Engaging Hourly Employees in Sustainability and Community Service Increases Job Satisfaction

Promising Strategies and Lessons Learned from International Paper Pilot Project

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Engaged employees lead to better business outcomes. Employee engagement programs focusing on the environment and sustainability have demonstrated the potential impact on company savings through reduction of environmental costs (energy, water, waste, etc.) and costs related to employee recruitment and retention, as well as community impact through employee volunteerism and pro-bono activities. Recent research by the National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF) shows a positive relationship between salaried employee engagement in sustainability and employee engagement as traditionally defined by human resources.¹

There are 80.4 million hourly employees in the US, making up 58.3% of the workforce.² While many corporate sustainability programs focus on educating and engaging salaried employees, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) notes that engaging hourly employees is just as important when it comes to job satisfaction and retention, as well as customer experience with the company. Creating a culture where hourly employees understand how their work contributes to the success of the company and feel that their contributions are recognized and rewarded can foster loyalty and more positive working relationships.³

With this in mind, International Paper and NEEF partnered to design and pilot hourly employee engagement strategies with the goal of building a model for sustainability and community engagement in International Paper’s US manufacturing operations. This paper shares promising strategies, lessons learned, and recommendations that may benefit other companies looking to engage their hourly workforce in sustainability and community-focused initiatives.
Engaging Hourly Employees in Sustainability and Environmental Education

From October 2018 to December 2019, International Paper and NEEF collaborated on a research project designed to gain understanding of hourly employee experiences, community interests, and local environmental issues to inform the development of employee engagement strategies inclusive of International Paper’s hourly workforce. The project included data collection from hourly employees at four International Paper pilot sites selected based on multiple criteria, including geographic location, business type, and facility size (two paper mills, one box plant, and one recycling collection center).

International Paper and NEEF designed and implemented sustainability and/or community  

engagement activities at each pilot site, using surveys, in-person site visits, and interviews to identify successes, challenges, and lessons learned.

The Design Thinking approach (Figure 1) was a key component of the project design. Design Thinking is a repeatable process that focuses on human values and applies creativity to help identify meaningful problems and generate innovative solutions. The foundation of Design Thinking is to empathize with end users in order to build the best solution for their situation. It was important to fully understand the interests, challenges, and working environments of International Paper’s hourly workforce when designing sustainability and community engagement activities.
The Design Thinking process for this project was implemented as follows.

**Empathize:** The project team (representatives from International Paper corporate, the local site, and NEEF) surveyed, interviewed, and observed hourly employees at each pilot site. Data was collected through a written pre-survey that asked employees to rate sustainability and social impact topics by importance, based on International Paper’s *Investing in People and Improving Our Planet* commitments. Pre-survey responses formed the basis for in-person site visits, during which employees were interviewed in a variety of locations inside the facilities—including break rooms, control rooms, and other work sites.

**Research questions included:**

- What incentives are in place, or need to be in place, to engage hourly employees in supporting corporate sustainability and community engagement goals?
- What benefits—contests, bonuses, recognition programs, time off to volunteer, etc.—are available to hourly employees? Which benefits are most compelling to hourly employees?
- What unique considerations exist for hourly employees that need to be integrated into a tailored employee engagement program?
The remaining steps of the Design Thinking process also took place during site visits.

**Define:** The project team debriefed on user input (pre-surveys and interviews) to further define the interests and needs of hourly employees.

**Ideate:** The project team brainstormed engagement opportunities that aligned with employees’ interests and met their needs.

**Prototype:** The project team designed sustainability and community-focused events and/or educational activities for employees.

**Test and Iterate:** The project team shared prototypes with hourly employees to gather additional feedback. Employees participated in a focused prioritization exercise in which they voted for ideas that were most important to them.
Based on employee feedback, plans for sustainability and community engagement activities were refined, revised, and later implemented at each site (Table 1). Activities were followed with a post-survey that sought to understand employees’ experience with the activity and asked questions about more traditional aspects of employee engagement measured by human resources (HR). The survey instrument was developed through a previous NEEF research project to examine the relationship between sustainability engagement and standard measures of employee engagement, including understanding how their job contributes to the success of the company, pride in the company, and intent to stay at the company. vi

Table 1. Snapshot of priority topics and hourly employee engagement activities by site.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Priority Topic</th>
<th>Employee Engagement Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eugene-Springfield Recycling Collection Center</td>
<td>Springfield, OR</td>
<td>Protecting streams and water bodies</td>
<td>Educational and volunteer event with local watershed council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensacola Mill</td>
<td>Cantonment, FL</td>
<td>Protecting streams and water bodies</td>
<td>Education about wetlands provided during mill-wide meetings and in break rooms; take-away materials for employees and their families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richland (Jackson) Box Plant</td>
<td>Richland, MS</td>
<td>Education and literacy in IP communities</td>
<td>School supply drive for a local elementary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Springfield Mill</td>
<td>Springfield, OR</td>
<td>Protecting streams and water bodies</td>
<td>Volunteer event with local watershed council</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

i https://www.neefusa.org/resource/winning-marketplace-and-workplace
iv The Design Thinking process was introduced to International Paper by the University of Memphis FedEx Institute of Technology “Memphis Innovation Bootcamp.
v http://www.internationalpaper.com/company/about-international-paper
**Insights**

**Employee Interests**

Through the Design Thinking Process, pre- and post-surveys, and interviews at each pilot site, International Paper and NEEF identified several insights and trends that can inform other hourly employee engagement efforts.

- **Employee Priorities:** During in-person site visits, employees’ priorities and interests were generally consistent with their pre-survey responses. At one site, however, a new priority topic emerged during conversations with employees, underscoring the value of the Design Thinking process. Without in-person discussions, the project team would not have known the topic was important to employees.

- **Influence of Place and Current Events:** The influence of geography, culture, and current events was clear across pilot sites. Employees at all sites were committed to presenting a positive company image in their communities. Employee interviews illuminated community issues and personal experiences that strongly influenced site priorities.

- **Urban-Rural Divide:** The top priorities of each pilot site pointed to potential differences in urban and rural areas. Mills, which are removed from urban centers, focused more on environmental topics. The Box Plant, located in an urban area, focused more on social topics.

**Activity Design**

Post-surveys indicated that 82% of hourly employees across International Paper pilot sites agreed or strongly agreed that the sustainability and/or community-focused activity they participated in enhanced their job satisfaction and overall feelings about the company. The project team took several factors into account when designing activities. The differences in activities selected and implemented at each site helped to identify successful strategies and challenges in engaging hourly employees.

- **Hands-on versus Educational Activities:** Post-survey results indicated that employees who participated in hands-on activities (volunteering, school supply drive) were more engaged overall when looking at HR engagement measures, as compared to employees who participated in educational activities.
• **On-site versus Off-site Activities:** On-site activities (school supply drive, wetlands education) had higher participation rates than off-site activities. This aligns with employee feedback that they wanted activities to take place during paid work hours, which was more likely to happen with on-site activities. It also reflects the challenge of shift work and employees’ reluctance to commit to activities outside of their work hours.

• **Timing:** Managing shift schedules is challenging for hourly employees and facility management alike. With multiple shifts and little flexibility in the work schedules of hourly employees, finding appropriate times to schedule activities was difficult. At some sites, employees work 12-hour shifts. Even with multiple days off, they expressed that they prioritized time with family and were frequently in catch-up mode while not working, which impacted their willingness to participate in activities on their own time.

• **Funding and Incentives:** Funding was provided to each pilot site to support activities and incentives, and each site had flexibility in deciding how to apply funds. Incentives for employees varied across sites and included prizes for participation, social events, and International Paper t-shirts. While prizes drove participation in activities, they did not translate to high satisfaction or engagement. Post-event surveys and interviews indicated that having a voice in the direction of the activity, feeling pride in the community, and presenting a positive image for the company were perhaps the strongest drivers of hourly employee engagement.
Recommendations

The International Paper pilot project made clear that individual facilities need both guidance and flexibility to implement sustainability and community engagement activities that fit the needs of their employees. Because capacity to design and implement activities varied across facilities, International Paper and NEEF recommend two complementary employee engagement strategies:

- **Create turnkey programs** that provide individual facilities with packaged resources to inform and educate employees about company sustainability and community engagement initiatives.

- **Create local, customizable programs** that allow individual facilities to take a lead role in designing educational and hands-on activities, and implement these projects on-site or within local communities.

In both cases, hourly employees should be part of the process, helping to identify topics of interest and design educational resources and activities.

To support facilities in implementing successful employee engagement activities, International Paper and NEEF also recommend the following:

- Include HR representatives in the planning of hourly employee engagement strategies to generate buy-in and strengthen the connection between sustainability engagement and HR employee engagement goals.

- Allow facilities to implement projects during paid time for all employees, both hourly and salaried. This ensures equity and may help drive participation, especially among hourly employees.

- Provide flexible financial support to individual facilities for project start-up, allowing sites to choose how to apply funds towards activity-related expenses, donations, or incentives.

**Hourly employees** can play a critical role in achieving sustainability goals for their employers while positively impacting the communities where they work and live. The International Paper pilot effort provides an example of how companies that give hourly employees a voice and develop sustainability and community engagement activities inclusive of the hourly workforce can increase job satisfaction and retention within this group.
International Paper is a leading global producer of renewable fiber-based packaging, pulp, and paper products with net sales for 2018 of $23 billion and manufacturing operations in North America, Latin America, Europe, North Africa and Russia. The company produces corrugated packaging products that protect and promote goods and enable world-wide commerce; pulp for diapers, tissue and other personal hygiene products that promote health and wellness; and papers that facilitate education and communication. The company is headquartered in Memphis, Tennessee, employs more than 50,000 colleagues, and serves more than 25,000 customers in 150 countries.

International Paper’s mission is to improve people’s lives, the planet, and the company’s performance by transforming renewable resources into products people depend on every day. The IP Way Forward is the company’s strategic framework for creating value for all stakeholders for generations to come and reflects the company’s core values of safety, ethics, and stewardship.

International Paper leads the world in responsible forest stewardship to promote healthy and productive forest ecosystems for generations to come. The company and the International Paper foundation make sustainable investments to protect and improve the lives of employees and to mobilize people, products, and resources to address critical needs in the communities where employees live and work. Donations support projects or programs focused on the signature causes of education, hunger, health and wellness, and disaster relief, along with environmental issues.

The National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF) is the nation’s leading organization in lifelong environmental learning, connecting people to knowledge they use to improve the quality of their lives and the health of the planet. Congressionally chartered in 1990 as a 501c3 nonprofit to complement the work of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), NEEF is a non-partisan, non-advocacy organization working to make the environment more accessible, relatable, relevant, and connected to people’s daily lives.

NEEF’s most recent report, Winning in the Marketplace and the Workplace: Activating the Workplace by Engaging Employees in Sustainability (2017), found that nearly 90% of salaried employees engaged in their company’s sustainability work say it enhances their job satisfaction and overall feelings about the company.