

Case Study of the St. Paul Companies Virtual Office for the Risk Control Division

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The St. Paul Companies has successfully implemented a virtual office (VO) working environment for their US distributed construction risk control and commercial risk control employees over the past six years. The program goals of operating more cost effectively, increasing contact of the risk control specialists with their customers, and reducing office space costs for The St. Paul Companies have been met. There are many good practices that have been developed over the six years of offering the program, and more refinements and changes planned. As the communications and computer technologies advance, facilitation of working from remote sites improves. While it is easier for employees to work from remote sites, maintaining the boundaries between work and personal lives is more challenging. Improving the VO employees' and corporate employees' understanding of the other's working conditions is necessary to improve relationships and the acceptance of change. The concept of VO work is well established within the organization, and the demand for it is growing.

BACKGROUND

Founded in 1853, The St. Paul Companies is Minnesota's oldest business corporation. It ranks 171 on the Fortune 500 list of the largest companies in the US. The multi-line, world-wide insurance company consists of several separate entities, and is growing continuously through mergers and acquisitions. The St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company is the US based property-liability insurance underwriting operation, with the St. Paul International Underwriting encompassing the rest of the world operations. F & G Life is the US life insurance underwriting and annuity operation, and the asset management business is accomplished through a majority ownership of the John Nuveen Company (St. Paul Companies web site). In 1999, the operating earnings of the firm increased to \$636.3 million. The CEO credited the improvements to the intense restructuring efforts to transform the general property-casualty insurer into a global commercial and specialty

insurer, as well as price increases and refusing unprofitable business (DePass, 2000).

The organization is committed to supporting the quality of life for all employees, and sponsors a variety of programs. A director of employee work/life quality and balance is responsible for monitoring employee needs and developing recommendations for addressing those needs. The organization was cited by *Working Mother* magazine as one of the 85 best companies to work for as well as by *Fortune* magazine as 66th of the top 100 firms to work for. On-site day care is provided (and has been visited by the First Lady of the United States), as well as programs to improve health. Offering telecommuting and VO working modes is another aspect of the organization's commitment to creating a productive and supportive environment.

SETTING THE STAGE

The architecturally significant corporate headquarters building in downtown St. Paul was built in 1991 and occupies several city blocks near the Landmark Center and the Ordway Theater. The space is finite, and in 1994, managers were asked to seek other venues for housing employees because of the growing number of employees. Teleworking options for employees to work at home one, two or three days a week were offered, and in 1999, 4000 employees were using this model. 1000 virtual office employees are now working out of their homes full time. Any employee can propose working in part-time telecommuting or full-time virtual office mode to his/her manager and human resources, based on the type of work performed and its requirements.

The organization has been experiencing a high degree of change with many layoffs and reductions-in-force (RIF) due to restructuring efforts and mergers. The competitiveness of the insurance industry parallels many other financial institutions in the post 1980's evolving deregulated environment. Global expansion and mergers with other insurance and financial institutions are common throughout the insurance industry. The St. Paul Companies is represented world-wide by over 12,000 employees (St. Paul Companies web site, 2000).

CASE DESCRIPTION

The risk control division of the organization is charged with preventing losses and accidents through customer education, training and on-site advising for customers in construction, commercial, medical technology, manufacturing and the public sector. The specialists provide education in the proper handling of hazardous and construction equipment, behavioral safety, ergonomics, regulatory compliance, and pro-active advice to identify and remove potential hazards. In the case of an accident, the risk control specialists are at the site to assist the claims unit to serve the client. The risk control specialists also work closely with the underwriters in helping the clients with the same goal of fully insuring the clients, with sufficient profitability for The St. Paul Companies from the relationship.

The risk control division vice president, Dan Murphy, saw an opportunity to provide a virtual office (VO) working environment for the risk control specialists who worked primarily on construction sites and with construction company home offices distributed throughout the US. Twelve regional offices provided a working space and secretarial support, however the risk control specialists were constantly traveling by auto and plane to

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