



Honoring flexible and supportive employers.

Avicenna Technology

Can a manufacturing company be a great place to work? This Montevideo organization, with 95 employees, is proving that the answer is a definite yes. The group of private investors who founded Avicenna Technology Inc. in 2000 decided early on that their employees were to be valued and nurtured as primary assets. The message he's gotten from the very beginning, says general manager Chad Carson, has been "keep these people happy."

They've used an employee survey regularly to find out what employees needed in order to make that happen, and with the arrival of a new HR manager, the survey, and the survey technique, were improved and the survey has become an even more powerful and important tool. It recently helped them resolve the challenge of sick child care. After spending six months investigating the possibility of adding sick child care services, they surveyed employees and found to their surprise that they had no interest. What they really wanted was to be able to stay home when their kids were sick, but they didn't want to burn through their sick days. So the company went back to the drawing board and created what they call "vacation on demand," allowing employees to take vacation days as they need them. It's a brand new program and yet untested, but if employees don't like it this company will probably come up with another option. Their commitment is clear; they want to help employees have a life that works.

Shiftwork is always a challenge for workers, and Avicenna has recently met that one as well, adapting their shift schedule to balance efficiency and employees' happiness. The company has added a second shift, and in doing so changed the first shift hours to match school schedules. While most day shifts in the community end at 4 p.m., Avicenna's staff leaves at 3. "When the kids get out, parents can zip right over and pick them up," says Carson, "and get them to their next activity, doctors' appointments, etc." Out of concern that second-shift workers have as normal a life as possible, they decided to run their second shift from three to 11:30, giving them "something of a manageable bedtime or evening schedule. We just didn't want to keep them here past midnight or one a.m. If they work until 11:30 at least they can be home and in bed by 12." A third shift? Absolutely not, says Carson. "We view that as really disruptive to the human body. We don't want to be responsible for doing that to people."

What motivates this company to be so caring? The need to recruit talent in a small town is part of it, but some decisions have been made out of pure humanity. "Some people have told us that four tens would make the company more attractive to them, but we just don't want to do that. We won't deviate from our philosophy of keeping things manageable from a quality of life and human perspective, and working people past eight hours in a day isn't terribly productive, nor is making them stay up till one or two in the morning. That's a schedule that forces too many people to use caffeine or other drugs to stay awake."

Benefits here are attractive as well. Employees pay just 15% of the cost of medical, dental and vision insurance (the company used to pay nearly all of it, but learned that asking employees to pay a modest share makes them more discriminating about how they use medical care). Long-term disability and life insurance are entirely paid for by Avicenna.

And one more thing; this is a company that's an active participant in the community, partnering with others to help make resource and referral and other services available to all. When Carson found out that the local childcare center couldn't take infants because they lacked a changing table, it didn't take long before the table arrived. "That was a no-brainer," he says. "Now I have a key employee with an infant who has quality childcare."