

### How do you make sure your company comes back to work on a Monday morning?

SEOptimise is a leading UK search marketing agency which helps businesses increase the visibility of their website on the internet. Established in 2007 the company employs some of the best people in the market but at the end of each day, Stuart Tofts, founder and director, watches one of his most important assets walk out the door. There are no widgets to dispatch, walls to build, or meals to cook, the basis of SEOptimise's business are the skills and expertise of the dozen or so people that constitute its staff.

Back in October 2011, recognising how important it was to look after his staff, Stuart took an enlightened step for a company of this size and decided to invest in an employee engagement survey. He selected an on-line survey from 3Ease, a company that specialises in providing customer, employee and supplier engagement support to SMEs.

"I recognised that my staff were my most important asset and that they needed to have the best tools, and I don't just mean computers but the whole work environment, in which to work to their best ability and to be at their most productive;" explained Stuart. "There was some worry amongst staff as to why we were doing the survey and some



The SEOptimise team who took part in the 3Ease Engagement survey process\*

scepticism as to whether it would make any difference but overall the response was positive and they appreciated that we were taking the time to ask them."

All the survey responses remained anonymous and even with the relatively small number involved a clear trend was visible. Michelle Bailey, founder of 3Ease recalls what the initial survey revealed. "Stuart was concerned when the results revealed that things were not as positive as he had thought and that there were concerns amongst his staff about some aspects of the company. On the upside the responses overall displayed a much more positive picture of the company than the average SME, so that was a good starting point."

Keen to put pay to the initial scepticism, SEOptimise set about implementing some of the changes that 3Ease had recommended would improve the sense of engagement

amongst staff. Unforeseen changes at a corporate level in the first half of 2012 overtook some of this work but looking back Stuart can see that these changes in themselves helped to meet some of the criteria for change.

### Not one but two engagement surveys

Having recognised the value of the first survey, SEOptimise allowed the dust to settle on the changes and then decided to undergo a second engagement survey in the autumn of 2012. By undertaking this second survey, Stuart and the rest of the team would be able to have something to compare against and see what impact the changes may have had. This time Stuart knew that his staff would need to see significant changes to not only ensure that the first survey was not seen as a waste of time but to use the results of the second and subsequent surveys as a marker for future good practice etc. Without real change both he and the process would lose all credibility.

The 3Ease Engagement survey covers everything that impacts and influences the way employees feel and perform at work, from working relationships, training, environment, and communication, to job

satisfaction and rewards. The value of employee engagement has been proven time and again with 94% of the world's most admired companies believing that their efforts to engage their employees have created a competitive advantage (Hay).

Michelle's analysis of the results identified that whilst staff were aware of the day to day business of the company they wanted more information and a greater understanding of the company's strategic growth and development.

"We have implemented a monthly update meeting and a quarterly detailed briefing on the company,

where we are and where we are going. These regular meetings not only show the staff that we have listened to their concerns but also provide us all with a platform to air other ideas and suggestions. Internal communication is now focused on more than just telling them 'stuff', it gives the staff the feeling that they are really involved and that has really strengthened the sense of 'team' across the organisation." In addition the company has instigated an 80:20 policy which ensures that over the course of a year all staff are able to spend 20% of their time on



learning and development, which is vital in such a rapidly changing industry.

### What are the benefits?

Stuart is the first to admit that to actually put a percentage figure on the value of undertaking the two surveys is not really feasible at the moment, but can see an improvement in both quality and work rate. However 3Ease is collecting information from the survey which will identify correlations with measures including turnover, profits, customer satisfaction and employee turnover, the results of which will be very revealing. One positive that the second survey has already revealed is how everyone in the company had a shared value around the importance of producing quality work and maintaining high standards. The latest findings suggest levels of engagement are significantly up on 2011.

"That figures are consistent with the results of a world class organisation and that is something to be really proud of," commented Michelle Bailey.

When pushed Stuart describes the benefits as being 'a far more cohesive feeling of being

part of something' and mentions that 'there are a few more smiles around the place.' Staff have a sense of pride and a greater understanding of what has been achieved, and are all able to share and enjoy that success.

From the outset Stuart was aware that the survey might highlight some uncomfortable truths. Adapting your management style is one of the biggest challenges facing SME directors as their businesses grow and they may need to let go of some aspects, and this has been true for Stuart. His new approach

has enabled the company's managers to get more involved, he has delegated responsibility and as a result the managers are being challenged and stretched, (with appropriate support) something they find rewarding and something which is often recognised as a key factor in staff engagement. It also frees Stuart up to focus on devising a clearer direction for the company and allows him to implement a framework on where to improve things from systems and working practices through to his own management style.

"SMEs tend to think that employee engagement is for big companies but they are



so wrong," commented Michelle. "In an age where technology and systems are easily copied people are the main differentiator and SMEs have a natural advantage when it comes to engaging with their people to produce a real competitive edge. In many instances a fully engaged, small workforce can have a far more significant impact on the success of a business than may be imagined."

The last word comes from Stuart who now doesn't worry every time the door closes as his last employee goes home; "I was delighted when the results of the second survey showed a significant improvement and that the workforce was fully engaged. The engagement survey has been a very valuable exercise and gives me a framework for improving individual performance and business results - it's already in the diary for February 2014."



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