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The Golden Rule



"Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you" Ah, the golden rule, engrained in many, practiced by...some.

The Golden Rule, or ethic of reciprocity is an ethical code, or morality, that spans many generations and can be found in some form in almost every ethical tradition. It's the one rule that most parents teach their children. Since this code, or concept, exists throughout hundreds of cultures – you'd think it would be practiced by everyone at home and on the job. I believe that most of us know what the right thing to do and say is, but executing it is the difficult part.

I think we can agree that doing the right thing isn't always easy. People tend to act and react based on their emotions and often do not think before they talk – or do. I know I am guilty of this from time to time, but it is one of the many things I constantly strive for, in my personal life and at work. Since this post is of a corporate nature – let's stick to business. Treating your customers how you would like to be treated. Is a sure-fire way to build solid, trustworthy relationships – and treating your customers right will, more often than not, enable everything else to take care of itself.

In business, many companies come up with a core set of values, or core values. These values are often well thought out from business executives and in companies where communication is key – these values are instilled and practiced throughout the company.

Here are ours:



I am proud to say that our core values are engrained and practiced by every member of our team. I believe the same goes for companies like Zappos and Google.

Zappo's #1 core value is to **"Deliver WOW Through Service"**

Google's #1 core value (or 1st of 10 things they know to be true) is: **"Focus on the user and all else will follow"**

When developing (or re-developing) a company's goals and values. It is important to be very, very clear about what the company is all about and what it stands for – and although every company is different, each one should have the same end-goal in mind – the customer.

Building Relationships: It is critical for companies to think about relationships in business. Oftentimes, we are only focused on tasks, transactions or deals. Relationships are nurtured over time and consist of many transactions – each of which is critical to the relationship. In addition to nurturing the company-client relationship, it is also crucial to build successful relationships with suppliers, management, staff and even competitors.

Here are some ways that you can help build those relationships and practice the golden rule:

Listening – Like you, everyone wants to be heard; therefore, really listening is essential in business. By doing so, you will gain respect – and ultimately, have a better understanding of what their needs are. Additionally, you will most likely be listened to when it's your turn, as listening often compels others to listen if they're listened to.

Communication – Being respectful, polite and genuinely concerned with others is vital. It is also important to feel out the other person and see how they communicate. It will be greatly beneficial to communicate with them in the way they desire being communicated to. As you get to know them better, you can adjust your communication style (tone, style, etc.) to match their preferences.

Internal clients: Yes, everyone in your company is your client – and ultimately, these clients should be your first priority. If you make them your first priority, you will be successful. Well-treated internal clients will take care of external clients, ultimately keeping them as loyal customers.

Existing Clients – Your existing clients are the reason you're in business. Be sure to put your existing external clients first – before prospects. If you do, you will have happy, loyal customers who will rave about you which will, in turn, generate referrals – the most cost effective and genuine way to generate business.

By practicing the golden rule – and reading, understanding and practicing the core values of your business – you will be successful.

To put this all into perspective, I'll leave you with this quote from Mark Cuban, the co-founder HDNet and owner of the Dallas Mavericks: **"Treat your customers like they own you, because they do."**

Related Content:

Upcoming Webinar: Increasing Loyalty to Your Customer Loyalty Program via Concierge Service

Offering concierge service as part of your overall customer loyalty offering provides equal benefit to both brand and consumer. Discover the best ways to integrate concierge service into an overall customer loyalty offering. [Learn More.](#)

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Characteristics of a Great Concierge

In my previous post: [Concierge Services: From the Hotel Lobby to the Palm of Your Hand](#), we discussed several different mediums where concierge services are offered beyond the hotel lobby. Many of which are the result of [rewards and loyalty programs](#) offered in banking, credit cards, and other industries.

No matter what the medium, the caliber of the concierge is crucial and a great concierge is worth their weight in gold. A concierge can make or break a company, as many concierges fulfill requests from consumers for critical events and milestones in their lives.

Concierges are expected to perform a variety of tasks, from the most basic to the bizarre, like having an entire hotel room filled with candy bars.

I've heard concierges compared to Cinderella's Fairy Godmother – which is a very good analogy. Think about it - she magically appeared and assisted Cinderella in attending the ball by getting her invited to this prestigious event; provided her with the perfect gown and a magical pair of glass slippers. She arranged the transportation (turned a pumpkin into a coach, mice into horses, a rat into a coachman, and lizards into footmen) – all within 24 hours. If Cinderella were to use one of today's modern concierges, vs. her Fairy Godmother, she could have also scheduled a reminder call, prior to midnight, alerting her that it was almost time to get home!

The modern concierge is very capable and executes his or her duties with urgency and fervor. Concierges are trained to be discreet and display integrity. There is no challenge too great and no task too small, so long as it is not illegal or immoral – they are there to solely and exclusively provide an exceptional customer experience. Concierges never use the word “no” and will instead offer options if what has been requested is not possible. A great concierge is an exceptional networker with an extended network of contacts and resources around the globe who understand the importance of not only developing, but also *nurturing* relationships.

In today's world, a great concierge is technologically savvy. This is critical as a virtual concierge can no longer depend on their contacts and knowledge alone. It is important to hire professionals who are trained in service excellence and have the skills and credentials necessary to handle the many tasks needed to succeed. Concierges are not magicians, but will always get the job done either on their own – or by knowing where to go or who to refer to. They will not only make the initial plans, but follow them through - ensuring that expectations are not only met, but exceeded.

A great concierge is creative, often taking an ordinary experience and morphing it into a magical one. For example a concierge will set up a tour of the city – a **great** concierge will set up a scavenger hunt that includes all of a city's main attractions with a welcome package waiting at the destination. The welcome package could include a compass to help them find their way and a camera take photos of this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

A concierge's job is challenging, imagine trying to find the dress that Julia Roberts wore in *Pretty Woman* – or getting tickets to a sold out event minutes before it starts. Great concierges have unique skill sets that are in demand. It is critical for companies (large and small - hotel or financial services) to hold them to a standard, but it is equally as important compensate them for what they do – as certainly, not everyone is cut out to be a concierge – especially a great one!

Cloud Computing and Web 2.0 Defined

Everyone is talking about Web 2.0 and Cloud Computing... Well, according to Wikipedia: Web 2.0 can be commonly associated with web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web. Examples of Web 2.0 include web-based communities, hosted services, web applications, social-networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, mashups, and folksonomies. A Web 2.0 site allows its users to interact with other users or to change website content, in contrast to non-interactive websites where users are limited to the passive viewing of information that is provided to them.

Everyone has a slightly different take on what cloud computing is and what it means. I will try to explain the overall scope of the term and then we will dive into the many different aspects of it.

The definition according to Wikipedia accurately describes the premise for this book:

"Cloud computing services often provide common business applications online that are accessed from a web browser, while the software and data are stored on the servers.

The term cloud is used as a metaphor for the Internet.

Users need not have knowledge of, expertise in, or control over the technology infrastructure in the "cloud" that supports them."

Will cloud computing take over the world? Probably not, but it is definitely changing the way many people run their business and their life.

Cloud computing can range from storing and sharing documents on the web (i.e., using Google or Zoho Docs) to running your entire company operations via a remote data center.

What's in it for me?

There are many advantages of cloud computing. Let's face it, life is hectic, and running a business requires that you wear many hats. Cloud computing helps you save money and time!

Easy Implementation – Gone are the days when you have to purchase software, get the right amount of licenses and manually load it onto every computer in your home and/or office. Also, you no longer need to invent the wheel or purchase something and then later regret it (many applications are free or offer a trial period so you can make sure it meets your every need).

Accessibility – Today, most of us have a PC, a smart phone, an iPod, maybe even a Kindle Reader. Utilizing web apps let you run your business and/or access your documents, pictures or applications from a variety of different sources in a variety of different ways.

Scalability – Many businesses start out small and continue grow, or that's the hope anyway. When you start out, you can buy the application that supports 1-5 people, when you hire 5 more, you can upgrade it then, and not before. You no longer have to buy the big server, in the anticipation that your company is going to grow. You can wait and purchase more space when the time comes.

Computer Resources are minimal and performance is improved - There is no longer a need to buy top of the line computers with robust hard-drives to handle the high tech programs that require a lot of memory and disk space to run. Your computer will now run faster and more efficiently, as it won't be bogged down with lots of software and files.

IT costs are eliminated and/or internal resources are freed up – There is no longer a need to hire IT professionals to install or upgrade your software applications.

Software costs are reduced or eliminated - Instead of purchasing high priced software, there are many free (that's right, FREE) or low cost alternatives.

Microsoft Office (\$229+) Google Docs (Free) + Gmail (Free)

Adobe Acrobat (\$299+) Google Docs (Free) and/or Primo PDF (Free)

Software updates and upgrades are automatic - Having to upgrade software can be costly, but is often necessary. Have you ever had someone send you a Microsoft document in a higher version that you couldn't open? What about when you decide to upgrade your computer and your old software no longer works! When the software or application is web-based, updates happen automatically and are available immediately (and most often for absolutely no charge!)

Unlimited storage capacity - In the cloud, there is an unlimited amount of resources available to store and back up your data. You no longer have to upgrade your computer or hard-drive, you no longer have to purchase external backup drives that take up space and power for additional storage.

Automatic Back-Up –If you store your data in the cloud, you no longer have to back it up manually. I do; however recommend that you have multiple (preferably automatic) backup systems in place. Big companies are much more reliable than your external hard drive, but servers do go down and your data might become inaccessible at an inopportune time. Some web applications (Google, Zoho and Remember the Milk to name a few) offer an alternative safety measure, such as [Google Gears](#).

Collaboration is easy! Multiple users can collaborate easily on documents and projects. No more emailing documents back and forth, not knowing what's been added or changed. It's a must have for many businesses!

It's GREEN-ER - Just think about the packaging for all of the software and hardware that you've purchased in the past (now think of the amount purchased by companies all over the world). Also, if you own and run your own server, think of the electricity you will save! Many of the companies in the cloud have the means and the money to ensure the servers that are housing your data on are top of the line and energy efficient.

How much money can I save?

Let's take a look.

IT Services – The average annual salary of an IT employee is \$65,000. Utilizing web-based software, you can eliminate the need for an IT professional.

Savings = \$65,000/year

Phone Service – To purchase and setup an Analog phone system, you will pay an average of \$40,000. If you choose to set up your phone system via VOIP, you will only pay about \$15,000 for the initial setup and the service.

Savings = \$25,000/year

Software – Let's take Microsoft Small Business Software as an example. If you have 50 employees you can most likely get the bulk-pricing rate of \$379 per license for a total of \$18,950. Additionally, you will need to use someone's time to install the software on each PC and you will need to pay for upgrades (usually every year or two). With open source software, such as Google Docs or OpenOffice, you will have to pay NOTHING, it's free!

Savings = \$18,950/year

Backup – If you choose tape backup to back up your data, it can cost up to \$3,000, as you will need to purchase the tapes and use an off-site rotation service. With online backup, you can pay as little as \$70 per year or less (for 50GB of storage).

Savings = \$2,930/year

Fax – If you choose to setup an analog fax line, purchase the supplies and the machine, it will cost you approximately \$1,200. A year of e-faxing is only about \$250.

Savings = \$950/year

So, based on this example (50 employees) you can save \$110K+ over the course of a year!

What are the risks?

The biggest risk is that you are willingly handing over your data to a third party. Security is one critical issue that you need to consider before moving your business to the cloud. This can be frightening, as it should be, but there are definitely more benefits than risks.

Now, I don't want to scare you, as I am a huge supporter of cloud services; however, everyone should be aware of the risks – But remember, there is risk even if you don't move your business online.

There are still quite a few people who won't order anything online because they don't want their information compromised. What they don't realize is that if they have a checking account or a credit card, they are already at risk. Also, most often when you call in an order, the nice person on the other end of the line is simply keying your data into the computer for you!

There are scanners that pick up cell phone conversations, so a prying ear can easily record your information, if they happen to catch you ordering something over the phone while they're listening. All banks store their information on computer systems, which many people have access to. Computer hackers, or bank employees can compromise your information (even though you "never purchased" anything online). Take for example the case of the Rocky Mountain Gmail mistake. On August 12th 2009, an employee at Rocky Mountain Bank inadvertently sent an email containing names, addresses, Social Security numbers, and loan information of more than 1,300 customers to a random Gmail address ON ACCIDENT! Luckily, no harm was done, but this is an example of the risks (even if you, personally, aren't running your business online).

Most providers take security very seriously. Data is often encrypted and security threats are reacted to and corrected directly by the provider, before it even becomes a problem. Google claims that they can protect your data better than you can, and I truly believe that, but you still need to be cautious!

Another important factor you should consider is the fact that you have less privacy in the cloud. According to the NY Times, the Federal Government has the right to demand some details of your online activities from service providers - and they are not required to tell you about it. There have been thousands of these requests lodged since the [Patriot's Act](#) was passed.

Honestly, I don't believe the government is (or is even interested in) reading your emails; however, you should be aware that if they do so desire, they can.

As discussed above, there is more risk in someone (and not the government) illegally getting access to your data stored in the cloud. You have to be aware of the risks and do your part in

protecting yourself and your business. Become familiar with the risks and how you can avoid them.

Use strong passwords – Some sites force you to create strong passwords that have multi-case/character passwords, but even if they don't, it's in your best interest to do so.

WEAK PASSWORD: 123456

STRONG PASSWORD: Yepe8u2U@

Be familiar with Phishing!

Phishing is the criminally fraudulent process of attempting to acquire sensitive information such as usernames, passwords and credit card details by masquerading as a trustworthy entity in an electronic communication.

In English, this means that bad people create emails that look like they are from someone that you know and trust. For example, If you ever get an email from PayPal or your bank asking you to sign-in to your account and/or enter your password – DON'T DO IT! DELETE THE EMAIL! These folks are good at what they do and can make the email look legitimate (and exactly like the source).

If you are unsure – you should immediately delete the email and access the site (either PayPal or your bank directly through your web browser, or better yet, call them). DO NOT CLICK ON OR FOLLOW THE LINK IN THE EMAIL.

Please note that any reputable company (PayPal, eBay, your bank, etc.) will NEVER ask you for any of the following personal information:

- ✓ Credit and debit card numbers
- ✓ Bank account numbers
- ✓ Driver's license numbers
- ✓ Email addresses
- ✓ Passwords
- ✓ Your full name

If you get an email (no matter who it appears to be from) and they are asking for this type of information – Please, for your own safety, never give out this information!

Keyloggers – **Keylogging or Keystroke logging** is the practice of tracking (or logging) the keys struck on a keyboard, typically in a covert manner so that the person using the keyboard is unaware that their actions are being monitored. There are numerous keylogging methods, ranging from hardware and software-based to electromagnetic and acoustic analysis. It is highly suggested that you become familiar with keylogging and how you can reduce your risks.

- o Anti-spyware applications are able to detect keyloggers and quarantine, disable or cleanse them.
- o Firewalls - Enabling a firewall does not stop keyloggers per se, but can prevent the remote installation of key logging software, and possibly prevent transmission of the logged material over the internet if properly configured.
- o It is **very important** to have a legitimate anti-virus and anti-spyware program installed on your computer. This will help you avoid most risks and allow you to run your life and your business on the web safely and securely.

Educate Your "Team"

Today, it is common to collaborate (share documents and web spaces) which means you must also rely on your team(s) to be aware of the risks and to take precautions. For example, let's say you share your confidential Google document with 10 other people. All it takes is one person to create a weak password or make a crucial mistake. If it's your document (and your concern), than it's your responsibility to educate them and require them to take the necessary precautions!

Concierge Services: From the Hotel Lobby to the Palm of Your Hand

The Evolution of Concierge Services

The origin of the word concierge is uncertain, but many believe that it comes from the Latin word "conserve," meaning "fellow slave." Others claim that the first concierge originated from "count of the candles" or "comte des cierges" a phrase that described people who lit the candles and maintained them at major events. As time went on, the "comte des cierges" were given additional responsibilities, such as fulfilling the requests of visiting nobility. In the Middle Ages, concierges were the "keepers of the keys" to government buildings and to the houses of aristocrats.

Typically, we associate the concierge with the hotel industry; however, due to the benefits that a concierge can provide – and thanks to technological advancements, concierge programs and services have matured and expanded exponentially over time.

What is a Concierge?

Dictionary.com defines a concierge as "a member of a hotel staff in charge of special services for guests, as arranging for theater tickets or tours," and this definition remains true, as almost every major hotel in the world provides these services to their guests. Additionally, many public buildings (residential and offices) also utilize the services of a concierge.

The major difference is that concierges are now not limited to the hotel lobby. One of the biggest breakthroughs in the concierge industry is [virtual concierges](#) – something that VIPdesk specializes in providing to an array of companies across industries.

Also, hotels like Hyatt are using technology to their advantage and offering concierge services beyond the hotel lobby and offering guests virtual concierge services through their [e-concierge](#) service and via Twitter at [@HyattConcierge](#).

Let's take a look at the different types of concierge services and programs:

Hotel Concierges

A hotel concierge can provide a wide range of services for guests. If there is anything a guest needs or has a problem with, the concierge is the person to call.

Concierges generally assist guests with tasks like making dinner reservations at nearby restaurants, arranging spa services, recommending day and night activities, booking transportation (i.e., limousines, airplanes, etc.), obtaining tickets to special events and assisting with tours of local attractions. In many high-end establishments, a concierge is often expected to "perform magic" by achieving what many would deem impossible.

Concierge Services as an Employee Benefit

Many companies are now offering corporate concierge services as a benefit to their employees in order to help employees to better balance their professional and personal lives. The more an employee can utilize their concierge to help complete personal tasks, the more they can focus on their job.

In most cases, the Employee Concierge is not sitting in the front lobby, but are virtual – which means they are reachable via phone or email 24/7/365 and do much more than help with

dining and directions. A Concierge can help with any task, big or small, and truly save people time—some tasks that a Concierge can assist with include:

- Finding a local plumber
- Comparison shopping a new digital camera
- Planning an overseas vacation

Hospital Concierges

Many hospitals are now offering concierge or personal services. A hospital concierge provides similar services to those of a hotel concierge, but in some cases they also serve patients, as well as employees.

Credit Card Concierge Services

American Express was the first to offer concierge services in 1984, and has a reputation for having the best service. Because there is so much competition today, many credit card companies are doing whatever it takes to stand out and that means many credit cards now come with a *free* concierge service and it is now possible to find and utilize these services on cards that have no fee.

In many cases, concierge services are part of a credit card's loyalty program and designed for those with high credit limits and a premium credit card with annual fees (up to \$500 a year); however, stiff competition has forced issuers to extend the service to a wider range of consumers. Now those with annual household incomes \$100,000 or more are eligible, instead of just focusing on the super affluent.

The level of service can vary by credit card issuer and by credit card, but the services that these virtual concierges offer are widespread and diverse. Also, because these concierges are available 24/7/365, many travelers prefer their credit card concierge to the one in the hotel lobby – as they do not have to wait in line to talk to someone, they can simply pick up the phone and call.

All credit card concierges can provide basic tasks such as finding out nutritional information on a take-out meal, directions to an upcoming appointment or finding a reliable electrician. Some can go well beyond the basic tasks and help procure tickets to sold out shows, get access to premiers or restaurant openings and provide special discounts and offers available only to those who carry the credit card.

One of the biggest downfalls to many credit card concierge programs is that many people don't realize they have this exclusive and extremely helpful perk. For many, the only way they can find out is by calling the 1-800 number listed on the back of their card. I strongly feel that credit card companies who offer concierge services should be far more benevolent in marketing this service – for the benefit of the consumer, as well as the financial institution. Concierge services can be a huge asset and time-saver for the busy professional or parent always on the go.

Mary Naylor: A Woman Who Means Business



Last month, Mary Naylor, our CEO and the founder of VIPdesk was recognized as a member of The Washington Business Journal's 2010 Class of Women Who Mean Business.

The Women Who Mean Business awards program is designed to honor the region's most influential business women from every industry and profession who have made a difference in their communities. Each of the women selected have achieved exceptional things during their careers and are truly innovative and inspiring leaders.

Mary is a pioneer of home-based contact center solutions and concierge services and I can personally attest to each one of those attributes for her. It's an honor to work for a woman and a company with such great leadership and vision...and thanks to her, VIPdesk now provides a greener and more balanced work life for thousands of people across the nation – and provides me with an opportunity to work from home, doing what I love!

Prior to founding VIPdesk in 1997, Mary founded Capitol Concierge, a corporate Concierge service located in Washington, DC. She started the company with only \$2,000, which her Mother loaned to her. Due to her passion and drive, Mary grew the company into the nation's largest corporate Concierge service with tailored programs serving over 80 commercial office buildings.

I'm inspired by stories like Mary's – and it's another reminder, that anything is possible if you put your mind to it!

Family: Lives in Alexandria with her spouse, Marc; children, Brian and Josh

Education: Bachelor's degree, communications/liberal arts, University of California, Santa Barbara

First job: Chef's assistant in a country club. That's a glamorous title for "I cleaned the grills and made sandwiches." I was 16.



Nontraditional Employee Benefits Can Help Win the War for Top Talent

Hiring the right people is critical and retaining them is equally as important. We all know that people produce results and hiring a winning team for your business is the key to success. We must also remember that hiring the wrong employees can be a costly mistake. Studies show that it can cost up to two and a half times an employee's salary to replace a lost worker. Even if you replace an employee with the same, or better, skills and talent; there will still be a significant period of non-productivity (during screening, hiring and training).

With the right people, a company can create a powerful competitive advantage. Leading companies are fully aware of this which is why they create forward-thinking strategies to leverage their talent and stay one step ahead of the competition.

It's a fact, unemployment is at an all time high, yet many people looking for work are still trying to find the right fit – and since times are tight and many companies have tightened their belts – unique perks and non-traditional benefits seem to be paying off in exchange for steep signing bonuses and salaries.

If you look closely at the Employers of Choice – you will see a pattern – These companies show concern for their employees' well being. They not only look after their professional needs, but show a genuine concern for their personal needs as well.

Here are just a few of the nontraditional perks offered by many of today's leading organizations:

Health and Well Being

Many companies provide services for the employee and their entire family (no matter what genus or species they are). These perks can include, pet insurance, on-site medical care, child or pet day care, cafeterias and fitness centers.

Creating Time

Employers also provide many other unique perks that not only save the employee time, but benefit the employer – as less time away from the office means more time they are available to work. These can include onsite (and may times free) haircuts, car washes and dry cleaning. I also recently heard about an employer who set up a farmers market in the parking lot every Friday and another who has regular drawings for housecleaning services.

Allowing for Play Time

You know what they say, "*All work and no play makes Johnny a dull boy*". Who wants someone dull (or miserable) working for them? Many companies reward their employees with a break room that has games such as ping pong tables, PlayStations and Wiis or Blue-Ray Players for employees to enjoy on their lunches or breaks. At a company I worked for in the past – employee morale was at an all time low – so "Game Day" was implemented – which meant every Friday – employees got to enjoy playing board games for 2 hours.

Providing Flexibility and Work/Life Balance

If you follow this blog – you know that we are huge proponents of telework and the many advantages [teleworking](#) provides for both employees and employers.

Flextime and telework allow employees to still be productive while managing life outside of work.

Reducing Distractions (Virtual Concierge Benefits)

Another way to help your staff balance work and life and a sure-fire way to help employees strategically manage their lives while getting their work done is to offer [virtual concierge services](#). Many companies have on-site concierges; however with the advent of telecommuting, flexible work schedules and grueling travel schedules – it is no longer realistic to count on a stationary concierge to meet the many needs of a unique and diversified workforce.

We all know that there aren't nearly enough hours in the week to get everything done. Most people work an average of 45-55 hours a week and this doesn't include the additional time spent commuting, cooking, paying bills and doing household chores. Sadly, this doesn't leave much time to spend with family and friends.

The problem for employers is that many people handle their personal tasks during work hours. A great way to solve this issue is to offer concierge services to employees. The services offered range from day-to-day tasks like picking up dry cleaning and arranging transportation, to gift buying, vacation planning and ticket purchasing. When employees utilize this service it not only saves them time, it helps them to be more productive, focused and less stressed at work – and we can all agree a less stressed and happy employee is a better employee.

Concierge services are available through specialized concierge service providers, such as [VIPdesk](#) or through many EAP organizations and can be offered as employer payment (per-employee per-month fees) or on a voluntary employee paid basis.

The best part of offering virtual concierge services is that they can be accessed globally, 24/7/365 via web and telephone.

So, as you can see, some of these programs cost little or nothing, while some require a significant investment, however, helping employees save time during their workday can be a win-win for everyone.

Also, it is important to keep in mind that employees are often willing to spend more to get more. If your budget is locked tight, consider enhancing your benefits plan through additional employee-paid options or try introducing voluntary benefits.

Increasing your benefits package can have a tremendous impact on employee morale, well-being and loyalty and addresses many problems such as lost productivity, absenteeism and turnover – things every company struggles with at one time or another...

The Benefits of a Virtual Workforce

Telework, telecommuting, a distributed or home-based workforce - no matter what you call it - I'm a tried and true advocate! I have long felt that telecommuting has made me more productive and I've been fortunate to have the opportunity to work from home in a variety of roles - as a business owner, a contractor and now as a corporate employee.

In today's digital world, the opportunities for a virtual workforce are endless and more and more companies (and employees) are embracing virtual working arrangements because of the many benefits it provides. Telework opens up new labor sources, global collaboration, reduced turnover and overall satisfaction for customers and employees; which in turn, increases productivity and drives business growth and success.

For me, having a 20 second commute to my office saves me both time and stress. When I do have to travel or when I hear about fatal car accidents on the interstate; I am reminded of the hassles (and dangers) of commuting. I have more time to spend with family and friends, can work with little to no interruptions and can control the lighting, temperature and my workspace without having to contact the purchasing or facilities department.

At VIPdesk, we are passionate about telework, as our core business provides [virtual concierge](#) and [contact center solutions](#). We see, first hand, the many benefits of a virtual workforce and want to share our knowledge and success with others.

We were also thrilled when we found out that the Federal Government is getting serious about it too. On November 18th 2010, [The Telework Enhancement Act](#) was passed by the House of Representatives. The new bill requires each agency to establish a policy under which employees may be authorized to telework to the maximum extent possible without diminishing employee performance or agency operations.

In many cases, all that is needed for someone to telecommute is a dedicated phone line and high-speed Internet, but the most important factor is hiring the right people.

Many companies are still hesitant and uncomfortable with not having their employees on-site, even in the wake of a disaster. The biggest fear is that they won't be able to control their employees and that their employees will watch television and do their daily chores during working hours. My response to that is if you are a competent manager, you will be able to tell, fairly quickly, based on the output and quality of their work whether they are slacking or not. If it's clear that they are not producing; then it becomes a performance issue - as with any employee (brick and mortar or virtual).

Hiring the right people is crucial to the success of a virtual workforce, from the front-lines to management. We'll discuss the qualities to look for below. If you put the right people in place, you should be able to trust them to produce, regardless of their location.

Benefits for Employers

Increased Productivity and Shrinkage:

- Disaster Recovery and Inclement Weather - Telecommuters are able to work during office closures due to inclement weather. There is no lost time due to driving in bad conditions and the time saved can be spent working.
- Uninterrupted and focused work - Working from home allows for large blocks of uninterrupted time without distractions.
- More time to work - Time saved commuting can be spent working
- Reduced sick time - Employees who work at home take considerably less sick time than employees who commute to work. Some studies say the reduction is upwards of 25%.

Also, at-home workers are less likely to get sick, as they are not surrounded by a lot of people with colds and the flu.

Reduced Real Estate Costs and Overhead Expenses: In the contact center world, the cost of a workspace is approximately \$800-\$3,000 per agent annually; therefore a call center with 20 home-based agents can save a company upwards of \$60K per year. Some companies can eliminate their corporate office altogether – if so, additional money saved on rent, utilities and taxes are much more significant.

Reduced Labor Costs: Salaries fluctuate based on geography. Employers with a virtual workforce can hire lower cost workers in suburban labor markets saving a significant amount of money. Also, due to the cost savings that the employees will gain, companies can pay telecommuting employees less per hour based on their reduced expenses.

Expanded Talent Pool: Employers who have a virtual workforce are not limited to employees in their local area, giving them the ability to hire highly qualified employees across the United States and beyond.

Additionally, companies can tap into can into new labor sources and provide more opportunities for employees with otherwise compromising circumstances, such as:

- Employees with disabilities or those on short-term disability with modified or limited job duties.
- On maternity, paternity, or eldercare leave.
- Retired employees or those approaching retirement who are interested in working in a reduced capacity.
- Employees who need to relocate as a consequence of dependent care or spousal responsibilities (i.e., spouses of military personnel or executives)

Elimination of Relocation Expenses – There is no longer a need to pay relocation expenses for top talent.

Reduced Travel Expenses – With the technologies available, there is no longer a need to travel for meetings (and in many cases, conferences). Meetings can be held virtually face-to-face with programs such as GoToMeeting or Skype. Additionally, virtual conferences are also becoming more common place – with specialty software that mimics a live conference (with virtual lobbies, lounges and conference rooms).

Access to a flexible workforce: Employers are more likely to obtain employees that are willing (and need) to work non-conventional hours. For example, someone that cannot afford daycare may be willing to work nights when their spouse is home and available to care for their child.

Additionally, employees that can work from home are more willing to work more often and on weekends and holidays, which can help accommodate seasonal workload fluctuations.

Happier Employees – Telecommuters are happier. Employees value telecommuting and many; 33% consider telecommuting the main draw for new hires, according to a 2009 survey of 1,400 chief financial officers conducted by Menlo Park, California-based Robert Half International Inc. In a recent survey of Gen Y employees, working from home ranked 10th (14.3 percent) on a list of important factors candidates look for when selecting a job.

HR departments and executives are always looking at new and enticing benefits to obtain top talent - Telecommuting is a benefit that employee's desire and one that you don't have to pay for, it actually saves you money – and having happier employees increases customer satisfaction and productivity, no matter what business you're in.

Reduced Employee Turnover – Happier employees are more likely to stay with a company for an extended period of time. As we know, labor costs are generally the most significant portion of a company's operating budget. Adding turnover to the equation significantly increases these costs. In order for companies to control (and reduce) their operational expenses, they must find innovative ways of attracting and retaining top talent. Giving them the benefit of telecommuting (a benefit they want) can do just that.

Benefits for Employees

Increased Opportunities for all Workers: A virtual workforce opens up opportunities for disabled veterans, persons with disabilities, older workers who desire to remain in or need to reenter the workforce and military spouses or spouses of executives that may need to relocate often. Additionally, it opens up opportunities outside of the employee's local area.

Better Work/Life Balance: As commuting is essentially eliminated, employees can spend more time with their family and friends. Childcare or elder-care can be more easily accommodated.

Increased Productivity:

- **Time Saved** - In some heavily populated areas, commuters spend up to 10 hours per week traveling to and from work (that's 40 hours per week and 2,080 hours per year). With the lack of a commute, home-workers can devote a greater part of their day to their job.
- **Less Disruptions** –Working from home prevents the often unnecessary and/or unwelcome interruptions by co-workers that hinder productivity. Think water-cooler chit-chat and the loud cubicle neighbor.

Increased Overall Quality of Life:

- **No Dress Code Required** – In many HR employee satisfaction surveys, the ability to dress down is a desired benefit. Home-workers can dress as comfortably as they want every day.
- **No Office Politics** – Office politics are non-existent allowing for a stress-free work environment.
- **Customized Workspace** – Home workers can control the lighting, temperature and their workspaces allowing for a comfortable working environment.

Economic Benefits: Employment expenses for home workers are significantly reduced or eliminated.

- **Public transportation costs** such as bus or train fare.
- **Personal transportation costs** such as gas, maintenance and tolls. In urban areas these costs can easily exceed \$4-5K per year. Some may even decide not to have an automobile, thus eliminating the cost of an automobile and/or finance charges on an auto loan.
- **Costs associated with lunches, breaks, pot-lucks, birthdays or other work based social gatherings.**
- **Wardrobe Expenses** - There is no longer a need for formal business attire.

In addition, many home workers may be able to claim some home office and utility costs as personal income tax deductions, further adding to their real income.

Benefits for Everyone

Decreased Carbon Footprint: The average length of a commute is approximately 30 miles each way. This commute can emit over 7,000 pounds of carbon into the air annually. Telecommuting lowers the carbon footprint, reduces greenhouse gas emissions, and improves air quality for everyone on earth and for future generations. Additionally, by telecommuting we can increase the likelihood of becoming self-sustainable and reducing our dependence on foreign energy.

- Utilities - Utility costs are reduced for brick and mortar buildings with fewer workers onsite.
- Paper consumption – The use of paper is significantly reduced, as much communication is done electronically.
- Office Equipment and Supplies – There is less need for unsustainable office equipment and supplies, e.g. cubicles, computers, printers, toner, desks, chairs, etc.
- Refuse – The amount of refuse is decreased, due to the reduced amount office supplies and packed lunches.

Better use of Rescue Personnel: With less people on the road, there are fewer traffic accidents and less traffic congestion, allowing rescue personnel the ability to tend to issues that can't be avoided.

Better Use (or reduction) of Taxes: The need for maintaining or building expensive transportation infrastructures is also reduced, allowing tax payer money to be used for more beneficial endeavors.

Increased Life Expectancy: Telecommuting reduces the risk of being involved in a fatal car accident, therefore, increasing the odds of a longer life.

Better Health: Telecommuting is a great way to help you, and your team, remain healthy. Workplace germs can no longer be spread – and it eliminates frustration and contempt when your office neighbor comes in with the flu.

Increased Collaboration: It is now easy to collaborate with a global team for little to no cost to you. No longer do you miss out on the opportunity to meet with someone due to budget or travel restraints.

More Productive Meetings: Virtual meetings, via telephone or teleconference, tend to be more productive and concise. There is less chatter about the surroundings or the weather. In some cases, teleworkers can multi-task if they are on a non-productive meeting, without being noticeably rude.

As you can see, the move to a virtual workforce can provide significant benefits to everyone; however, keep in mind that it will not work for every company or individual.

It is important to evaluate and research all of the factors involved and have a process in place before closing your office doors. It is equally as important to note that not all managers are cut out to supervise telecommuters and not all individuals are cut out for telecommuting. The A type micro-manager probably wouldn't be the best person to put over a telecommuting staff. [Managing employees remotely](#) can be very challenging, and it is ultimately the manager's responsibility for ensuring that the work gets done.

Whoever you hire needs to be motivated, self-disciplined, and comfortable with the type of work they will be performing. People who do their best work independently are often the best fit for telecommuting. If someone is very social and needs to have regular interaction with others, they probably won't be a good fit for a telecommuting position.

For companies that are interested in transitioning their workforce to a home based model, but aren't quite ready yet, we recommend implementing an occasional telecommuting arrangement, say every Friday or two days per week, so that you can be ready to when the need arises or a disaster (hurricane or blizzard) strikes.

The Golden Rule

“Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you” Ah, the golden rule, engrained in many, practiced by....some.

The Golden Rule, or ethic of reciprocity is an ethical code, or morality, that spans many generations and can be found in some form in almost every ethical tradition. It's the one rule that most parents teach their children. Since this code, or concept, exists throughout hundreds of cultures – you'd think it would be practiced by everyone at home and on the job. I believe that most of us know what the right thing to do and say is, but executing it is the difficult part.

I think we can agree that doing the right thing isn't always easy. People tend to act and react based on their emotions and often do not think before they talk – or do. I know I am guilty of this from time to time, but it is one of the many things I constantly strive for, in my personal life and at work. Since this post is of a corporate nature – let's stick to business. Treating your customers how you would like to be treated, is a sure-fire way to build solid, trustworthy relationships – and treating your customers right will, more often than not, enable everything else to take care of itself.

In business, many companies come up with a core set of values, or core values. These values are often well thought out from business executives and in companies where communication is key – these values are instilled and practiced throughout the company.

Here are ours:

I am proud to say that our core values are ingrained and practiced by every member of our team. I believe the same goes for companies like Zappos and Google.

Zappo's #1 core value is to “*Deliver WOW Through Service*”

Google's #1 core value (or 1st of 10 things they know to be true) is: “*Focus on the user and all else will follow*”

When developing (or re-developing) a company's goals and values, it is important to be very, very clear about what the company is all about and what it stands for – and although every company is different, each one should have the same end-goal in mind – the customer.

Building Relationships: It is critical for companies to think about relationships in business. Oftentimes, we are only focused on tasks, transactions or deals. Relationships are nurtured over time and consist of many transactions – each of which is critical to the relationship. In addition to nurturing the company-client relationship, it is also crucial to build successful relationships with suppliers, management, staff and even competitors.

Here are some ways that you can help build those relationships and practice the golden rule:

Listening – Like you, everyone wants to be heard; therefore, really listening is essential in business. By doing so, you will gain respect – and ultimately, have a better understanding of what their needs are. Additionally, you will most likely be listened to when it's your turn, as listening often compels others to listen if they're listened to.

Communication – Being respectful, polite and genuinely concerned with others is vital. It is also important to feel out the other person and see how they communicate. It will be greatly

beneficial to communicate with them in the way they desire being communicated to. As you get to know them better, you can adjust your communication style (tone, style, etc.) to match their preferences.

Internal clients: Yes, everyone in your company is your client – and ultimately, these clients should be your first priority. If you make them your first priority, you will be successful. Well treated internal clients will take care of external clients, ultimately keeping them as loyal customers.

Existing Clients – Your existing clients are the reason you're in business. Be sure to put your existing external clients first - before prospects. If you do, you will have happy, loyal customers who will rave about you which will, in turn, generate referrals – the most cost effective and genuine way to generate business.

By practicing the golden rule – and reading, understanding and practicing the core values of your business – you *will* be successful.

To put this all into perspective, I'll leave you with this quote from [Mark Cuban](#), the co-founder HDNet and owner of the Dallas Mavericks: "***Treat your customers like they own you, because they do.***"

Looking For a Unique Vacation Experience?

[VIPdesk Concierges](#) receive calls every day from customers in search of assistance for developing unique travel experiences. While many of these customers are frequent travelers who have traveled the world, they tend to stay at the same hotels or resorts they have become accustomed to, and want to try something new.

Our Concierges have gathered a comprehensive list of the most unique and exciting places on earth and below we've selected three very different and interesting vacation destinations to share with you—our blog readers. We will regularly post a series of featured destinations from around the world, so make sure you subscribe to the blog (or check back regularly) to see what we will feature next!

Is that an igloo? No, it's an ice hotel!

Hotel de Glace, Canada's ice hotel
Québec, Canada

<http://www.icehotel-canada.com/>



Imagine a structure made completely of 15,000 tons of snow and 500 tons of ice with ceilings over 19 feet (5.4 metres) high, walls covered with original artwork, and furniture carved out of ice blocks. This describes the Hôtel de Glace, a very unique and complex hotel in Quebec. Re-developed every year from scratch, it takes approximately five weeks to erect the masterpiece of architecture that is the Hôtel de Glace.

Starting with the first incarnation of the Hôtel that measured 1,000 square meters, the Hôtel de Glace artisans continue to amaze by modifying and creating new elements every year that maintain the original unique concept of the Hôtel de Glace while revitalizing its design and décor. The Hôtel de Glace now covers more than 3,000 square meters, consisting of 36 rooms

and theme suites, the Ice Café and Ice Bar, a wedding chapel, an immense lobby with a fiber-optic candelabra, an interior courtyard, hot tubs and saunas, functional fireplaces.

Have You Slept Underwater Lately?

Jules Undersea Lodge, Key Largo, FL USA

<http://www.jul.com/>

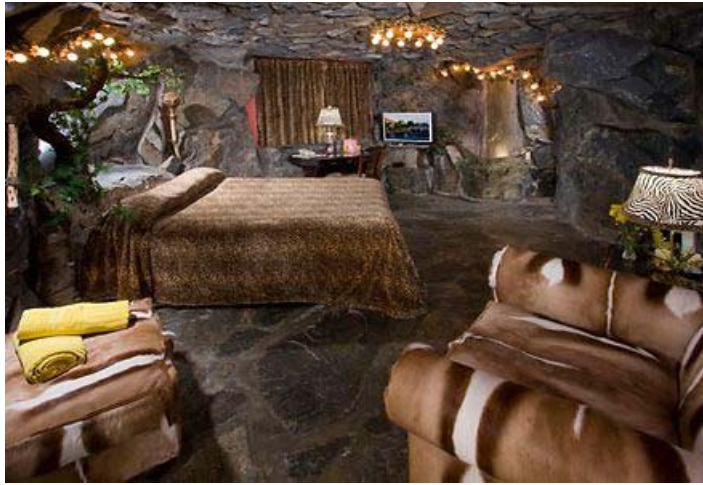


When guests visit Jules' Undersea Lodge in Key Largo, Florida, they discover that the name is no marketing gimmick—Jules' really is underwater. Just to enter the Lodge—the world's only underwater hotel—visitors must scuba dive 21 feet beneath the surface of the sea through the tropical mangrove habitat of the Emerald Lagoon. Don't let all of the water dissuade you—even from the outside, Jules' 42" portholes cast a warm invitation to come in and stay a while, relax and get to know the underwater world that few have had the opportunity to visit.

Themed Lodging for Every Taste

Madonna Inn, San Luis Obispo, CA USA

<http://www.madonnainn.com/>



For nearly 50 years the charm of the Madonna Inn has been one of California's landmark attractions, as well as a sought-after lodging, meeting and convention destination.

Each one of the Madonna Inn's 110 rooms is decorated with a unique special theme, combining to provide an unforgettable lodging, dining and entertainment experience. The Madonna Inn is home to a picturesque European-style pool, state of the art exercise room, celestial Day Spa and the largest convention center on the Central Coast of California. Other features include banquet rooms for intimate weddings & receptions, exclusive clothing, gift and wine shops and limousine service for the Inn's guests.

The Madonna Inn sits on approximately 2,200 acres and has very unique architectural details. The Inn is constructed in part of locally-excavated rocks—some weighing in excess of 200 tons each! The hand-carved marble balustrade in the Gold Rush dining room came from the Hearst Castle, and all of the copper and brass items were etched and/or shaped from original designs and fabricated right on the premises. In addition, both the leaded glass work throughout Inn and the large etched glass windows in the coffee shop were custom made for the Inn, and the doors, beams, railings and many other carved adornments were made by wood carvers especially brought in for the job.