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City of Kyle Using Flexible Workplace Practices to Improve Customer Service and Provide Better Work Environment

Flexible work schedules allow expanded city hall access for customers and help to improve employee moral and retention.

KYLE, TX - When Kyle City Manger Lanny Lambert took the reigns of Kyle's staff and operations two years ago, his number one stated priority was customer service. He also soon realized that money was tight, staffing was short and any improvements would have to be done without counting on adding either money or staff.

"City government is all about providing our residents, businesses and visitors quality customer service," said Lambert. "Over my thirty-four years as a city manger, I've also learned that the key to quality customer service is to be sure that your employees providing the service are taken care of and are having their needs addressed."

The City's Parks and Recreation, Public Works and Police Departments were the first to implement flexible work schedules in order to address various working conditions. These department's responsibilities require a twenty-four hour, 7-day a week presence to be ready to respond rapidly to circumstances that can change quickly and put public health and safety at risk.

The Police Department patrol division went on twelve-hour shifts in order to reduce overtime and sick leave, as well as to allow a rotating shift plan that allows officers to have rotating weekends off. the 12 hour shifts allow maximize our personnel resources for shift coverage and training.

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The Kyle Police Department administrative staff works 10 hours shifts in order to offer extended operating hours during the week. The new hours of 7 AM to 6 PM, Monday through Thursday, allow citizens to obtain access to police records, crime prevention, and other programs that traditionally were unavailable after 5 PM. The extended hours have been highly praised by the community due to the access to police reports, accident reports, and police staff hour traditional hours. With much of the Kyle community working in the Austin and San Antonio areas, they do not return to their home community until later in the evening. The new hours make it more possible for them to meet with the staff at the police department.

Animal Control Officer also works a flexible schedule including nights, weekdays, and weekend shifts in order to meet the needs and demands of the community. The days and hours are flexible in order to accommodate complaints that are occurring outside of normal working hours.

The public works department maintains an around the clock operation to monitor and maintain critical water supplies and respond quickly to a water line break or road closure.

The parks department crews are tasked with maintaining public facilities and rights of ways. Their schedules are adjusted in the summer to allow more work in the mornings and avoid possible heat related illnesses. Parks employees also are needed to open and close facilities being used by the public after regular work hours and on weekends.

Using these departments as a model, Lambert and City management staff worked to come up with a program to allow flexibility to other staff areas and at the same time improve customer service. The result was expanded hours at City Hall and schedule options for the staff.

"One size doesn't fit all," said Lambert, "What may work for your management employees won't necessarily work for your front line employees. The real trick is putting together a plan that addresses the needs of all of the employees, as much as is possible. Some of the flexible workplace principles were in

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place before I arrived, but not everyone could take advantage of them. I was inspired by what I saw in Kyle and wanted to drive flexibility down to the line employee level, and I think it has been a huge success."

"The first step was to provide flexibility to line staff employees who are necessary for the business function and customer service function of the city on a day to day basis by changing working hours to 7:30 to 5:30 Monday through Thursday, and working half days on Friday," said Lambert.

This progressive strategy not only allowed extended hours before and after the work day at city hall four days out of the week for citizens who had business to tend to, it also granted an amount of flexibility to the front line hourly employee that typically has very little discretion in their work schedule.

“The flexible schedule that we have is wonderful, it allows time on Fridays to run errands and even go have lunch with my son at school. I am motivated and eager to work harder. My customers seem to love it too," says a smiling Clarissa Guerrero, a Utility Billing Clerk with the city for five years.

While the city has just begun offering flexibility to some of its rank and file, it has always offered some form of workplace flexibility to its management employees.

"We have to acknowledge that we no longer work in the manufacturing focused society that was responsible for adopting most of what we consider as 'normal work practices' across the United States. Times have changed and we need to change with them," says James Earp, Kyle's Assistant City Manager.

Over the past four years the city has expanded this flexibility to meet the needs of the younger generation of employees taking leadership roles. These roles of department heads and higher-level administrative staff often require evening meetings and weekend work. With the city growing so fast in the last decade, its management team is comprised mostly of these younger According to a study by the Longitudinal Study of American Youth (LSAY) and published in the Generation X Report in the Fall of 2011, “Generation X’ers”, those born between 1960's and 1980's, are typically professionally driven to work more hours, while being more active socially and place great importance of family values. They are also independent and perform better when given options in the workplace that provide freedom and

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flexibility. Typically speaking Gen X'ers are generally more diverse and have achieved a higher level of education than the Baby Boomers that are now retiring and leaving the workforce. This makes them highly desirable, especially in key management roles.

To this end, the city has taken a progressive approach to dealing with the needs of its predominant younger management team by providing constant technology connectivity to critical city operations, allowing mobile office space and allowing managers some flexibility regarding their own schedules, comp time for leave, and allowing flex time for the many late night meetings they are required to attend weekly. This has resulted in improving the recruitment and retention of talent that a growing city like Kyle really needs.

"The risk of not being progressive is that we stand to lose our best employees to bigger organizations and the private sector," said Lambert. "Fast growing organizations live Kyle need to retain a vast amount of institutional knowledge that is best held by our long term employees. You want your best people in place when you are making decisions and plans today that will affect this community for the next fifty years."

An example of how this practice as been successful can be found with Kyle's Director of Human Resources, Sandra Duran. Mrs. Duran is also well educated and currently serves as the President of the local chapter for the Society for Human Resource Managers. Recently, Mrs. Duran was offered a position at the University of Texas but after considering the University's less flexible work environment decided to stay with Kyle.

"I've been offered other employment since joining the city of Kyle, which I have declined," said Mrs. Duran. "The city of Kyle has embraced my desire for a flexible work environment, allowing me to be there for my family and it is worth a lot to me. My flexible work environment was key in my decision to stay."

"A flexible work environment doesn't work for every employee the same," says Lambert. "But we have tried to come up with ways that all employees can possibly benefit. Even the 12 hour shifts that the

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Police Department went to is considered a flex schedule because every officer that works that shift gets 3 days off in one week and 4 days off in the next. It allows them to have time to de-stress and focus on their home life. We haven't been able to give market adjustment pay increases to our non-civil service staff so a flexible work environment is a way we can still affect and reward performance. We have seen employee morale improve and turn over decrease in most divisions since implementing the change. The flexible work environment seems to be a huge asset for the City and the citizens we serve. Happy employees make for productive employees and that benefits us all."

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