

The Right Habitat for Success

Teamwork- and incentive-based programs help Companion Habitats Inc. ensure high product quality and staff morale.

BY MARK KALAYGIAN

When looking at the Companion Habitats Inc. from the outside, it's easy to see the progressive approach that the company takes with its products.

Since its inception, Companion Habitats has been innovating the way that retailers display small animal pets by offering a variety of aesthetic and functional options—not to mention superior quality—in the modular environments that it supplies to pet shops. Take a look at Companion Habitats from the inside, however, and the picture becomes even more impressive. You see, the company takes a progressive approach not just in the design of its products, but also in the way it manages its staff.

"Just like any other manufacturing company, we are faced with turnover and quality assurance issues," explains Nancy Reed, strategic planning and marketing manager for Companion Habitats. "So, several years ago, we initiated self-directed work teams."

Reed is quick to point out that self-directed work teams are not really a new idea, and that manufacturers from all different industries have been using this model for some time. It seems that Companion Habitats' execution of the concept, however, has been a standout success.

"It works very well because it incentivizes the employees and lets them take part in the success of the company,"

Reed says. "Thus, turnover is lower, and quality is much better. Retraining always loses valuable time for a company, and not only does it impact quality, it also hurts productivity."

In the Companion Habitats' self-directed work team program, which includes all of the company's hourly employees involved in production and material management activities, teams are established throughout the production process (e.g., Team Electrical, Team Glass, etc.). The leader of each team—a role that team members take turns filling—represents his/her group at a daily team-leader meeting to discuss the company's goals and whether or not they were met.

"If they reach that day's goals, a daily incentive is paid to the employees," Reed explains, going on to note that every team must reach its goal before any incentives are awarded. "That works well because everybody wants to pull together to meet those team goals and get the incentives."

According to Reed, Companion Habitats' self-directed work team program has not only kept turnover rates down, it has also reduced overtime costs. At the same time, the incentive feature enables employees to earn more than they would in a comparable position with another company.

In addition to its daily team-leader meetings, Companion Habitats also holds a weekly "roundup" meeting during which the company's general manager, Robert Lowe, and other managers speak to the entire staff about a variety of subjects.

WORK HARD, PLAY HARD

Another wrinkle to Companion Habitats' progressive approach as an employer is its focus on providing its employees with quality 'down time.'

"The owners of the company [Kevin and Ann Kvols] really think it's important to balance life with work, so we have a four-day work week here. This creates an atmosphere where it is clear that family is important, and it's certainly a benefit that we all enjoy."

Although the Companion Habitats employees only work four days a week (Monday through Thursday), the company loses nothing in terms of man-

hours because the workday is extended to ten hours. It's a win-win situation; each week, the employees get a three-day weekend, and the company gets 40 hours of work out of each member of a very happy staff.

Companion goes even further with its 'work hard, play hard' attitude by maintaining a "fun team." This group, which includes employees from various departments, plans fun events almost every month.

"These events are a great way to bring us all together. We've become a pretty close-knit group," says Reed. **PB**



Nancy Reed

