friendliness of the culture. She says the more an employee and customer feel like they are being taken care of by the company, the happier and more satisfied they will be. Annese & Associates spares no expense in making its employees feel like family, with events that include team building conferences.

“It’s expensive, but the results are far reaching,” Nordquist says. “The company is committed to customer excellence by forming personal relationships.”

Business models founded on cultural values may have found ways to increase worker happiness, resulting in increased productivity. Studies have shown that workers’ well-being has many benefits for both individual employees and the companies they work for, including making superior decisions and improving interpersonal behavior.

According to CareerBliss.com, as reported by *Forbes* magazine, the company with the greatest gain of happy workers each year is Google. In addition to free haircuts, gourmet food, on-site doctors, and high-tech toilets, Google employees are entitled to death benefits. *Forbes* reports that if a Google employee passes away, the surviving spouse or domestic partner receives a check for 50 percent of his or her annual salary for 10 years.

Like Google, some Capital Region businesses offer more than just a steady paycheck to their employees. Some have found success in creating a unique workplace culture that puts a premium on relationships, personal development, and satisfaction.

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Located in Saratoga Springs, the city of innovation and the arts, one business knows what it takes to be a success as defined by its culture.

Fingerpaint Marketing, a full-service advertising agency, was founded in 2008 on its values of collaboration, teamwork, and equality, according to the company’s founder Ed Mitzen. When you walk into its office, located in a renovated Borders Bookstore on Broadway, the first thing you notice is the open environment where approximately 70 people work.

“Advertising is primarily a team

sport,” Mitzen says. “If you work on a project, you have a lot of different people with different skill sets working on the project together. It is a culturally different environment, so we have gone the non-traditional route.”

At Fingerpaint, no one has a title or an office, and everyone owns stock in the company.

According to Mitzen, advertising can be stressful and requires long hours. In that regard, Fingerpaint seeks team players. “We didn’t want an office mentality. We wanted to have people in this together,” Mitzen says. “I’ve been in business for quite a while and seen models that I think work and those that I have not really liked. When we founded our company, it was an opportunity to create our own culture.

“For those that are looking for that type of environment, it seems to be very inspiring to them,” Mitzen says.

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ACCORDING TO A 2012 DELOITTE STUDY, **94 PERCENT** OF EXECUTIVES BELIEVE A **DISTINCT WORKPLACE CULTURE** IS IMPORTANT TO BUSINESS SUCCESS.

“The quality of our work is directly tied to the quality of people here.”

The company also shares something that many others do not—company stock. One hundred shares of stock are given to new Fingerpaint employees, which gives them a sense of ownership in the company, Mitzen says. “I think giving people stock in the company was a big step,” he says. “In my past life with other businesses that I have worked in, company stock was always reserved for senior executive staff. With our company, everyone can share in that down the road.”

Andy Pyfer leads the strategy group and business development at Fingerpaint. He came from the corporate world with a corporate mentality.

“Even though we have a clear sense of organizational structure, I think it gives everyone a feeling that their voice counts,” he says of the Fingerpaint culture. “When you don’t have labels, only functional areas, this creates an environment where collaboration is expected and appreciated.”

Fingerpaint employees are organized into clusters. Each individual team includes someone responsible for accounts, someone who manages projects, and a creative staff.

Privacy, however, is not overlooked. The company created space for rooms where people can make personal calls or have personal meetings when needed. But Pyfer says the company’s culture reflects one of openness, which is demonstrated through the hiring process.

“A lot of times I don’t have candidates’ technical skills to evaluate,” he says. “What I always try to evaluate is if they are going to fit in our culture.”

DREAM A LITTLE DREAM

At the end of 2009, when managing director William Newman was at a leadership conference with Northwestern Mutual, it was the first time he heard of the book *The Dream Manager*, by Matthew Kelly.

In the style of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, it is a fictional story about a janitorial company that had tremendous turnover, costing the business a great deal of money. The company solved its problems by starting a dream management program.

“The basic premise is when you have happier employees built into your daily culture, they are much more productive,” Lauri Spargo, practice manager for Northwestern Mutual, says.

Northwestern Mutual embraced

that idea, and after 90 days on the job, employees are eligible to participate in the dream manager program, which helps them to achieve their goals.

“The basis is that employees can fulfill their dreams outside of work,” Spargo says. “We give them the book, they read it and start meeting confidentially with the dream manager.” Spargo says the dream can be either professional or personal, according to their wishes. “It may be a professional dream, such as they want to get a professional designation, or it may be personal, in that they want to take a trip with their spouse,” she says.

The dream management program provides accountability, putting the employee’s dreams down on paper, prioritizing goals, and outlining steps to take to reach them. Spargo says dreams have ranged from obtaining scuba certification to losing weight.

“We all work very hard in a professional environment,” she says. “But, what is important is having balance in life from developing a career and also spending time with family.”

ALL FOR ONE

Treo Solutions, headquartered in Troy, has developed a culture rooted in its core values: client-first, passion, teamwork, respect, and accountability.

This 10-year-old business works with patients and providers across the country to reduce healthcare costs while also improving the quality of care. According to COO Kurt Hasbrouck, Treo considers its employees and clients as its two primary assets.

“If we hire good people and take care of good people, they will work hard for the company, which will work hard for our clients,” Hasbrouck says. “This, in turn, leads to success.

“Our work environment is very serious, but the culture is very laid back,” he says. Hasbrouck is dressed in jeans, a golf shirt, and a pair of golf shoes.

Hasbrouck says the company spares no expense to make employees comfortable. Treo provides free continental breakfasts where breads, cereal, yogurt, and fruit are served. At lunch, employees are provided with a massive salad bar. The break room houses

three large-screen televisions as part of an environment designed to allow workers to de-stress.

Treo Solutions also has an activities committee that plans monthly events. Some upcoming programs include free massages, Saratoga hat day, and three upcoming golf outings. Hasbrouck says all of that is in line with the company’s goal of cultivating a loyal workforce.

“It is very common for people to work extra hours, not because anyone told them they need to but out of loyalty to the company,” Hasbrouck says. “Because the company was started by people we knew and liked, it became a respect thing to work here free of office politics.”

According to Hasbrouck, it is important that new hires know the importance of the company’s work culture—not for the free food or the tee times but from a career development standpoint. He wants them to recognize the opportunities here.

“I always use the expression, “Take advantage of Treo, but don’t take advantage of Treo,”” he says. 