



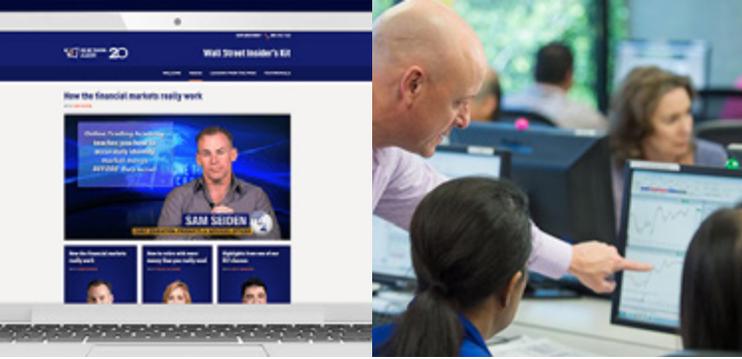
Online Trading Academy Improves on Successful Culture Using the Workplace Survey as its Guide to the Top



“What makes great companies is culture, the way people feel every single day about the work they do. We are privileged to impact people’s lives, and we need to be responsible with that privilege.”

Gene Longobardi, Chief Operating Officer, Online Trading Academy

Twenty years ago, [Online Trading Academy](#) (OTA) set out to transform lives worldwide through exceptional financial education, operating the company under values of love and collaboration. After earning a Top Workplaces designation in 2011, the company did not make the list in 2013. Using feedback from WorkplaceDynamics’ [Workplace Survey](#) as a guide, the company made key adjustments and earned [Top Workplaces](#) status for three consecutive years, scoring double digits above the benchmark.



Background

Values-Driven Culture

Chief Operating Officer, [Gene Longobardi](#), first engaged with Online Trading Academy

OTA in 2004 when owner and president Eyal Shahar hired him as a business consultant. The two immediately clicked, and Longobardi came on board full-time in 2007.

Longobardi described a guiding principle that shapes the company, “We want to have love present in every relationship: with our prospects, our customers and students, our franchisees, and from employee to employee.”

With that goal, Longobardi and Shahar set out to take a good company and make it special.

Avoiding Pitfalls of Rapid Growth

Prior to joining OTA, Longobardi helped to lead another franchise company to great success and then watched the organization struggle as it began to move away from its core values.

“Your company can get so goal-oriented that you lose track of your soul,” he explained. “If you don’t believe that culture is everything and you don’t put it as a number one priority—above strategy, above investment—then the growth will start to erode.”

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Unexpected Survey Results

Determined to keep on top of any signs of employee frustration or stress, Longobardi convinced Shahar to conduct an employee engagement survey through

[WorkplaceDynamics](#). The company earned a Top Workplaces designation in 2011. But surprisingly, OTA failed to make the list in 2013.

As Longobardi reported, “We just scratched our heads and said, ‘This is crazy. We have a great organization. Why would we have fallen short?’”

Despite well-defined values and a commitment to competitive pay, the company sought further improvement.

Strategy

Acting on Feedback

The executive team immediately met to evaluate survey results and discovered an opportunity in the area of benefits. Using the feedback as a guide, they outlined a plan of improvement, beginning with employee focus groups.

“We improved the benefit package around time off, added emergency loan funds, and counseling,” remembered Longobardi. “The changes were well received by our employees.”

When OTA surveyed their employees in 2014, employees’ perception of the company benefits had improved by 9 percent, and an additional 18 percent the following year.

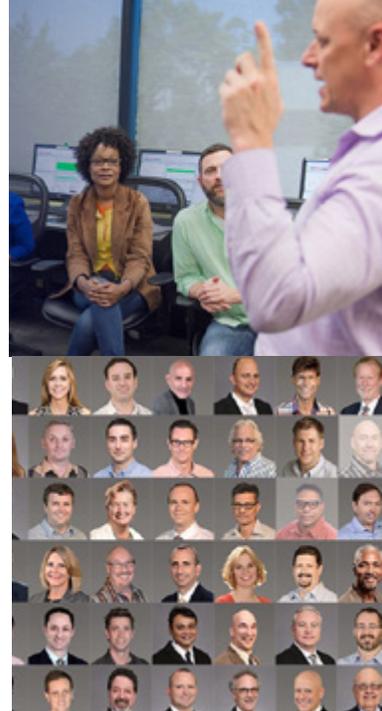
Social Media Scorecard

In addition to annual employee surveys, OTA also incorporated a “brand scorecard” to track, by location, the number of positive and negative social media postings.

“People talk,” said Longobardi. “That’s a human being that had an issue, and it may be telling you that something is a problem. When a negative pops up, we typically have someone call that employee or student and find out what the issues were.”

Preserve Culture through Communication

With 40 training centers around the world, two thirds of them franchise-owned, OTA executives needed to ensure that company values continued to guide each individual





interaction. In addition to hiring people who align with the central mission, the administrative team developed a comprehensive communication strategy including:

- Semi-annual international conference of all franchise owners
- Multiple online webinars each month
- Initial training at corporate headquarters
- Compliance program
- Monthly town-hall meetings with open brainstorming sessions
- Management training

Results

Three Consecutive Years as Top Workplace

Beginning in 2014, OTA achieved [Top Workplaces](#) status in Orange County, California for three consecutive years.

“We are proud of the great culture OTA continues to cultivate,” related Longobardi. “We provide a loving, inspiring environment for our employees. They know that they each contribute to enriching the lives of thousands of people worldwide, and that mission drives us.”

OTA’s ongoing process of evaluation and adjustment demonstrates that even a company with a strong commitment to culture can benefit from applying the results of an annual employee engagement survey.

“We are a complex organization, with many employees who work remotely and departments that aren’t as visible. The surveys helped us to identify areas where people were maybe not getting the attention they needed,” said Longobardi.

Scores Exceeding the Education Benchmark

Not only did OTA regain Top Workplaces designation, but in several key areas, the company

scored from 14 to 24 percent above the Education benchmark. Employees rated OTA particularly high in commitment to values and ethics, inter-departmental cooperation, and communication, with a 7 percent increase just in the past year in communication.

The social media scorecard confirmed those favorable numbers. OTA now reports a ratio of 98 percent positive posts on Yelp, Google+, and Facebook.

A Culture of Innovation

According to Longobardi, working in an environment where there's no fear fosters a culture of innovation. "That's what keeps me motivated," he explained.

"When you are in a place where your own personal mission completely aligns with the organization, then you're in the sweet spot. I have an opportunity to love, inspire, and encourage a lot of people. I believe this company is making a positive impact on the planet. And it's just begun."

