

“PFL makes a substantial investment in training its employees, who all go through an eight-week training program. For this reason, and many others, employee retention is critical. Quality, licensed, onsite early care and education has, without any doubt, contributed to employee retention.” Suzie Lalich, PFL Director of Employee Success

Summary

Sparked by an employee’s need for childcare for her infant, PrintingForLess.com (PFL), headquartered in Livingston, Mont., opened its Learning Center in 2002. The licensed center is exclusive to parents of PFL and provides care for 30 children, infant to 5-years old. From the beginning, employees unanimously led the charge to start the center, and the company subsidizes its operations. The Learning Center has improved employee retention, especially among mothers, and has helped attract new employees. PFL leadership is also contributing to a community initiative to provide more quality care throughout the community, which is in dire need of childcare.

Key Takeaways

PFL is a model of what a small- to mid-sized company can do to alleviate its employees’ need for childcare, and the creation of the Learning Center has improved employee retention, especially among women, and helped attract new employees.

Employee buy-in was key to the Learning Center’s success. Without the commitment of employees, the Learning Center may not have happened, nor would it have been the quality provider that it is.

The need for early childhood care and education in Livingston is dire. PFL is taking a leadership role in community conversations to address the issue, which will benefit all the young children in the community, not just those served by the Learning Center.

PrintingForLess.com

PFL is a Montana company located in Livingston, Mont., that provides a wide range of printing services for companies large and small across the United States. Products range from basic business cards and letterhead to specialty items such as labels, vinyl banners, and magnets. It also offers design, marketing support, and bulk mailing.

PFL was started in 1996 in Livingston, Mont., under the name of Express Color Printing. Amid the .com boom, the company transitioned to an e-commerce business model, effectively making a leap from a local market to a national market. In 1999, it was renamed PrintingForLess.com. The company was among the first, if not the first, online print shops in the U.S. and certainly the first in Montana. From its beginnings, PFL has been committed to staying on the leading edge of e-commerce and online business trends. The company saw steady growth with a major expansion in the early 2000s and the opening a new 45,000 square-foot facility in 2006.

In addition to the facility in Livingston, which employs about 300 people, PFL maintains offices of about 50 employees in Bozeman and Indianapolis.

The Learning Center

The PFL Learning Center is located on-site in a dedicated space designed for early childhood care and learning. It was constructed when the new PFL facility was built in 2006. The space includes four classrooms, a kitchen, office, and play-yard as well as well as a separate entrance.

The Learning Center is licensed by the State of Montana and provides care for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers through age 5. Enrollment is capped at 30, and the Learning Center maintains a waiting list of about 15 families. The center is subsidized by the company and parents pay \$3.50 per hour per child. It serves only the children of PFL employees.

The Learning Center is staffed by a full-time director and five early childhood educators; some work full-time and others part-time. Due to a shortage of qualified early childhood educators statewide, attracting and maintaining staff has been an ongoing challenge. However, the Learning Center has a hiring and retention advantage because employees receive competitive wages and the same benefits package offered to all PFL employees, including health insurance, paid vacation and sick leave, regular raises, and retirement benefits.

The Learning Center's earliest beginnings started with Marne Reed, PFL's Director of Human Resources. She could not find quality, affordable care for her infant, so she brought the 3-week-old baby to work with her. While the arrangement certainly grabbed the attention of PFL leadership, they were well aware of a shortage of childcare in Livingston. Several female employees did not return after maternity leave due to the inability to find quality, affordable childcare. With a younger, family-minded workforce, that trend appeared likely to continue.

At Reed's urging, PFL CEO Andrew Field polled all the employees in the company and asked them if they would be in favor of childcare provided through the company. The response was unanimous. Every employee responded with an emphatic, "Yes!"

From the start, PFL leadership brought employees into the planning process. Initial discussions included the possibility of contracting with an existing provider or center to provide childcare. However, the group quickly shifted to an in-house model, primarily to meet PFL employees' high expectations for quality of care. The group also considered just offering childcare but shifted to one that focused on early child development, including preschool curriculum.

Employees took the lead in researching licensing requirements, startup funding, tax credits and best practices. Initially, Montana state requirements for licensure were a challenge, but it was one PFL and its employees gladly accepted because they wanted their program to meet the highest standards of quality. This unrelenting attention to quality earned parents' trust and bolstered employee pride in the program and in the company overall.

The Learning Center opened in 2002 in a nearby house, rented by the company. Employee support continued; they pitched in to furnish and supply the center with purchases from garage sales and thrift stores. It moved into the company's current facility when the facility was built in 2006.

It's important to note that in 2002, when the Learning Center opened, PFL employed about 75 people, far fewer than it employs today. This likely helped with employee buy-in and demonstrated the viability of a subsidized, in-house childcare center for small- and mid-sized companies.

PFL makes a substantial investment in training its employees, who all go through an eight-week training program. For this reason, and many others, employee retention is critical. Quality, licensed, onsite early care and education has, without any doubt, contributed to employee retention. The Learning Center reversed the trend of losing employees due to a lack of childcare, and more women are returning to work after having a child than before.

PFL leadership also recognized the importance of quality childcare as part of its initiative to develop a diverse staff and support women in their pursuit of leadership roles. While it may have been a mother who floated the concept, it was supported by the entire staff, which included many men who recognized the Learning Center's value.

As the number of staff at PFL has increased, demand for childcare continues to grow. There is strong interest in expanding the Learning Center, but the physical limitations of the current facility do not allow it at this time. Renovating the previous PFL facility, which is still owned by the company, has been discussed. However, given the strict building requirements for a licensed childcare facility, it's cost prohibitive. For now, PFL leadership is committed to supporting community-based solutions to the shortage of quality childcare. They have consulted with numerous Livingston-based businesses and organizations to support efforts to implement childcare options for their employees.

Need for childcare in the community

Livingston is in Park County and sits alongside the Yellowstone River. The small community is home to an estimated 7,500 people. The closest large city is Bozeman, about 25 miles and a mountain pass away. In many ways, Livingston can be considered a bedroom community for Bozeman. However, unlike most bedroom communities, which are more affordable compared to nearby cities, the cost of living and availability of affordable housing in Livingston is almost equal to that of Bozeman.

In 2018, it was estimated that there were about 1,000 children age 0-6 years living in Park County, and based on labor estimates, 42 percent or about 420 of them needed childcare. Yet there are only seven licensed providers in Livingston.

One center, Montessori Island School, which serves 95 children age 12-weeks to 5-years, has a waiting list of more than 100 families. Another provider that serves 28 children, Front Street School, has had so many requests that they report no foreseeable openings. Due to a shortage of qualified staff, the center recently cut back its operating hours.

Other communities in Park County (population approx. 16,300) such as Clyde Park, Wilsall, Emigrant, Gardiner and Cooke City, have no licensed childcare facilities. All the licensed care in Park County is in Livingston.

There have been many community conversations about childcare, and PFL has been in contact with various groups who recognize the need and are seeking solutions. Businesses and organizations are looking to PFL as a model.

Conclusion

PFL is a valuable example of what a business or organization can do to meet the needs of its employees. Providing subsidized early care and education has improved employee retention, and the Learning Center is a valuable asset in attracting employees as well. Similarly, the wages and benefits offered to employees of the Learning Center have helped to attract and retain the best early childhood care providers and educators amid a tight market for those workers.

One of the primary keys to the success of PFL's Learning Center was employee buy-in. From the beginning, all 75 employees backed the initiative and provided support for the project from startup research to furnishing and stocking the Learning Center. Throughout the process, the company was transparent in communicating its modest budget for the Learning Center startup and operations. The process resulted in an unwavering commitment to quality.

Not all PFL employees with young children are served through the Learning Center, and childcare is in short supply across all of Park County. PFL is active in community initiatives to provide more quality care for Livingston's youngest population. PFL's efforts in early care and education seem to be paying off, both for the company and the community.

PrintingForLess.com (PFL) is the nation's first e-commerce commercial printer. Since 1996, PFL has helped over 220,000 customers, from entrepreneurs to the Fortune 500, implement high-impact print marketing strategies. PFL provides unmatched value, made possible by the company's high volume and state-of-the-art manufacturing operations, all done with the service that customers would expect from a small, local print shop. "Our whole gig," says CEO, Andrew Field, "is being easy to do business with."

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