ADAPT OR FAIL

A REMOTE WORK REALIGNMENT

The transformation of eight architects and six engineers into a remote workforce was as sudden as the pandemic. This staff was used to working closely together and to meeting often with clients in person, but that changed forever during the pandemic and then became the new normal.

SITUATION

Midland A&E is a small business and is reliant--as most are--on performance. Before COVID, the architectural and engineering firm had operated out of an office for nearly two decades. The requirements of each project were such that a high degree of interactivity between all employees was required. There was in-person contact onsite and in the office.

During the pandemic, there was no onsite work due to state and local restrictions. But a new, remote work framework had to be created because the Company would lose enough business to endanger its survival if they did not work remotely. Because of the nature of the business, all employees could work remotely and all agreed.

Their remote work arrangement was based on the honor system, trust and the belief that each employee would continue to do their job as they had before the pandemic. They saw this as a short-term situation that was not intended to become permanent.

CHALLENGES

Ultimately, the staff had the option to create a fully remote or a hybrid working arrangement where they spent part of their time at the office. The ad hoc remote operation begun during the pandemic had continued until mid-2023. Everyone was on board with keeping it that way but, at that point, employees and management alike wanted the framework formalized. A fully remote operation was what everyone wanted.

But things had changed over the past couple of years and a remote work framework had to be defined. Regulations that had previously applied only to onsite workers now applied to remote workers as well:

- Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) Laws
- Minimum Wage Requirements
- Hour and Break Laws
- Privacy and Surveillance Laws
- Personal Information
- Leave Laws

Remote work arrangements also must comply with Texas employment laws related to discrimination, minimum wage, safety, and harassment.

The elephant in the room was *productivity*. During the time that this was a short-term arrangement, it was assumed that everyone would pitch in and do their jobs—well. Now, sustainable productivity had to be formalized—so that it was acceptable to all stakeholders.

SOLUTIONS

We created a compliant, sustainable operating framework for A&E and its remote employees. Most of the program was put online to facilitate security, record-keeping and communication. A cybersecurity program monitored and managed the risks of customer file breaches. A&E decided to have a developer create a framework that was exclusive to the business and to its employees.

It was decided that the online employee handbook would contain information about the Company, specific projects, and would include a private portal for each employee. Each employee portal contained all company policies and procedures, including those related directly to remote work.

Outcome: We created a compliant, sustainable operating framework for A&E and its remote employees. The program was put online to facilitate security, record-keeping and communication.

The measurement of productivity in the context of employee privacy and management trust was handled by creating SMART goals on which KPIs were based.

Outcome: The most critical decision made as part of this realignment was how to deal with measuring employee productivity. We created SMART goals that were chosen because they enabled management to assure that work was done, as required, in a timely manner. Each employee had their own set of overall SMART goals for their position but also had a set of SMART goals for each project. More importantly, however, this framework showed the level of trust that management put in its employees. They were expected to meet their SMART goals but had the freedom to choose how best to get meet those goals.

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Outcome: The most critical decision made as part of this realignment was how to deal with measuring employee productivity. SMART goals were chosen because they enabled management to assure that work was done, as required. Each employee had their own set of overall SMART goals for their position but also had a set of SMART goals for each project. This framework showed the level of trust that management put in the employees. They were expected to meet their SMART goals but were personally responsible for meeting them. Everyone in the Company agreed to this framework.

Some of the goals were not flexible—such as meetings with clients. There were instances where actions on the part of someone else prevented an employee from meeting their goals. The process for altering their goals was a simple one so that no one was penalized for the actions of someone else.

This framework was based entirely on trust. Management had to assume that each employee would meet their goals—until they didn't. And project teams had to assume that each member would do their part.

RESULTS

Two of the key Company objectives of the transition to remote work were that productivity did not suffer and that customer satisfaction remained high.

Customer satisfaction was measured, as it traditionally had been, by feedback and repeat business or referrals. Employee productivity was measured by whether or not they consistently met their SMART goals and their work was of a quality that projects were completed on time and to customer satisfaction. These were measured over a period of six months after the change began.

Results indicated that while employee productivity increased at a fairly steady rate after introduction of the new program, customer satisfaction suffered initially and then began to increase.

8% INCREASE IN EMLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY

THIS TRANSFORMATION WAS DEEMED A SUCCESS BY ALL INVOLVED

5% INCREASE IN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION