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Technology and workplace culture: An evolving partnership — Table of Experts

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The landscape of what makes a workplace desirable is ever-changing. The best companies to work for are adapting to change by focusing on client and employee satisfaction and the implementation of new technologies.

In a recent private roundtable, moderated by Northeastern University CEO and Regional Dean Maria Alonso, Comcast Business sought out the insights of the 2024 South Florida Business Journal Best Places to Work honorees on creating the region's best workforce cultures in partnership with evolving technologies.

Developing and maintaining a strong workforce that is forward-thinking, compassionate, and dedicated can be a difficult task. According to a 2023 Gallup-WorkHuman report, "By making recognition an important part of company culture, a 10,000-person organization with an already engaged workforce can save up to $16.1 million annually due to reduced employee turnover." There are many ways to engage employees and increase employee satisfaction, including through technology.

We began by asking the panel what their employees would say about their company.

"I treat my employees the same way I treat our customers; they understand that it's a mutually beneficial relationship and they can easily approach me," said Tiffany Gonzalez, CEO and CPA at Accounting to Scale. "We have check-ins every quarter, I give them anniversary presents, I very much treat them like you treat your best client. We're proactive about making sure that they feel good not just about work but their lives outside of the work environment. When they know that you care about them, they produce better work, and they feel good about doing their job."

"I think our employees would highlight three aspects," Jose Vargas Calderon, Regional Marketing Manager of Breezeline, outlined. "The first one is diversity, including diversity of experience. Experience in multiple industries gives a person diversity of the mind. Our teams are welcome to bring new ideas with different perspectives. The second would be our flexible work environment. Everybody works from home and then we have a hub office in Miramar. It eliminates long commutes and wasted productivity time. Now, people can pick up their children at school and enjoy a better work-life balance.

As we've been undergoing rapid growth, we've also been very transparent with our values and we bring them into the fold," Vargas Calderon added. "Third, they know what we're going to be doing so they know that they have a stake in it. Our CEO and COO are extremely accessible to all our colleagues; they're not sitting in an ivory tower. We also became part of a group which allowed us to become employee-owners — everybody has a stake in the company."

Michael Ortega, President of Ortega Construction, founded his company in 2010 and set his sights on making the list. "We're going on 14 years, and it's been great to be recognized by the South Florida Business Journal as a best place to work. Our industry has been known as a tough, hard-nosed industry and this recognition really helps us as a recruiting and retention tool."

"Once they perceived the benefit and then I returned to the office with the plaque, the team said: OK, this is amazing. We are actually a best place to work in South Florida," added Breezeline's Vargas Calderon.

"It's about our people," noted Lewis Greenberg, Regional Marketing Director for Marcum. "Our culture comes from our people. The relationships we have built survived — maybe even thrived — during the pandemic."

How AI and emerging technology are transforming business

Successful businesses have always innovated, adopting new technologies to increase efficiency, accuracy, and quality. The pace of that innovation continues to speed up, with patent applications increasing from nearly 80,000 in 1960 to more than 597,000 in 2020.

Today, artificial intelligence (AI) is dominating workplace conversations around the world, with talent and management navigating how to best incorporate AI into their processes — something that looks different for just about every industry, as we heard during this private roundtable recently.

"I think, for us, what we've seen is people want data faster," said Eugene Diaz, Director of Marketing for KSDT CPA. "The Amazon generation of having something right at the fingertips also translates to the accounting field, keeping up with the demands of the market and the speed in which clients have this expectation. We're leveraging technology, whether AI or automation, to give the client what they're looking for."

Looking at what technology is on the horizon in our industry is paramount, as we're seeing fewer students entering accounting fields," Diaz added. "Technology is going to be disruptive, and we are looking at that and saying: How are we going to leverage that disruption so that we continue to provide value?"

But it's not just about speed and efficiency. A main concern is ensuring quality assurance and accuracy, especially in a time when people — even those creating the technology —

aren't always sure how it works.

"The quality control aspect of AI is what we're looking at and making sure we don't deliver anything to a client based solely on AI. The technology is there and it's changing our operations every day," according to Marcum's Greenberg. "Our focus right now is acquiring accurate data through automation and ensuring there's a human touch."

Juan Hernandez, Commercial Lines Leader with NSI Insurance Group, agrees. "We must be responsive to the immediate needs of clients such as someone looking for an insurance quote, and they want to know we've gone to 15 different insurance companies through technology. People crave immediacy; so it's about instant gratification that addresses our clients' needs, with that added human touch."

"We have an internal AI platform and we compete monthly for the coolest application. They get a prize for sharing what they did with AI and how they're using it, leading to more efficient services," Greenberg continued. "People are having fun exploring and testing, and ultimately that also leads to workplace satisfaction as well; it's a win-win."

Quick adoption of these new technologies is going to help keep companies from becoming irrelevant in the marketplace. Not only does AI help meet the needs of employees and clients, but it's helping fuel innovation in products, technologies, and efficiencies.

Henry Rojas, Director of Enterprise Sales at Comcast Business, contrasted two corporations — one that innovated and one that lost its footing by not adapting to market forces. "In the mid to early 2000s nearly everyone doing business by mobile phone and email had a BlackBerry. When Apple entered the marketplace, Blackberry quickly went from the phone you need to conduct business, to a relic."

"And then you have Netflix," Rojas continued. "Just about everybody received their DVDs in the mail. In contrast with BlackBerry, Netflix predicted a change and bet big on digital — it paid off." The company today continues to innovate and remains at a near-high stock price.

Fueled by AI, innovation is happening at a much faster rate than in the past.

"The winners and the losers in the next couple of years will be directly related to how well we integrate those capabilities," said Fernando Mejia, CIO at UDT. "And your

business models will change based on how you use those capabilities to enhance the talents of your people. This is happening much faster than any other technology disruption we've seen in the past and this must be at the forefront of your business strategy. At UDT we created an AI Center of Excellence to integrate all the business units so we can share ideas on how to leverage technology," Mejia added. "The second initiative, which I think is unique, is that we created the position of Chief Artificial Intelligence Officer and their job is 100% focused around how we tie these capabilities into our strategy to inform our future plans for the group."

Technology champions

Managing the implementation of new technology such as AI, and ensuring the data is accurate and secure, typically falls to a CIO or CTO. But not every organization is large enough to realize the cost-benefit of such a position, while others choose to outsource some or all their IT needs.

"Our industry historically has been slow to adapt to technology," says Ortega. "But we've started seeing over the last five to seven years innovations such as virtual design enabling us to present models to potential clients and use that to avoid conflicts before you even start the project. We're actively ramping up new technology in our organization. We have a lot of young talent that has joined our company over the years and that group is charged with recommending and adopting new technology."

It's all about speed; how can we speed up our current work processes, including making payments," Ortega added, noting that it can cost him $30,000 per day for missing a date in a contract. Looking ahead on the horizon they are evaluating facial recognition, so they know who's on a job site, and who's not. "Taking it a step further, we can ascertain who is working, and where, to identify areas that are lagging and solve the problem."

Jeremy Mullings, Director (CTS Engineering) of South Florida Commuter Services hopes to advance technology to get us back to having more one-on-one time with our families and neighbors. "We're using technology to find the quickest way to get to work or school and coordinate schedules," he says. "The whole goal is to get more cars off the roads by enabling technology to facilitate more people time."

"We're looking to adopt tools to create growth, not replace our jobs, which is the perception many people have," NSI's Hernandez pointed out. "Employees are fearful of

being replaced by technology, but we must look at it as a tool to work smarter and more efficiently, not as an inherent threat."

Security itself can seem like a burden with double and triple authentication," Hernandez continued. "But we need safety measures to keep information secure. It's a necessary inconvenience, but I'd rather be inconvenienced than have to tell a client that we suffered a breach of their information, especially when dealing with sensitive financial information."

Using emerging technologies to ensure company culture continues to thrive

Much discussion continues to be had as organizations navigate a post-pandemic world where people are accustomed to more flexibility and can be as productive, or more productive, with a hybrid or remote schedule.

"We can categorize this in two areas. The one that's been around for a while but is becoming more and more challenging for organizations and consumers is everything related to security, particularly cybersecurity," said UDT's Mejia. "That is, it needs to be at the forefront of every organization, not only from the technology side. The second major aspect of this is how rapidly work environments are changing. It started with the pandemic and has continued to force us to evaluate how we enable employees to be productive. There is a key IT security aspect to that."

"We try to bring people back in-person periodically because the human component is so important," Mejia added. "But in some cases that is not possible and so you really have to go that extra mile to connect with remote employees. We care about and connect with them and what's important in their lives even from behind a screen."

"Hybrid models are a challenge for us because so many of our projects require people on site," said Ortega. "So we are constantly thinking about how to do this for office personnel who would love to go to that model. We have our main offices, and then we have several people at each job site because the size of our projects are large in nature."

"Technology is also playing a huge role in recruiting," noted KSDT's Diaz. "Now when looking for a job you're no longer applying for a job, you're applying for an algorithm. When you're looking for a job, you must understand the rules of the game; you need to understand which channels to use to get to that human conversation.

We leverage Teams to build culture and it can be uncomfortable for some because it's technology," Diaz added. "We create snack breaks, we play online games, we connect with everyone. We make sure to alternate the time of day because we have people all over the world. Technology allows us to stay connected with our team even if they're in India or the Philippines. Having that human touch behind technology, to connect and see their face and their expressions, is extremely important."

Needed skill sets

"For Breezeline, that depends on the role," says Vargas Calderon. "If you tell me that we need to sell services to a resident, he or she needs to speak Spanish in South Florida. If not, you're already set up for failure. But what we're looking for more than anything in a person is resilience. It's the adaptability to change, so every time that we have a new hire, I recommend a book that changed my life called My First 90 Days. It's all about learning the culture. We should be able to change our mindset on a monthly or weekly basis, and these skills we're talking about, they're not just tech skills. It's having the agility to continue lifelong learning."

"[The] the ability to communicate at that core fundamental level is critical," according to Greenberg. "Because with constant adoption of new technology you have to raise your hand when you see a problem with the system. We also emphasize emotional intelligence; having the left brain/right brain combination so you can read a room."

"Unique, very specific skills are role-based, but in general I would say there's more than just that," said Mejia. "For us the most important skill that we look for is what we call learning agility. You need to quickly learn new capabilities and then think outside the box. Sometimes the most important skill is to be comfortable being uncomfortable. We're looking for somebody that is willing to take a chance."

Moderator:

- Maria Alonso, CEO and Regional Dean, Northeastern University Miami

The experts:

- Tiffany Gonzalez, CEO and CPA, Accounting To Scale
- Juan Hernandez, Commercial Lines Leader, NSI Insurance Group
- Michael Ortega, President and CEO, Ortega Construction Company

- Jeremy Mullings, Director, CTS Engineering

- Jose Vargas Calderon, Regional Marketing Manager, Breezeline

- Eugene Diaz, Director of Marketing, KSDT CPA

- Lewis Greenberg, Regional Marketing Director, Marcum

- Fernando Mejia, CIO, UDT

- Henry Rojas, Director of Enterprise Sales, Comcast Business