

Effects of Collegial Culture on Teamwork

Insomnia Cookies

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INTRODUCTION

Insomnia Cookies is a nationwide bakery chain focused on the late night serving and delivery of cookies to college students. Insomnia relies on a strong collegial culture and strategic team design throughout the company to build a supportive, close-knit environment. Using external research from websites such as Glassdoor and Indeed, as well as interviews from two in-store employees themselves, we will dive deeper into both of these topics and how they relate to one another. The first topic, Insomnia's company culture, is centered around the specific artifacts of Insomnia Cookies that contribute to its collegial atmosphere. Our group thought culture should be a key part of our research mostly because Insomnia was founded with the idea of college students at the forefront of their business model. This college oriented culture has tremendous effects on the company's mission and values, physical locations, and the demographic of its employees. Next, our paper will go more in depth with the internal team design of Insomnia Cookies, how their culture affects this, and the implications of homogeneous groups and flat structures on the work environment as a whole.

When considering the topics that we chose to analyze, it is also very important to note the general background of Insomnia Cookies. The idea for the cookie chain was born in 2003 inside the dorm room of Seth Berkowitz- a college student at the University of Pennsylvania. After graduating and briefly experimenting with a delivery-only business model, Berkowitz opened the first physical Insomnia Cookies location in New York near the campus of Syracuse University. Since then, more than 250 locations have been added across the country, with the vast majority still being conveniently located on or near college campuses. In fact, the mission statement for Insomnia Cookies remains: "provide dependable, late night food delivery to college students¹." With that being said, it's clear that Insomnia adopted a collegial atmosphere from the very

¹ "Insomnia Cookies - Case Study." Professional Leadership Institute, April 11, 2022.

beginning and has evidently strived to maintain this. Even as competitors such as Red-Eye Cookie and Midnight Munchies have begun to arise, Insomnia Cookies has dominated the rapidly growing late night treat industry. In fact, they currently boast nearly four times the amount of locations as the second largest chain, Tiff's Treats. The sustained dominance of Insomnia Cookies can be primarily attributed to their collegial culture that stays true to their roots and results in relatively simple team design, as well as a supportive, close-knit work environment overall.

MO TOPIC 1: CULTURE

Through the analysis of observed artifacts within Insomnia's organizational culture, we concluded that there is a collegial culture that inherently results in a supportive, close-knit workplace environment.

First, there is a widespread story and legend about the company's founder, Seth Berkowitz, whose mission when founding this company was to cater towards and support college insomniacs. The story is relatable, as it stresses a common strife of college students: long study sessions and late night hunger. Berkowitz strove to combat these everyday struggles by starting Insomnia Cookies, a snack shop open late at night; by a college student, for college students. The website writes, "...not only was a company launched, but an entire category too, redefining the late-night, delivery-focused, food-service industry as we know it²." With this mission in mind, Berkowitz positioned the company to constantly support college students, and as the company grew, his objectives for the company persisted. Insomnia locations were strategically placed on or near college campuses, thereby increasing business and continuing to uphold the original

² "Insomnia Cookies." Warm Cookies Delivered Until 3 AM Daily.

mission. CNBC contributor, deal maker, and entrepreneur, Carol Roth, writes, “If you can get traction on a college campus, you have access to thousands of somewhat captive customers that are easier to reach because they are confined to certain geography and connection points...”³ The business model of remaining on or near college campuses creates a captive college student audience on both the customer and employee end. “That’s actually how I got the job,” says one store employee in an interview at the Commonwealth Avenue location, “My friend who’s a year older than me worked here and recommended it. And I make a lot of friends here because they’re also either college students or they’re around the same age as I am⁴.” In a Mashed article titled “Workers Reveal What It's Really Like To Work At Insomnia Cookies,” Crysta Corburn writes about the experiences of other positions at Insomnia, stating “A delivery driver called their position ‘great for college students ...,’ adding, ‘Scheduling is usually very accommodating, and if anything comes up, it's usually pretty easy to get someone to cover a shift⁵.’” Another interview with a shift-lead at the Commonwealth Avenue location confirms this, but also adds a slight refutation, stating that, “As a student, I’ve been lucky enough to get manageable shifts. [Insomnia] has been very amenable to a lot of things that I have asked for, however, some people have to do graveyard, closing shifts, so I can imagine how that’d be difficult⁶.”

Through our research consisting of interviews, and analysis of news articles and Glassdoor reviews, we were able to establish a conclusion that Insomnia Cookies maintains a collegial culture. Berkowitz’s mission to revolve around the college student experience results in cultural effects that trickle down from the company values, to the physical structures, and to the store-level employees. We see these aspects come into play in a few artifacts: the story of the

³ Drew Casey, Special to CNBC.com. “Insomnia Cookies Caters to Late-Night Munchies.”

⁴ Sullivan, James. Interview with Shift Leader at Insomnia Cookies.

⁵ Coburn, Crysta. “Workers Reveal What It's Really Like to Work at Insomnia Cookies.” Mashed. Mashed, March 21, 2022.

⁶ Lee, Katelyn. Interview with Cookie Crew Member at Insomnia Cookies.

company's creation, the locations on or near college campuses, and its attraction of college student employees. Through further breakdown, we were able to ascertain that these factors of Insomnia's collegial culture create a close-knit, supportive work environment.

The mission of Insomnia has been made abundantly clear to its employees and customers, as the story of the company's creation is plastered on the walls inside various store locations and broadcasted across the company's website. We see this result in close-knit, supportive work environments, as the company's mission values boil down to the method in which the store is run. The main idea that Insomnia was established to support the average college student affects both the customer perspective, as we see through the late night hours and accessibility, but also the employee experience. An effective instance of the company's values trickling down to a "family" oriented culture is Insomnia's "Campus Rep" program, where college students can "Join the Insomnia Family as a Campus Marketing Rep" by "seek[ing] fun and relatable partnerships for Insomnia Cookies to contribute to on campus⁷."

The physical store locations on or near college campuses also contribute to a feeling of "family," as one store-level employee put it⁸. The close proximity of these locations to campus makes it so that the average employee and customer will likely attend that university or college. From an employee perspective, this collegial culture creates a close-knit workplace environment, since the student network is progressively connecting more. For instance, one interviewee says, "I constantly see people in my classes, which is nice because I get to talk to them outside of an academic setting and get to know them better⁹."

Finally, the heavy college student employee rate helps facilitate this close-knit, supportive workplace environment, as the employees are able to empathize and understand each

⁷ "Campus Rep Employment." Insomnia Cookies | CAMPUS REP EMPLOYMENT.

⁸ Sullivan, James. Interview with Shift Leader at Insomnia Cookies.

⁹ Lee, Katelyn. Interview with Cookie Crew Member at Insomnia Cookies.

other. In an interview with a shift-lead at the Commonwealth Avenue location, the interviewee explains, “It’s a very family-like environment here, very family-esque...overall, just very nice people your age, people who get you and understand your experience as a student *and* store employee¹⁰.” The ability to relate to one’s co-workers and experience the same struggles and benefits produces a workspace that is generally more inclusive and safe.

Comprehensively, Insomnia maintains a close-knit and supportive work environment which is constructed due to its collegial culture. While this results in a feeling of family at college campuses and at Insomnia as seen through the Campus Rep program, opportunities to network and meet more peers due to Insomnia’s physical on-campus presence, and a relatable and trusting environment of majority college students, there is also a prevalent risk of abundant homogeneous thinking, which could hinder innovative thinking.

MO TOPIC 2: TEAM DESIGN

According to the company’s founder, Berkowitz, “building a strong team from the start is one of the most important ways to transition from a college startup to a successful, growing business¹¹. You need to surround yourself with great people and let go of the reins to let people come in and help you”. This key message portrays itself through Insomnia Cookies’ hiring practices. They formed a collegial environment in the workplace by hiring mainly college students and targeting the same demographic in terms of customers. When building up in store teams, Insomnia Cookies does not have harsh and selective requirements in their hiring process. According to our interview, a high school diploma is not a considered factor, as no previous

¹⁰ Sullivan, James. Interview with Shift Leader at Insomnia Cookies.

¹¹ “Insomnia Cookies - Case Study.” Professional Leadership Institute, April 11, 2022.

experience is required for most positions, and only one year of relevant experience is required for leadership positions such as shift leaders and store managers. Therefore, most ideal candidates are college students and graduates who have had little experience in customer service or supervisory roles within restaurants or retail stores, which leads to the creation of homogenous teams, since members are typically of the same age group.

Additionally, Insomnia Cookies also hires campus marketing representatives, mainly because most sales in this niche industry are made by word of mouth. For this job specifically, it involves promoting the on-campus location by partnering with student organizations and events, often giving out free cookies for the duration of their shifts.

Designing a homogenous team is beneficial to guarantee employees can maintain higher satisfaction rates. Working with people of the same age means employees can find like-minded people with similar backgrounds. As one store-level employee on BU campus put it, “I meet a bunch of BU people here all day and a couple of my friends I’ve met through here. There is a close connection between my team members and I really enjoy baking cookies with them while listening to Hip-Hop¹².” More importantly, employee satisfaction is significant for the service-oriented bakery industry where employees directly interact with customers because highly satisfied employees lead to higher satisfied customers. According to a Forbes article, “Employees are the driving factor behind customer satisfaction. Employee interactions set the tone for a positive or negative customer experience. Over the course of time, this can have serious repercussions for a business¹³.” In an article from Snap Surveys, Susan E. DeFranzo explains “Satisfied employees are likely to assist customers with a more pleasant demeanor and a

¹² Sullivan, James. Interview with Shift Leader at Insomnia Cookies.

¹³ Prossack, Ashira. “How Employee Satisfaction Affects Customer Satisfaction.” Forbes. Forbes Magazine, October 12, 2022.

higher level of customer service. This creates a more satisfying customer experience, increases customer loyalty, and ultimately drives increased profitability¹⁴.”

As we have learned in class, a homogeneous team tends to perform better on simple tasks. Within the scope of baking cookies and serving customers, a homogeneous team with members of similar ages and backgrounds may function well. On the other hand, there is a clear downside to homogeneous groups in the workplace, as they tend to be lacking in effective leadership involving tasks and responsibilities, which causes process losses through a lack of productivity. In the case of our research, it seems that employees who were delivery drivers, whose tasks included only delivery and folding boxes, had a lot of down time when there was a lack of online orders; however, the employees working inside the store were overworked frequently, often with no breaks. According to one previous employee, “if there are enough boxes and there are no deliveries, you get to sit down and be bored¹⁵”. Ineffective leadership leads to improper task delegation, which leads to process loss. This workplace is not functioning to the best of its ability, and it is due to the casual environment formed by homogenous groups. In other words, the employees lack the necessary conflict that comes from team diversity in order to innovate and overcome difficulties in the workplace.

According to several online posts from prior employees, many have said that it is “the ideal place for college students” as most of the employees tend to be college students, as well as an implication of a “very casual environment”¹⁶. Coworkers are often very friendly with each other, and even the management as well. In this case, promotions in the workplace do not necessarily support a strict hierarchy, meaning there is a flat structure in place on the store-level.

¹⁴ DeFranzo, Written by Susan E. “Satisfied Employees Leads to Satisfied Customers.” Snap Surveys Blog, June 14, 2022.

¹⁵ Working at Insomnia Cookies: Company Overview and Reviews.” Find Jobs and Careers - SimplyHired.com Job Search.

¹⁶ “Insomnia Cookies Careers and Employment | Indeed.com.”

Because there is a flat structure, it is ideal for communication. New employees will most likely need less training, provided they fit the criteria for the homogenous group of college age students that sets the standard for hiring.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this project it has been full of trial and error. We began this project by trying to get interviews or any kind of response from members of the Insomnia Cookies' team via email or phone call but that did not work. We originally thought that going in person would be a hassle for the workers at Insomnia and that the individuals would be uncomfortable, but we were wrong. These interviews were primary drivers for our research since we had been able to acquire first hand information from the employee's themselves. Thanks to the information from these interviews we were able to synthesize the information given to us in our interviews with the information we were able to acquire from our online resources. The seemingly very fun place to work at, Insomnia Cookies, can be a relaxed work environment but from a business standpoint the homogenous work teams and the rooted late night collegial atmosphere make for a company that has huge process losses. The most important thing that can be taken away from the overall process of this project through the semester is that, when it comes to company culture, what is below the iceberg that the mass population is not able to see often has some of the greatest influence in the functions of a company. Insomnia Cookies is a seemingly enjoyable place to work because the jobs of employees are simple where homogenous teams can be somewhat effective, but leads to huge process losses. Also, these teams with lack of diversity makes it difficult for team members to manage complex workplace situations effectively.

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