



## Eight Secrets to a Scalable, Growth-Driven Culture

Every organization is shaped and defined by its own culture—a culture that flows down from the company’s founder, permeates through the leadership team, and seeps into the rest of the organization—whether good or bad. Organizational cultures are like fingerprints: no two are the same. While Information Experts has grown from a \$34,000, home-based business into an organization on a 3-year track to reach \$100 million, the focus has consistently remained on the values and culture of the company. Experience has taught me that if the leadership holds true to these two components: culture and values, the employee base, customer base, and top and bottom line results will remain strong and healthy. Only after leadership shifts its focus or intention from the values and culture does the decline appear in other areas.

I’ve identified eight cultural strategies that have stayed consistent over the last 16 years—no matter what. These include:

### 1 **Commitment to a Non-Toxic Environment.**

Work is stressful enough without adding unnecessary toxic behaviors. We terminate customers for being abusive to employees, we turn down business opportunities from potentially abusive partners, and we purge employees for being abusive to other employees (although our experience has taught us that this behavior is often masking a larger issue). Respect for one another is a non-negotiable requirement inside Information Experts. In addition, an attitude of gratitude is reinforced by much public appreciation, with heavy doses of “Please” and “Thank-You” all around.

### 2 **Commitment to Fun.**

Life is too short to not infuse fun along the way—even in your work day. A few years ago, we instituted a Good Times Committee (GTC) to plan special, “time for a fun break” events. Nothing builds teamwork like a competitive scavenger hunt that takes teams throughout their community and culminates at a local restaurant. Budgeting for fun—literally inserting a line item for fun in your company’s yearly budget—tells your employees you are committed to not taking life too seriously, even in the midst of high pressure deadlines. High-volume fun doesn’t necessarily equate to high costs. One of our favorite traditions at Information Experts is the annual Thanksgiving potluck luncheon. Everyone contributes, and the GTC is responsible for selecting a movie that is shown in the conference room throughout the afternoon. Other events include BBQs, baby showers (I’ve traditionally read *Goodnight Moon* to my employees), mid-day movie field trips, customer field trips (we toured Wegmans!), paintball, flag football, and laser tag.

### 3 **Safety Outside of the Comfort Zone.**

A cog-in-the-wheel who embraces the status quo doesn’t thrive at Information Experts. We encourage our employees to say, “Wouldn’t it be cool if....” One of the



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most rewarding aspects of business ownership is watching employees stretch to a place of discomfort, explore new tasks, and then grab the opportunity to follow a new interest.

### **4 Employee Input for Ideas, Improvements, and Direction.**

I often feel and express that I am one of the least intelligent people in my firm. My employees are in their positions because of their intellect, creativity, innovation, and technical expertise. I heavily depend on them for ideas on how to build the best business possible. As the visionary, I rely on others to keep me grounded. When I have ideas, my employees are the first to provide honest feedback—how viable the idea is, how it aligns with our brand, and how it impacts our existing work or strategy. We approach all ideas with an open mind. There is no place for arrogance, filters, and blinders in effective leadership.

### **5 Join for One Position; Stay for Another.**

It's been incredibly rewarding to watch so many employees join Information Experts in one position and then evolve and migrate to another position, the by-product of the freedom we give our employees to explore and follow their passions. This aligns with the practice of ensuring that we have the right people on the bus and further, that we have the right people in the right seats on the bus.

### **6 Continuous Learning.**

There are so many learning opportunities for every discipline these days. Our employees attend conferences, luncheons, and webinars on just about every topic relevant to our business. We give them non-billable time to explore and try new ways of doing and making things. Innovation and creativity often can't be scheduled—but the lessons gleaned from those breakthroughs can be scheduled through brown-bag lunches and all-hands meetings. We run at a very fast pace and without scheduled learning and sharing, we would miss out on opportunities to grow personally and organizationally.

### **7 Responsible Flexibility and Work-Life Integration.**

Responsible flexibility is one of the six core values of our firm, and one of our biggest cultural differentiators. We recognize that while work life is an important component—it is only part of a larger picture of life responsibilities, obligations, goals, and interests. Our employees are empowered to build a responsible work-life model that reflects the needs of their unique individual situations, and still enables them to achieve maximum productivity. This is a natural win-win-win for our company, our employees, and our customers.



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### 8 Empowerment & Accountability.

Experience has taught us that empowerment and accountability are actually two different sides of the same coin. We fully empower our employees in their positions. We don't believe in a culture of hand holding or micromanagement. I only know a fraction of what is needed to run, build, and grow Information Experts. Delegating to others and elevating them to their highest potential is essential for us to continue our growth. My practice leaders build the teams they need to grow our practices, and we rarely insist they interview specific candidates for open positions. Our Project Management Organization (PMO) project managers follow established processes and lead without micromanaging. If an employee believes he or she fills the competencies for a higher position, he or she tells the leadership team and we provide professional coaching. The flip side of this "freedom" is accountability. Our employees are empowered to act and make decisions and are responsible for delivering. We are a process-centric organization that demands a lot of reporting. One of my rising stars recently said to me, "One of my favorite things about Information Experts is that you can't hide here."

These eight cultural strategies work well for Information Experts, and while it's been difficult at times, we've been able to remain true to them throughout our growth. As we continue to grow, my role will be to preserve these ideals that make Information Experts unique and to not sacrifice culture as our revenues climb. Culture and people fuel growth. Growth does not create culture. What cultural footprint is your organization leaving?