



Cash in on Culture

There's more to a balance sheet than numbers. Happiness counts, too.

BY JILL COODY SMITS

SO YOUR EMPLOYER has never won one of those "This Workplace Rocks" awards. You're OK with that, because we can't all work for Google, or REI, or Southwest Airlines. But given the fact that you can't even wear jeans on Friday, your manager darts into the bathroom when she sees you coming, and your company only has three Facebook "likes," you're beginning to wonder why you toil away at a place devoid of the good stuff.

That's how Kristi Bryant felt in 2007, after spending countless long nights, skipped lunches, and

All Smiles
Lifting morale can boost the bottom line.

interrupted weekends glued to her desk at Ryan LLC, a Dallas-based tax services firm with nearly 50 offices employing more than 900 employees throughout North America and Europe. She was 28, newly engaged, and planning to start a family. But Ryan LLC wasn't a "have it all" place. "A 55-hour workweek was synonymous with the firm, and there was

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an ‘If you’re not here, you’re not working’ attitude,” says Bryant.

After taking a hard look at her work/life imbalance and deciding

that a career at Ryan was unsustainable, she gave notice. “I knew as a married person my future was going to be different, and I wasn’t willing to give up life for work.” What happened next will surprise you, and it just might provide you with a road map to a healthier work environment.

THE ENGAGEMENT IS ON

If Bryant’s whistleless work life sounds familiar, it’s because she’s not alone. According to one recent survey, fewer than half of Americans are happy at work, a factoid that’s bad news for employers because happiness is a key component of engagement—biz speak for “employees who do great work.”

“Engaged employees are good for the bottom line because they are passionate about the company and their contribution, and are willing to invest discretionary effort,” says Jim Knutsen, founder of Cast, a consulting firm that helps happiness-deprived corporations redefine their cultures.

Alas, a 2011 Gallup poll found that 71 percent of American employees are *disengaged* from their workplace, which means their employers will never reap the many benefits of emotionally connected staff members. “At best, disengaged employees are not performing at their highest level. At worst, they are poisoning the surrounding environment and giving customers a bad experience,” says Knutsen.

So, what does it take to engage employees? CFO-led Zumba classes? Freezers stocked with Lean Cuisine? Star-studded holiday parties? Knutsen says people



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aren't snowed by those kinds of perks. "Employees want to be clear about where their organization is going, feel valued, make a fair wage, and have autonomy and a role that fits their strengths."

Moreover, Knutsen says, they want to grow, learn, and feel tied to something that's bigger. "People need a story to connect to, and if the employer doesn't give it to them they'll write their own."

Seriously? Back in the day, no one was preoccupied by bonding with a mission or being happy at the factory. "It ain't called *work* for nothin'," your Sansabelt-jump-suited grandpa might have said. He and the other hired hands had axes to wield and iron to smelt.

IT'S NOT ME, IT'S YOU

That sort of nose-to-the-grindstone mentality is what Brint Ryan, chief executive officer of Ryan LLC, put into place when he started the firm two decades ago. "The number of hours worked, billed, and charged was the currency of the realm, and it was the model I founded my business's culture on," he says.

But times have changed, and research shows that a healthy corporate culture is as good for business as it is for the drudges. A 2010 Wharton study found a strong relationship between employee satisfaction and long-run stock returns, but *that's* some scratch Ryan had a hard time learning to spend. In the months before Bryant offered her resignation, Delta Emerson, Ryan's chief of staff, was working to convince her old-school CEO that it was time for him to rethink his company's culture. The world had moved on, and so had many of Ryan's top employees. "The firm was stable, but it had a rough-and-tumble feel, and some of the policies were draconian," she says.

Draconian: as in drastic, oppressive (aversive to millennials).

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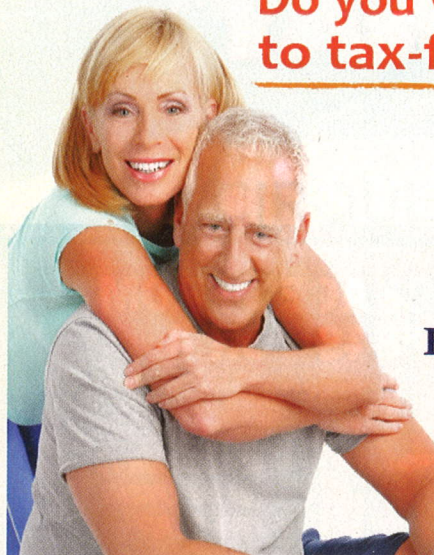
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With voluntary turnover around 20 percent, exit interviews were pointing to a culture in need of an overhaul. But the business had a strong bottom line, and Ryan was loath to acknowledge the problem existed. "Because we were successful," he says, "I'd write off exit interviews as anomalies, believing they just weren't cut out for this business. It couldn't be us."

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According to Knutsen, such a reaction to turnover is common. "Leadership tends to think it's a personality trait rather than

looking inward and seeing how to create a positive environment." Over time, as several superstars at Ryan LLC cited a merciless culture as their reason for quitting, Ryan began to see the light. But Bryant's was the resignation heard 'round the world, and her near departure inspired leadership to put the firm's cultural evolution on the fast track.

THE TURNAROUND

Rather than accepting Bryant's resignation, Ryan owned up to the firm's drawbacks and engaged her in a conversation about the firm's toxic environment and her definition of balance. He promised to implement swift and radical changes to the company's culture and invited her to participate in the effort. She accepted and, within weeks, joined the company's first task force dedicated to creating a more positive workplace.

Flexibility was defined as the firm's top priority, followed by camaraderie, benefits, and community outreach. That may sound touchy-feely, but Emerson says, "When you hire someone, you don't just bring the brain inside the door—it's the whole person."

Knutsen says that this defining step is a must-do for any company hoping to create a positive corporate culture, and it's as simple as filling in a blank: "Once upon a time, there was a company that believed in ____." Get this step wrong (or skip it altogether) and you'll be setting yourself up for a less-than-happy ending.

To begin its transformation in 2008, the firm launched myRyan, an über-flexible work environment that measures performance

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solely on results. For the most part, that means employees can work wherever they are most effective—whether that's at home, in the office, or on the treadmill. It was a radical transformation Brint Ryan hoped could result in reduced attrition, higher productivity, and better customer service. But one con weighed heavily on his mind. "There was a feeling among management that we would destroy the company. We worried if you tell people you don't care if they come to work, they won't."

Four years later, the numbers tell the story. Voluntary attrition is down to about 6 percent, and profits are up. Ryan says, "Without question it has affected our bottom line. We posted record revenue in the year following implementation." In addition, he says client satisfaction has increased every year.

Bryant is now married and the mother of two young daughters. She says the culture shift has given her and her peers control over their professional and personal destinies. "Because importance is placed on what we do and why we do it rather than hours, we work just as hard, but more effectively."

Effective: as in more time for yourself, family, friends, and life (millennials like).

Since launching myRyan, the firm has rolled out additional initiatives, including extended paid maternity and paternity leave, a wellness program, community service projects, and enhanced benefits for deployed military. Just a few months ago, Ryan scored an envy-inducing feather in its cap when it landed on *Fortune's* 2012 Great Place to Work list. But, hey, don't be bitter. If they can build a workplace that rocks, your sweatshop can, too.

Jill Coody Smits is a Dallas-based journalist. Find her online at blueseedcommunications.com.