

The Hospitable Workplace

BY STEPHANIE RAMSEY

10 IDEAS TO HELP YOU IMPROVE YOUR WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT AND MOTIVATE EMPLOYEES TO STAY LONG TERM.

TODAY, ONE OF THE BIGGEST challenges the funeral industry faces is finding and retaining qualified staff. Each year, it seems as if fewer students are graduating from accredited mortuary school programs, and most of those who do graduate do not have any practical experience in the industry and find themselves surprised by the reality of the workplace. Quite often, the stress of the work combined with the unusual work hours lead to new hires jumping ship to find another career path.

Locating staff appropriate for a funeral service business can be a complicated and expensive process. However, retaining employees is another hurdle as funeral businesses find themselves competing for the same candidates. Rather than focusing solely on how to find new employees, perhaps funeral business owners and managers need to consider ways to make their businesses attractive to new employees, as well as how to motivate current employees to hang around.

For the past 11 years, Google has been ranked as one of the best places to work. In fact, it has been the number one-ranked employer for multiple years. What does Google do to be considered one of the best employers in the country?

It offers some unique perks, including free gourmet food, haircuts and laundry services. The company also takes an analytical approach to employee morale. For example, when Google discovered it had a larger-than-normal attrition rate for young women after they had their first child, the parent leave policy was revised, cutting its loss of young parents by 50%.

Google also fosters an environment that allows supervisors and managers to ask their employees what they need to be happy in the workplace. Granted, Google has the financial stability to offer benefits that many small businesses cannot afford, but there are some perks that even the smallest funeral business can provide to make its workplace attractive to employees.

SO, WHAT CAN A FUNERAL BUSINESS owner/manager do to create an enticing workplace environment? The place to

begin, of course, is by recruiting the right employees. While the available pool of employees for licensed positions is restrictive, it may be valuable for a funeral service business to consider looking outside its immediate area for qualified help. This means a willingness to seek candidates from other states, especially if they have the appropriate education to qualify for a license in your state. Yes, there is an increased cost to hiring a candidate outside of your area due to possible moving expenses, but if you hire an individual who is qualified and fits the “personality” of your business, the additional cost is well worth it.

Consider that a poorly matched employee can impact the morale of the rest of your team, which increases the chances that families will not receive the quality of service that established your firm in the community. This can be costly if you are in a competitive situation in which families have a choice between different firms.

When you recruit, don't be afraid to have some key priorities in terms of the qualifications you seek for the position. Typically, there is a valid reason to have certain requirements for either education or experience. Many of those are tied to how effectively and efficiently your business is operated. If you accept individuals who have few, if any, of the basic qualities you're seeking, it's a good bet that either you or another member of your staff is going to find their workload burdened even more to make up for the new employee's lack of qualifications.

There may be opportunities for candidates to be mentored or trained to acquire the skills you prefer, but this comes at the expense of time and effort – typically yours! Carefully evaluate whether such a situation is in your best interest. If recruiting is important to creating the preferred work environment for which you are striving, then without a doubt, any bad-fitting employees are going to sink the ship before you even have the chance to see if it will float.

Are you hanging on to an employee who does not impress you simply because it's easier than hiring a new one? Yes, it's difficult to terminate employees, but if they are poisoning the



well of your business environment, it may be the best choice for you, your staff and your community. Take some time to determine if the staff you currently employ is the one you truly want for the next several years. Don't pander to those who are not meeting your expectations. While it may be painful to let an employee go and find a suitable replacement, the health of your business in the long run will be much stronger.

Beyond establishing the right team members for your business, what can you do that will improve your workplace environment and motivate employees to stay long term? Here are 10 ideas.

1 IMPROVE LIGHTING IN EMPLOYEE WORK AREAS

Lighting is vital to an employee's performance and attitude. Research has indicated that exposure to natural light improves mood and energy, greatly impacting focus and productivity. If it's not possible to incorporate natural lighting through windows, there are other options. It is believed that blue-enriched bulbs may reduce fatigue and increase happiness and work performance. Use this type of lighting in the areas of employees' most productive workspace. Breakrooms should have light that is warmer in tone to promote calmness and relaxation. In the arrangement of office, it's best to have lighting that falls in the middle of natural lighting and warm lighting to create an ambiance that is welcoming to families yet helps employees remain alert while assisting them.

2 MAKE THE OFFICE COMFORTABLE

An attractive workspace with appropriate office equipment is very impactful for employees. Does all of their equipment meet their needs to perform required tasks? Some employees prefer to stand rather than sit while working on their computers; have you ever inquired? Do they have the necessary office supplies? This entire concept seems ridiculously simple, yet studies illustrate that employees are frequently frustrated with the office equipment

with which they have to "make due" in order to perform their roles. It doesn't take much effort to ask employees what they need in terms of equipment and supplies.

3 MAINTAIN A BALANCED TEMPERATURE IN WORKSPACES

Keeping the temperature of work areas pleasant keeps employees from being distracted by overheating or freezing. If the work environment requires that the temperature be maintained on the chilly side, consider letting employees bring business-appropriate sweaters to wear or allow them to wear their suit jackets when chilled. If the temperature is very warm, if possible, allow employees to remove their suit jackets.

4 KEEP THE OFFICE SPACE CLEAN

The more employees you have the easier it is for germs to spread, and losing employees to illness is a setback to productivity. Health is important and contributes to an employee's ability to stay focused and maintain a positive attitude while working. The secondary benefit is that the business can reduce expenses associated with overtime or the use of third parties to help cover tasks for an ill employee. Have the work equipment wiped down at least once a week to reduce germs.

5 ALLOW FOR PERSONALIZATION OF EMPLOYEE WORKSPACES

Personalization of employees' space can increase their connection to their tasks and the business. This can be as simple as allowing them to bring in a framed picture of their family or pets. Perhaps they can customize their computer screen saver (obviously this must be approved) to make the space more their own.

6 ADD LIVE PLANTS AND KEEP AIR FRESHENERS CURRENT

Live plants or flowers are not only attractive, they create a pleasant work environment. Additionally, many studies have shown that people have an emotional reaction to scents. Pleasant scents can help keep employees motivated and reduce stress.

7 PROVIDE WATER AND SNACKS

Water is refreshing, and a well hydrated employee is less likely to feel tired and unfocused. Keeping snacks available for employees can help avoid those between-meals munchies that can be distracting.

8 PAY EMPLOYEES FAIRLY

Financial security is important to every employee. As difficult as it may be to pay competitive salaries when cash flow is low and budgets are tight, it often pales in comparison to the cost to replace employees. Research has indicated that it can cost as much as 30% of an entry-level employee's annual salary just to replace him or her. When employees don't feel they are being paid fairly, they will begin to consider if the grass is greener somewhere else.

9 OFFER TRAINING

Most employees appreciate the opportunity to invest in their careers by participating in ongoing education or training. While some licensure criteria require employees to participate in specific training, there is an assortment of online training in multiple areas, some of which may even be free.

10 BENEFITS AND PERKS

Offer the best benefits you can in terms of health insurance and retirement plans. While you may not be able to match a larger

company's healthcare options, you might be able to offer flexible work schedules to allow employees to attend their children's events, more vacation days or sick leave and performance bonuses. Consider a clothing allowance or paying for dry cleaning. Keep some gift cards (valued from \$10 to \$50) on hand (e.g. Starbucks, restaurants, home improvement, etc.) and offer them to employees in recognition of their work efforts or when a family shares their exemplary experience with them.

Most of these ideas are inexpensive, yet they illustrate to employees how much you appreciate them and their work and want them to remain with the company.

Clearly, it's not always dollars and cents that impact employees' perception of their workplace atmosphere. Beyond these suggestions, it is important to create strong communication between owners/managers and employees. Open communication allows employees to have a voice in their work situation and provides owners/managers a better grasp of what their concerns are.

Knowledge is key to being able to create a workplace environment that employees find supportive and mentally stimulating. Such an environment can motivate employees to remain at their current place of employment rather than searching for a more enriching position.

It is within any business owner's ability to create a more productive and enticing work environment for employees. It just takes some vision and effort. The reward in retaining quality employees makes it well worth your time to consider how your workplace atmosphere can be improved. Feel free to reach out to me if you need additional ideas or direction on what can work best in your funeral business. ☰

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