

Opening a Branch Office

By Stephen Lehigh, P.E.

Editor's Note: Today, many firms have tackled remote work in response to COVID, and learned several lessons along the way. Although this article is about issues that arose well before the current pandemic, it is interesting to realize that today's firms may very well be better positioned to create solutions like those presented here.

The departure of a valuable employee from a company due to a spouse's relocation can be difficult for a company and the employee. What options does the company have to retain this employee? Is it beneficial for the company to have the employee work remotely, and what are the challenges?

I found myself in this position three years ago when my wife was transferred for her job, and we had to decide to move 1,900 miles away. It was a challenging time, to say the least. I enjoyed the company that I worked for and my advancement within the company could be lost, but I had no choice, or at least that is what I thought. I decided to have a private meeting with the president of the company to break the bad news. Walking into the meeting was very nerve-wracking, and the outcome was uncertain. In my mind, there was only one option on the table – for us to part ways. What other option was there? To my surprise, shortly after the words left my mouth, my boss made an offer I could not refuse. He offered me the ability to work as a remote employee. I was surprised and greatly appreciated the offer. It made sense as he did not want to lose a valuable employee, nor did I want to leave.

After further discussions, working remotely started to become a reality and we knew that there would be challenges to overcome. However, with today's technology, the ability of Virtual Private Networks (VPN), internet phone services, and screen-sharing software, we had a positive outlook. This situation was new for both the firm and me, but we had to work together to succeed.

During the first few months, the plan was for me to work at home, settle in as a remote employee, work out the kinks, and find out if this option would benefit us both. Most importantly, for this to work, I must be happy

with working at home exclusively. This was far different than being in an office environment each day. There was no more interaction with other employees, watercooler talk, or simply being at an office. It took time to adapt, but

seemed to be an excellent opportunity for us in the market, we decided to open a satellite office and hire an entry-level engineer from the area. We mainly focused on marketing and ways to get our name in the community.

We needed the community and potential clients to know we were here and ready to help them with their structural needs. One tool that seemed to pay off was making our new location known on Google. This allowed people to find us quickly when searching within the area for a structural engineer. Although this helped, more needed to be done.

Since opening the office, we have focused on researching local businesses to determine how we could benefit them. We have emailed firms to try to set up meetings with their principals and have sent mail-

ings of pertinent and useful structural code information to all of our contacts. Recently, we donated our time to an Eagle Scout troop with a project at a local church. Business is increasing, and we have a positive outlook for the future.

From my personal experience, this could not have worked out better for me. From the day I sat down with my company President until now, it has been a journey that I was happy to take. I have since become a shareholder in the company, lead a satellite office, and am now on the Board of Directors. As an employee, the future seemed uncertain when I had to decide to relocate. Working for a company that is dedicated to its employees made this an easy process. Although this path may not work for every firm, it shows that there *are* options to retain an employee faced with a relocation dilemma. Company alterations come with challenges; the benefits certainly outweighed those challenges for us. ■



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once a home office was set up, I became more focused and determined to make it work. This was a great opportunity, and I found myself happy with the situation.

One major obstacle for me was my role as a Project Manager without having direct contact with engineers working on my projects. Having the ability to sit at a desk with an engineer to work through a project was a thing of the past. This was a big hurdle to overcome. In the beginning, we used screen sharing and video chat software. This process worked at the time, but since then, the use of Zoom and Microsoft Teams has dramatically improved the experience. These platforms now allow me to have face to face interactions at any time with coworkers. To further aid the situation, I traveled three to four times back to the company office. This put me back in front of our engineers a few times a year and gave me the ability to visit with clients.

A benefit to having a remote employee is the option to expand the company. After the initial year, we started looking at the bigger picture. Since construction in the area where I relocated was on a steady incline, and there