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Oregon Contractor Invests in Employees

Reitmeier Creates University Program to Train, Certify New Employees in HVAC

By [Nicole Krawcke](#)

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In his years as an HVAC service technician, Jeff Nusz saw several things he didn't like. So, when he purchased [Reitmeier HVAC Services](#) in 2002, just five years after coming to work for the service company, he felt like it was time to make a positive change in the industry.

“I wanted to create a place that reflected my values — one that brought in more than just the model of an HVAC company. My goal was to look at all industries, pick the best attributes, and mold them into our company. Ultimately, I wanted to inspire change within the industry.”

Eco-friendly Sustainability

Reitmeier, located in Tualatin, Oregon, provides HVAC repair, installation, and maintenance services to customers in Portland, Oregon, and southwest Washington.

Being in the Northwest, Reitmeier embraced a culture of sustainability.

“We’re in Oregon, so we’re looking at the environment and sustainability, but not just sustainability in a recycling, eco-friendly way, but sustainability in long-term relationships, long-term employment, and in customers. I believe we should lead the way; we should be innovators. It’s up to us to create the right solution. If all of those values are forefront, and we’re making decisions based on those values, we can find balance. And that’s balance in life and in work — the balance between too warm and too cold. We really live and breathe by those values down to every person here.”

The Great Recession really forced Nusz and Reitmeier to look at employees and discover how to create that sustainability in long-term employment as well as attract qualified new talent. Essentially, Nusz said he marketed his services to his employees.

“The key to keeping employees happy is to listen to them; they’ll tell you,” he said. “We have an open-door policy here. Anyone can walk into my office at any time. But the key, we have found, is to communicate, communicate, communicate. Let them know what’s going on. Following the recession, we changed our model to the point where we are sharing financials with the executive staff. That really made a big difference for them to see the big picture and allow me to lead them in a more — there’s that word — sustainable way.”

Nusz said each employee is asked to rate managers on how they are doing in their leadership. “We encourage them to share their ideas. It doesn’t matter where the idea came from; if it’s a good one, we certainly want to use it.”

Robyn Benedetti, human resources and operations manager, said Reitmeier’s treatment of its employees is the thing that sets it apart and makes it unique among the competition. “I feel good about being an employee here,” she said.

Benedetti, who has been with Reitmeier for eight years, previously worked in a white-collar law firm. “It was quite shocking when I came to this realm of the world,” she said. “People weren’t sure I’d be able to fit in. I just wanted something different. I predominantly supervised, assisted, or managed women. And it didn’t really seem to focus on real-world problems, if that makes sense. I was just up for a challenge. And, it’s had both pros and cons. Every day is something different. It’s been a great experience thus far.”

Benedetti said, surprisingly, the biggest difference between working at a law firm and Reitmeier is the open-door communication. “We’re always available, whether it’s a gripe, input, or a suggestion. They’re asking me, ‘What do you think?’ It’s not just an automatic decision, and the same goes with the employees. Everyone’s given options, from a salmon derby or a family picnic, a floating holiday, or a bonus — everyone has input. I think that’s a little bit different than most companies.”

Investing in People

“We were having a difficult time finding top-end talent, so we had to really take a step back and find out where the largest pool of talent was, and it was with the millennials,” Nusz said.

In response to that shortfall, the company created Reitmeier University. It took Nusz and his team two years to develop the curriculum for the program, which began last year. The 52-week course meets once a week and combines hands-on training with coursework material at no cost to accepted students. One of Reitmeier’s senior-level technicians administers the program, which is also paperless. All testing, grading, and communication between the instructor and students is conducted through an email portal.

“We had to learn how to think and communicate like the millennials in order to develop the university and maximize the educational experience,” he said.

“The way we learned — I learned — is completely different from the way students are learning now.”

The state of Oregon requires technicians to complete a four-year apprenticeship program, but students who have completed the Reitmeier University program have the ability to test out of the first two to three years of the apprenticeship program, which saves money.

In addition to Reitmeier’s own educational program, the company also covers 100 percent of the cost for the apprenticeship program, operated by Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) at the Northwest College of Construction. The program consists of three terms a year. Reitmeier pays \$630 a term, per student, for the first year. As students advance, the cost increases. At the end of four years, apprentices are tested, and, if they pass, they’re given their journeyman licenses.

Reitmeier currently has five apprentices in the program through ABC and four students in the Reitmeier University program. Reitmeier has the set expectation that a student must maintain 100 percent attendance as well as a grade of ‘B’ or better to maintain enrollment in the university — the same policy utilized in state apprenticeship programs.

“I think that’s big,” said Benedetti. “The education we’re provided as managers and technicians really is top notch. The company provides everything we have to do to be the best in the field. So, yes, there is money and a cost associated, but, in the end, it’s money well spent. I feel our educational offerings far exceed our competitors.”

“Our product is our people, and the better educated they are, the better our product’s going to be,” Nusz said. “I believe I owe them. If I’m going to invest in them and give them a shot at a career, I believe I need to educate them at the highest level possible. What that means for my clients is when we show up, we’re not on the phone calling somebody else asking how to fix it. I’ve seen it with competitors. I’ve seen what their product is. We need to have the best product out there. Our mission is not to be the biggest company, but to be the best, and it’s all about our people.”

Reaping the Benefits

In addition to the paid apprenticeship program, Reitmeier offers its employees 100 percent medical coverage in addition to covering about 75 percent of spouse and dependent costs. Other benefits include dental, vision, 401(k) with a 3 percent company match, life insurance, supplemental insurance, floating holidays, and employee perks through partners. The company also pays all continuing education costs, including fees for licensing.

The great benefits are what drew Dallin Gibb, one of Reitmeier’s senior HVAC service technicians, to the company almost five years ago.

“I knew a few people who worked there, and I kept hearing really good things about the benefits and atmosphere,” Gibb said. “It’s a family-oriented company. One of the primary goals is to care for employees and their families. I have a wife and three kids; thus, the health insurance benefits were a huge plus. They do a lot regarding health care premiums and things like that. At the few companies I worked at before, you were pretty much paying all the premiums for the health insurance for your family. So, it was a pretty significant difference as far as the cost.”

Gibb said his favorite thing about Reitmeier is the small-company mentality. “Everybody knows

everybody. We're a close-knit team — I'm happy here. I like the people, I like the customers, and I like the atmosphere."

Reitmeier strives to promote a work-life balance by allowing employees to take time off for special events, such as children's soccer games and prenatal appointments. It also allows on-call employees to take their work vehicles to such events. Additionally, the office staff is set up to work from home, if needed. "If a child gets ill or they need to take care of something, they have the ability to work from home," Nusz said. "We find balance that way. They can take care of their kids and take care of the company, as well."

"As an employee, I was often not treated the way I wanted to be, and I think that's the most important thing — it's the fair and right thing to do," Nusz continued. "There's no other way for me. We've been working on this [employee satisfaction] since 2002, and I think we're at a point now where we've just about got it right. Business is fun again. It wasn't fun there for a while, but now we're enjoying it."

SIDEBAR: Contractor: Reitmeier HVAC Services

Owner: Jeff Nusz

Location: Tualatin, Oregon

Years in Business: 30

Bulk of Market: Commercial

Total Sales for 2013: \$5.9 million

Total Employees: 32

Total Service Technicians + Installers: 24

Average Hours Employees Spend in Training: 41 or more

Benefits Beyond Medical/Dental Insurance: Life insurance, supplemental insurance/AFLAC, 401(k) with a 3 percent company match, floating holidays, an employee perks program through partners, credit union affiliations, and a paid apprenticeship program.

Industry Association + Contractor Group Members: Associated Builders and Contractors Inc. (ABC), Associated General Contractors of America (AGC), Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA), and the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC).

THE NEWS Selected this Contractor Because: Jeff Nusz believes that his people are his product, and he endeavors to provide the best education possible, through programs like Reitmeier University.

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