

Building a Collaborative Culture

A culture that keeps learning, knowledge sharing, and communication alive is key for growth.

BY MATT BROWN



Gone are the days when companies and their employees could get by with working in silos, using information as power. We are operating in the knowledge economy. Today's successful companies arm their employees with endless learning, knowledge sharing, and two-way communication opportunities.

Without these opportunities, innovation, performance, and professional growth are stifled. But how is a culture that keeps learning, knowledge sharing, and communication alive created, especially with a remote and mobile workforce?

Lawson Products, which sells and distributes specialty products to the

industrial, commercial, institutional, and government maintenance, repair, and operations market (MRO), has grown sequentially quarter over quarter over seven quarters. One of the biggest contributors to Lawson's increased daily sales figures is the performance of its sales force, which includes

approximately 1,000 representatives spread across North America.

Increasing sales rep productivity has been a key pillar of Lawson's overall growth strategy. To be successful in our industry, sales reps need to be great problem solvers, multitaskers, and strong communicators. Working for Lawson Products is more than selling products; our sales reps help improve their customers' profitability. That requires collaboration and the ability to see subtleties in complex situations.

The use of knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing is the exchange of information or understanding between individuals and teams. Knowledge may be explicit (procedures and documents) or tacit (intuitive and experience-based). Sharing knowledge is an intentional process that bolsters individual understanding, creating or enhancing a collection of accessible knowledge for others. The concept of knowledge sharing is important because it aids individuals and organizations to be more agile and adaptable, ensuring continued growth.

Analyst estimates suggest that Fortune 500 companies lose a combined \$31.5 billion per year from employees failing to share knowledge effectively. These productivity costs are often the result of employees reinventing the wheel, wasting time trying to find specific information or expertise or repeating others' mistakes.

In an effort to grow sales by developing underserved territories, Lawson has been adding sales reps every year since 2013. New sales team members are welcomed into the Lawson culture, which offers the stability of a legacy organization combined with the energy and heart of a start-up. With the support of local sales management, new sales representatives are encouraged to leverage our extensive product line and make an impact on their customers and their own success.

Technical expertise sets us apart from our competitors; sharing our technical knowledge with customers is a value-add when selling products and building customer relationships. While

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providing our distributed sales team with “just-in-time knowledge” of hundreds of thousands of products that Lawson sells is challenging, we do see sales grow as customers recognize the value we provide compared to our competitors.

The use of Microsoft Teams

Lawson has implemented Microsoft Teams, a business instant messaging software. The uptake of this group chat tool has been amazing, allowing individual sales reps to connect with their much larger Lawson network. This means that each rep potentially has the collaborative resources of hundreds of other Lawson reps, sales managers, and subject matter experts to help answer a question or solve a customer problem. A rep can ask a question to our rep community, and in short order, he or she will get an answer from someone.

Knowledge and terminology can vary greatly between experienced and newer sales reps, and especially between reps that have different industry concentrations within their territories and different product categories. And accessing information quickly is a challenge in itself. This just-in-time knowledge sharing via Microsoft Teams is extremely important.

Our sales reps believe cross-pollinating ideas between customers is a tremendous value-add that they provide to our customers even in unrelated industries. One customer might be in food and one might be in transportation. Think about how helpful it is for the rep and how valuable it is to a maintenance mechanic to have fast access to the knowledge of 1,000 reps and the best practices from multiple industries. Sales reps are alone most of the time, so this is like having 1,000 teammates with you at all times.

Fairly new to Lawson, the use of Microsoft Teams has increased collaboration, bringing together people, conversations, and content from a variety of regions and functions. The use of this group chat software is a contributing factor to recent productivity gains.

The use of classroom and online training opportunities

Sales rep learning begins during the interview process when potential reps spend a day riding with an existing rep or district sales manager to better understand the role. Once hired, sales reps benefit from a combination of traditional in-classroom and online learning as well as in-field training with their sales manager.

Starting with new hire orientation, sales reps travel to headquarters for an extensive four days of learning and networking where they hear from leadership, get a tour of the McCook Distribution Center, see demonstrations, gain hands-on product training, participate in role-play and team building, and learn about the company culture.

In addition to onboarding, mentoring, and shadowing opportunities, Lawson sales reps participate in ongoing district workshops to learn new products and sales tools. Ongoing in-field training with local district sales managers is customized to sales reps' territory and customer needs.

Lawson Central, our company intranet, is loaded with updated and relevant content enabling our distributed sales team to pull information at any time. With the majority of content maintained by trained key content owners across the business, information ranges from company news and upcoming events to employee and sales and product resources.



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Regular webinars are available to our sales reps, both live and after the broadcast is over, and cover a wide range of topics, including selling skills, products, and sales promotions. Podcasts, also ideal for a dispersed sales team, are housed on our intranet.

The use of Lean Six Sigma

Providing members of the remote and mobile sales team the same opportunities that employees at headquarters or the warehouse have makes a world of difference when it comes to engagement. Since we adopted Lean Six Sigma methodology and tools to improve operational efficiency in all areas of the organization in 2013, more than 100 Lawson employees (24 sales employees) have participated in Lean Six Sigma problem-solving teams. When Lawson Products started offering Lean Six Sigma training and team participation, word spread fast. The opportunity to learn the methodology and better the company, while addressing professional development and experience essentials, creates healthy competition.

Lean Six Sigma is a key contributor to improving the customer experience, increasing revenue, and reducing costs at Lawson Products. Our sales representatives have served on Lean

Six Sigma teams. One example is a Six Sigma team that set out to gain a stronger understanding of what attracts sales representatives to the industry and what they need to be successful. This Six Sigma team, consisting of a cross-functional group of employees representing human resources and field sales, reduced recruiting cycle time by 56% by improving the company’s social media presence, simplifying the job application, and better defining the sales position.

The use of communication opportunities: ride alongs and town halls

Our company’s senior management team members spend one day every month on the road with salespeople, calling on customers, filling bins, and experiencing life as a sales rep. This one-on-one time with sales team members allows senior management to build relationships with those employees who have the most “face-to-face” contact with customers. By observing, listening, and rolling up their sleeves together, senior management and reps can talk about what’s working well and what still could be improved in sales, service, and customer outreach. The opportunity to share their expertise

and perspective with senior management helps ensure that sales reps feel heard and valued. Learnings from the ride alongs are brought back and shared with the rest of leadership/management so they can make better, more informed decisions.

We continue to hold quarterly town hall meetings—in person for our corporate team and via conference call for our sales team. Because our sales force doesn’t get as much face time with the corporate team, we devote at least 20 minutes of every sales town-hall conference call to live Q&A.

Named to the “50 Best Companies to Sell For” by *Selling Power*, Lawson Products earns success by empowering employees through knowledge sharing and professional growth. Key to Lawson’s growth, we will continue to hire and train sales reps across North America. Equally important, we will continue to evolve our learning, knowledge sharing, and communication programs to ensure a collaborative culture, one that is always at the ready with the technical expertise that drives customer relationships. [AQ](#)

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