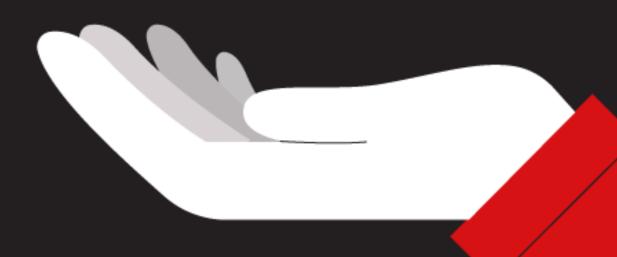# HOW TO CREATE AND SUSTAIN A POSITIVE WORK CULTURE

2021

Summary

This white paper dives into the best practices for developing and sustaining a positive and productive team through the use of proactive culture development, support of inclusivity and diversity, and team development resources and tools. Developed by the IGDA in partnership with Facebook Gaming.

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Contents

Introduction

Games present a rich, expansive medium that allows players to explore the possibilities of other realms and realities. A positive, supportive company culture creates an inclusive environment for employees and working environments that value individual and group differences. These diverse teams have the freedom and creativity to build more diverse and inclusive games, as the team members incorporate their own backgrounds, experiences, ability, heritage, and culture into their development process and creations. This unique culture supports teams in building more compelling, stable, and entertaining games.

This document provides an overview of the various considerations of company culture, diversity, and team development to ensure the best support of employees and the overall success of a studio.

Culture

A positive company culture is an integral part of a healthy studio. Culture affects every aspect of how a studio runs, from the content it creates to the retention of its staff. Employees of a company with a good culture will feel inspired and supported, and they will grow into better versions of themselves and carry their projects along with them.

Define Culture Explicitly

The best method for creating a desired company culture is to explicitly define it as the goals, values, and mission of the company. When these are specifically listed, referred to, and upheld, employees will be able to uphold these values, and customers will be able to recognize the intention and efforts of the studio.

Mission and Goals

Game development is a creative, nebulous, difficult endeavour, and developers can question the worth and purpose of their efforts. Defining the studio's outward mission and goals as a company provides the employees with a banner to rally under. This mission will be the guiding light of employees when they feel lost or uncertain and gives them meaning and purpose in their work.

A publicly listed mission statement also provides an understanding of priorities to both customers and potential hires.

Values

Company values are the beliefs, philosophies, and principles that drive the business internally and externally. They impact the employee experience as well as the relationships the studio develops with its customers and partners. It is important to define the values that a company holds dear and for those values to be reinforced in company meetings, reviews, and other official decisions and communications with employees.

These values should emphasize employee wellness, positivity, social connections, and growth. It is important that inclusivity of both a team and the content they create is part of an organization's core values as well. These values should be not only listed, but actively considered in the choices made by the company. Explicit and outward support of these values will also help maintain a positive and inclusive company culture.

Human Resource Policy Guidebook

The policies of a company, as they relate to employees, should be explicitly defined and provided to employees upon their hiring. An effective policy guidebook will list not only the mission, goals, and values of the company, but all of the intricacies of working at the company itself, from dress code to performance reviews to workplace relationship restrictions.

The guidelines in this book will answer an employee's questions in regards to what is appropriate, what behavior is expected of them, and how they can report their troubles or concerns in a way that provides them support and protection.

The IGDA has published a detailed HR Policy Guidebook Template that outlines how to develop a guidebook for employees that sets standards and processes to ensure employees understand expectations, report handling, and the values of their organization.

Proactive Cultural Development

A naturally formed culture may be positive or negative, but there is no benefit to leaving it to chance. Proactive culture development ensures a positive culture, but requires that companies dedicate their time and resources to building it.

Fostering the desired culture of a company creates a healthy work environment that allows for all employees to feel motivated, supported, and dedicated to their work.

Emphasize Employee Wellness

The game industry is famous for crunch, abusive workplaces, and low salaries. A company cannot have a positive culture without a healthy workforce. Employees need to be supported physically, mentally, and emotionally to succeed. Studios should establish the priority of overall employee wellness through the creation of resources, tools, and policies that support the health of their employees. And leaders should actively encourage employees to take care of themselves and engage in healthy work-life balance behaviors.

Evan Robinson's white paper, "Why Crunch Mode Doesn't Work: Six Lessons," notes that more than a century of studies show that long-term useful worker output is maximized near a five-day, 40-hour workweek. The paper also notes that, while work can continue seemingly unimpeded, the cognitive function and decision making abilities of the workers are severely reduced during overwork periods. As game development is an extremely cognitively demanding process for all disciplines, game development studios should always aim to have work weeks that do not exceed 40 hours, and that periods of overwork should not extend beyond two weeks.

After a period of overwork or high stress, additional attention should be paid to workers and their health to reduce burnout. Additional vacation days can help offset crunch periods, allowing employees to mentally and physically recover. Low-stress and creatively-rejuvenating projects like hackathons hosted during normal work hours can also help a team recover.

Honesty and Candor

A studio is most successful when employees feel empowered to provide and accept meaningful feedback. When communication happens honestly at every level, creativity is best supported and operational efficiency excels. Maintaining an environment where new ideas and constructive criticism are freely expressed requires active effort from the leadership team to protect and encourage such input.

Foster Social Connections

Positive workplace relationships are core to an employee's experience and the company's overall culture. Studio leaders must provide team members with explicit opportunities for social interactions within the workplace, such as team meals, clubs, and activities. These events should be opt-in to reduce pressure to attend for those who cannot make time or do not feel comfortable due to mental health or other challenges. A majority of these activities should occur within the normal workday, so that employees are not excluded if they have after work or family obligations.

Praise and Acknowledgement

Praise alone is a powerful motivator for most people. Game developers and leadership are often too absorbed in the development process to remember to pass on their praise and congratulations to their team members. These kind words not only help validate the efforts of team members, but also strengthens the connections between the praiser and the recipient. The power of and need for praise should be discussed and encouraged openly.

Another way to assist with cultural development of a studio is to publicly promote and celebrate positive behavior. This acknowledgement can be handled in a wide range of approaches, from congratulating team members in meetings to granting internal awards and benefits for upstanding behavior.

Employees who are outstanding in their efforts and support of others will become cultural champions and can provide guidance, either actively or passively, to the rest of their team.

Finally, crediting developers for their contributions acknowledges the efforts they have made and allows them to feel confident in their impact. Employees are often mislabeled, unlabeled, or left off game credits. A 2006 IGDA Game Writers Special Interest Group survey revealed that 35% of respondents either "don't ever" or "only sometimes" receive official credit for their efforts. The IGDA's Crediting Standards Guide provides a set of guidelines for the crediting process for game developers.

Protection and Support of Employees

Game development itself has many challenges and hurdles which developers must overcome. Developers should be able to focus on the challenges of development without being distracted or overwhelmed by external challenges. Thus, protection and support of employees, particularly in the face of enthusiastic and overbearing fans, is necessary.

Social Media Protection

Gamers engage readily on social media more with game developers than almost any other group of professionals. While having fans cheering on developers can help motivate and provide validation, toxic and unhappy fans can may resort to harassment that greatly weighs upon a developer's emotional resources.

In order to reduce the amount of unwarranted public and social media backlash that employees face for company or project decisions, the studio should have an active social media account

that encourages fan engagement, so that fans are encouraged to speak with a trained community management team instead of engaging with other employees on their personal accounts. Studio leadership should also assume responsibility for any issues or delays in projects, protecting developers from postulating fans that may blame such issues on them.

Finally, all studios should have a social media policy so that employees are aware of what aspects of development they are publicly allowed to speak about and how they should or should not engage with fans.

Crisis Support

Employees may sometimes experience and have to navigate crises, from pandemics and natural disasters to family deaths and medical difficulties. Showing support of employees during these struggles by providing them with time-off, flexible working hours, or other accommodations will support employees and their productivity through such challenging times.

An employee assistance program (EAP) can be a good investment for studios to support their employees, especially for studios who are not large enough to have their own in-house counselors. EAPs provide workplace services that help employees and their families cope with a wide range of crises and other stressful situations. They provide counseling services unrelated to medical benefits, including counseling on stress reduction, depression and anxiety, financial concerns, legal issues, work concerns, and other life and health management issues.

An employee should never be forced to "make up" hours when a natural disaster or other uncontrollable force causes disruption to their work day. Such events are taxing and requiring additional hours will not only cause loss of faith in their organization, but also cause additional stress and loss of productivity.

Team Building

Even with the best sets of goals and values, much of the culture of a team is derived from the people who are part of it. Enthusiastic, talented, positive developers will help the team share those qualities, while a negative person can quickly drag down the enthusiasm of the people around them. A poor leadership hire can cause great damage to a studio and game overall, creating rifts between teams, causing development instability, and scaring away talent.

Diversity

A diverse team will be able to overcome obstacles more easily and create inclusive games.

Inclusive games not only empowers players who are often underrepresented, but also helps to create an impassioned fanbase. Diversity distinguishes the game and its design from competitors, and inclusivity improves both user experience and public perception.

Newzoo's 2020 Gamer Sentiment Study on Diversity and Inclusion showed that half of players want more diverse characters in games, 45% of players avoided playing games that they felt were not made for them, and that a third of respondents prefer to play characters who resemble themselves.

Types of Diversity

There are many types of diversity possible within the employees of a workplace, including:

- Culture
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Age
- Gender identity
- Sexual orientation
- Ability/disability

- Neurodiversity
- Socioeconomic background
- Behavior/ethodiversity
- Ideologies
- Education
- Career experiences
- Marital/parental status

Variety in these backgrounds and characteristics enriches a team with a diversity of thought, creativity, and experience, making the team more effective and creative.

Some of these diversity characteristics are protected by law and should not be taken into consideration or, at least, held against a candidate during the hiring or interview process to avoid. Please refer to the local laws and legislation regarding what information may be taken into consideration during the hiring process.

In-House Diversity

A team that is diverse and inclusive will tackle problems more effectively and create content that will be enjoyed by a wider audience. Diversity among employees takes an active strategy to counteract innate biases and help employees overcome barriers.

While pursuing diversity within their studio, hiring managers and recruiters should keep in mind that there are protected classes within most countries and that asking about certain topics during the interview process could be viewed as discriminatory. All companies should review their government's laws and regulations on hiring practices.

Contracted Experts

It is not always possible to have members of an organization with backgrounds in all of the cultures that their content will encounter, from both a development and consumer perspective. Thus, it is important that contracted experts are brought in to consult on cultural and social sensitivity, and content culturalization. These experts will not only ensure that a game treats sensitive topics respectfully, but they will also help avoid public issues and criticism.

Recruitment

Proactive measures need to be taken to recruit a healthy and diverse team.

Job Listings and Advertisements

Job advertisements should be thoroughly considered to ensure that they reflect the company's culture and do not use terms which can be off-putting to some applicants, such as gender-coded words. Additionally, the only requirements listed for a position should be the core requirements of the role, as people from marginalized backgrounds are less likely to apply to roles when they do not meet all of the listed requirements.

Candidates will review a company's website, social media, and public image to determine if the culture would be fitting for them. A company should ensure they are promoting their values and a diverse range of their employees publicly to both support diversity and to demonstrate their inclusivity.

To effectively reach a diverse range of candidates, post job listings in a variety of different locations. Non-profit organizations that support the career advancement of disadvantaged populations and minorities can assist with reaching candidates. Additionally, investing in the development of local talents can help improve the recruiting pool. Consider supporting schools with diverse populations, accepting paid interns, and providing support to nonprofits that support local or marginalized communities.

Interviews

When interviewing for a role, it is important to consider if the person being evaluated can grow into the requirements of the role with the project. A person's ability to learn, grow, and collaborate successfully on the team should be considered as much as their current level of experience. Many diverse candidates have not been afforded the same opportunities as non-minority candidates.

Interview panels themselves should be as diverse as possible. A homogenous panel is more likely to express unconscious bias. All panelists and hiring managers should receive inclusivity and unconscious bias training to reduce any potential issues. Diverse candidates should also be considered for every role and an active effort should be made to find diverse candidates to review. Conducting structured interviews with competency based questions ensures equality throughout the interview and also allows for fair analysis of responses.

Accessibility in Recruitment

Studios should ensure that the methods through which they communicate vacancies, the interview process, and the interview environment are accessible to disabled applicants. While companies cannot ask applicants for personal details about disability or medical history, they should ask if they require any adjustments to the interview process or workplace facilities. In many countries, disabled people are a protected group and there is legal obligation to accommodate all adjustments that are reasonably achievable.

Retention

Retention of talent, especially diverse talent, is just as important as recruitment of that talent. A game studio requires a clear set of behavior expectations, active cultural development, mentorship and training, and explicit support.

Developing support channels is a great way to help retain talent. Most employees are looking to grow their skills and knowledge, mentorship and consistent feedback opportunities are key to ensuring their job satisfaction. Additionally, affinity groups for mid-sized and larger organizations, such as Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), provide safe spaces for an employee to connect with others and find additional support for their growth and wellness.

Employee Resource Groups

Employee Resource Groups, or ERGs, are voluntary, employee-led groups that foster a diverse and inclusive workplace by providing support to marginalized groups, remote workers, parents, and other employees that feel connected through a common cause or interest. These groups not only provide a community and support for the employees within them, but can also be champions of positive change by recommending workplace improvements such as increasing the accessibility of amenities.

Exit Interviews

When an employee leaves a company, they should be asked to participate in an exit interview. The interview should be for the sole purpose of determining possible improvements for the company. The employee should be informed that their answers will have no bearing on their career or future recommendations. This interview should be focused on the internal processes of the company and any issues within the organization, allowing the employee to express their grievances and other concerns.

Team Development

Studio leaders must invest in their team members and their growth, so they can perform to their highest potential and feel satisfied with the support they receive.

Training and Expectations

The faster that a new employee is onboarded, the better for both the employee and the studio. Each new hire should have time dedicated to ramping them up actively instead of simply throwing them into a project. While it is admirable to hire developers who can find their footing quickly in an active environment, it is not efficient.

During this onboarding process, the talent should be trained to understand the projects that they will be working on, their role within those projects, and the expectations that they will be held to. This should include an explicit review of the pipelines, tools, and any architecture that they will be working with.

Diversity and Inclusivity Training

Good diversity and inclusivity training allows employees and managers to realize the benefits of diversity, including increased financial returns, productivity, innovation, and employee happiness. A study by Deloitte showed that when employees "think their organisation is committed to and supportive of diversity and they feel included," there is an 83% increase in their ability to innovate.

Training helps employees become more aware of unconscious bias and helps break down barriers to diversity and inclusion. It also motivates positive behaviors and attitudes, which benefit teamwork and professional development.

This training and its approach should be carefully considered by studio leadership, and these leaders should also partake in it. Good training with consideration of employees and company culture is extremely beneficial, but poor training that employees feel is out of touch can have negative effects. Consider working with diversity experts within the game industry to create or find training that is best suited to game developers and the studio's culture.

Mentorship

Mentorship empowers an employee to learn from a more experienced developer and to receive feedback on both their technical and soft skills. While technical skills are often learned and improved upon in the day to day workplace, a dedicated mentor and mentoring time allows for the mentee to deep dive into their concerns and interests. Furthermore, junior level employees often are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with professional interactions, and a mentor can help them understand the workplace etiquette and provide them with a sounding board for their questions and concerns.

Mentor and mentee relationships should be consented to by both sides and regularly reviewed to ensure that trust and progress is maintained. A quarterly mentorship feedback survey can help detect any pairing problems and allow pairing changes without harming workplace relationships.

A mentoring program that pairs all employees with mentors and regularly scheduled mentorship sessions will both improve an employee's growth and their desire to stay with the company.

External Mentorship

In studios that are too small to have a full mentorship structure, that have junior employees that need experience mentoring, for veteran employees that are unable to find suitable mentors within their studio, it is recommended that external mentorship programs are reviewed. Local nonprofits and other organizations offer mentorship programs where junior employees can work with college and high school students to practice mentorship skills. The IGDA and other organizations offer mentorship programs such as this, as well as mentorship pairing for mid-level, senior, and executive developers.

Sponsorship

In addition to mentorship, sponsorship is also critical for the career development of all employees, but especially marginalized employees. Sponsors highlight the efforts and success of junior employees, endorsing them and their ideas. While mentors can act as sponsors, Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) also greatly assist in connecting employees with sponsors.

Feedback and Growth

Employees tend to thrive best when they are provided with consistent feedback. Similarly, companies run most smoothly when employees feel empowered to provide constructive feedback to each other and studio leadership. It is important to implement structures and programs to encourage such feedback and continuous growth and improvement.

Performance Reviews

Performance reviews should also be held on a regular basis, no less frequently than every 6 months, and the main expectations and categories of the assessments should be thoroughly understood by every new hire. Understanding their role and the expectations they are being held to provides a sense of confidence and structure to allow them to grow.

Performance reviews are also an opportunity for the employee and manager to express their desired areas of focus of the employee's work and growth over the next review period.

Encouraging Constructive Criticism

Constructive criticism benefits the project, the team, and the company, while negative criticism can lead to low morale, a toxic work environment, and delayed or misdirected projects. Companies should work with their leadership team to train and maintain a culture of polite and constructive criticism.

As much as criticism should be encouraged, leadership should also watch for any team members consistently dominating the conversation or team members who are not able to express themselves. Opportunities to provide feedback between team members should be encouraged and monitored to ensure proper tone and opportunities to express themselves. If a team member cannot voice their opinions in the environment for these discussions, they should be provided with alternative methods of providing feedback.

Gathering Company Feedback

Employees should also feel empowered to provide feedback about the company and its processes, especially on how to improve them. Candid feedback and exchange should be encouraged on all levels of the studio.

People are generally afraid to "rock the boat" or provide criticism. The best way to overcome this is to have dedicated meetings, surveys, and even full-day events dedicated to providing

constructive criticism about how the studio runs and offering suggestions for improvement. Anonymous feedback can be a helpful tool for identifying initial problems before candor is established and fully supported at all levels within a company.

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International Game Developers Association

The International Game Developers Association (IGDA) is the largest non-profit membership organization in the world serving all individuals who create games. The mission of the IGDA is to support and empower game developers around the world in achieving fulfilling and sustainable careers.

As an international organization, the IGDA is a U.S.-based 501(c)6 non-profit professional association and a global network of collaborative projects and communities of individuals from all fields of game development - including programmers and producers, designers and artists, as well as writers, business people, QA team members, localization experts, and everyone else who participates in any way in the game development process. The IGDA brings together developers at key industry conferences, and in over 150 Chapters and Special Interest Groups (SIGs), to improve their lives and their craft.

Facebook Gaming

Facebook Gaming is building the world's gaming community by helping game makers, developers and publishers to build, grow and monetize their games. We're committed to building a workforce that's as diverse as the communities we serve, and in assisting our partners and clients in their efforts to make the games industry more diverse, inclusive, accessible and equitable for all.