

“Best Job You’ve Ever Had”

Ryla

The Story | With explosively fast growth since its 2001 founding, Ryla has been recognized on Inc. magazine’s list of high growth companies for four consecutive years. Revenues climbed steadily from less than \$1.1 million in 2002 to over \$100 million in 2009. The number of employees increased from 20 in 2002 to more than 3,500 today, the majority of which are entry level positions. Ryla was also lauded as a Top Small Workplace in the U.S. by *The Wall Street Journal*, and one of the top 500 African American Owned Businesses in the U.S. by DiversityBusiness.com.

Engagement Strategies | How did they do it? One piece of the puzzle is the company’s extraordinary corporate culture that emphasizes employee engagement and involvement. Headquartered in Kennesaw, GA, Ryla provides call center services and other customer care solutions for large- and medium-sized corporate customers. Service is delivered by a highly motivated workforce, trained to focus on courtesy and empathy when interacting with customers (the company motto, emblazoned on the wall of the office, is “Excellent Interactions Every Time”). The agents’ friendly attitude is ideal for clients that strive to differentiate themselves through superior customer interactions.

While Ryla’s success is aided by a strong operations platform and cutting edge technologies, the employee-focused culture stands out as the distinctive competitive advantage of the organization. Workforce development strategies include comprehensive recruiting, extensive training, promoting from within, team-based operations, onsite cafe, a 401(k) plan with company match, and health benefits.

The company long held spontaneous “huddles” or stand-up meetings in which Mark Wilson, the firm’s founder and former CEO, updated everyone on the latest business developments. Wilson also personally attends at least one session of the extensive new employee trainings. One of the great successes of Ryla has been its ability to scale its culture as it grew to 175 times its original size. Wilson says the company now conducts daily huddles led by each department head as a way

of keeping the engaged culture even as the firm grows. “It takes more of my time,” says Wilson, “but it is well worth it.”

Ryla’s work environment buzzes with a palpable friendliness and vibrancy, a tone first established by Wilson. He said that creating an atmosphere where our people feel it’s “the best job they have ever had” is an essential element of Ryla’s business model. Employees say that the tone of mutual respect is key to attracting and retaining a loyal and committed team.

Shared Ownership | Stock options were shared broadly early on; twelve employees, or half of the original team, were still with the company at the time of the 2010 merger and gained significantly. They include Siovan Williams and Cathy Daniels. Neither has a high school degree and both started as agents on the phone and then were given the opportunity to train for higher paid, higher skill positions.

Williams moved first to training new agents and then helped pioneer the reporting department, where she mines and interprets data both for internal use and for clients. Without a college degree, Williams says her opportunities at the firm have been tremendous. “It’s almost unfathomable for someone with very little professional experience to have such incredible training and opportunity,” she said. Williams received approximately \$18,000 as a result of the recent transaction, allowing her



AT A GLANCE RYLA

Business:

Customer contact management

Locations:

Kennesaw, GA (headquarters) and Saraland, AL

Employees:

More than 3,500

Revenues:

101 million in 2009

Ownership:

Monthly performance bonuses, stock options for early employees

Engagement:

- high involvement hiring
- extensive training
- promotion from within
- employee rewards and recognition
- community involvement
- culture of trust and respect
- clear communication of core values
- subsidized meals at onsite café
- monthly performance bonuses

Business result:

- customer satisfaction/retention
- outperforms industry in employee tenure

to complete critical home repairs that would have been difficult to finance otherwise.

Daniels also went from an agent on the phone to the technology side of the business and notes that the company does an excellent job of promoting from within and training people in new areas. “It would be easier to bring people in from outside but they are committed to growing existing employees,” she said. Daniels said holding stock options was a significant motivator for her over the past few years. “I felt more a part of the company as a result of having options,” she says. The windfall she received from cashing in her options this year allowed her to make home and car repairs and pay off several bills.

Business Results | Ryla’s many employee engagement practices add up to improved bottom line performance, including fast growth and much lower than usual employee attrition rates – an important differentiator for an industry known to struggle with 100% and higher annual turnover.

Ryla’s attractive workplace culture also helps the company scale faster than its competitors when new projects arise. The company’s own employees often recruit friends to work at Ryla when the firm is ramping for a new project, and new employees are often willing to work for a onetime project with the hope of becoming a permanent employee at this special company.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- An authentic culture of mutual respect created and reinforced by top management, coupled with frequent and clear communication of the company’s core values, can result in a dynamic and successful workforce that outperforms its competitors.
- A strong workplace culture can be scaled with intention and effort as the company grows: for example, holding seven huddles to share good news rather than one.
- Investing in entry level workers with extensive training and promoting from within can be a good strategy for maintaining an excellent customer service-focused culture.