



The Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE): Keeping a Project Manager Sane

The Results-Only Work Environment concept allows people to work whenever and wherever. Is it a dream or nightmare? Here is a project manager's view on implementing the system.

It's an unusually dreary, chilly, and rainy day in Charlotte, North Carolina. It's the kind of day that makes you want to stay in your fleece pants and slippers, sip tea, and watch a Hallmark Original movie (I recorded 25 of them for just these occasions). Luckily, thanks to the implementation of the Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE) at our company, I can spend an occasional morning doing just that.

Since adopting the ROWE culture at Choice Translating in December 2012, the road we have taken has not been without trials and tribulations, potholes and detours, and has caused more than a few grey hairs on the head of our

fearless founder and leader, Michelle Menard. For her in particular, giving up the deeply ingrained notion that all staff members had to sit at a desk from 9 to 5 and beyond to get work done and keep clients happy meant countless bouts of anxiety attacks and sleepless nights. She worried ceaselessly that nobody would show up to work, that projects would never get delivered, and that clients would leave us in droves.

Three years later, she has come full circle and embraced the concept. She has gotten used to not knowing when and where she will see her team. She understands that, thanks to the wonders of modern technology, we're never more

than a Google Hangout or a phone call away. As a result, productivity—and the company—are thriving. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

WHAT THE HECK IS A ROWE?

Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson, founders of the consulting firm CultureRx, developed the ROWE concept in 2003. It soon gained a reputation as a solid business platform with enormous global appeal, helping to launch a contemporary work culture that infuses equal amounts of autonomy and accountability. Ressler and Thompson published the approach in their bestselling book, *Why Work Sucks and How to Fix It*.¹ (They also co-authored another bestseller, *Why Managing Sucks and How to Fix It*.²) They have appeared on the cover of *BusinessWeek*, and their story has been featured in *The New York Times*, *TIME Magazine*, and on *Good Morning America*, *CNBC*, *MSNBC*, and *CNN*.

Most people are still unfamiliar with the ROWE concept (bar pretty much every freelancer in the world), but it basically means you can work whenever and wherever, as long as your work gets done!

To this end, employees are given the freedom and autonomy to schedule their workdays while ensuring that deliverables are met. In a ROWE work culture, performance is measured not by how much time you sit at a desk, but by whether or not you meet the relevant key performance indicators that have been defined for your role. In a ROWE, there are no set hours or prescribed number of vacation days. You either get your work done or you don't.

For most employees joining a ROWE company, the idea of fluid working hours and locations takes some adjustment. In fact, even after three years, I still feel guilty if I take a two-hour lunch break.

When I tell people about ROWE, they typically question the method: "What do you mean you have unlimited vacation time?" "Does anybody ever work?" "How do you get anything done?"

MAKE IT COUNT

The concept sounds like a dream come true. And it is—with one caveat: it works only for the right type of person. Adopting the ROWE concept

is a fantastic opportunity for high performers to create their own idea of a work/life balance. Organizational skills, focus, motivation, trustworthiness, and a sense of responsibility and accountability are imperative to be successful in a ROWE.

Working in a ROWE doesn't mean you work less. It means you make your time at work count. You don't sit at your desk scanning Facebook or getting the latest scoop on Caitlyn Jenner. Instead of wasting two hours a day gossiping around the watercooler, you put that time to better use and spend it with your family or go for a jog. You work effectively and efficiently when you're the most productive. I, for example, am not a morning person. Try to wake me up to watch a sunrise and I'll punch you. I have more energy and better focus in the evenings, when it's quiet around the house or the office. So, I'll save communicating with Japan or sending purchase orders to Vietnam for these later times. No point in composing a perfect project brief for a Chinese engineering team at 11:00 AM when nobody there will be around to read your oeuvre until 10 hours later.

DOES IT WORK FOR A PROJECT MANAGER?

Being a project manager at a language services provider can be stressful at times, working long and odd hours to communicate with linguists, clients, and vendors around the world. Project managers in the U.S. tend to work over 40 hours a week, operating under tight deadlines, working through issues with clients and linguists in various time zones. Turnover is high because project managers who can't keep up with the high-pressure job tend to crash and burn.

Since the consequences of losing a project manager can be detrimental for the company—not to mention the cost involved with hiring and training new talent—managers seek to find ways to ensure that the team has a good work/life balance and gets the breaks needed to prevent burnout, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness.

The ROWE culture is designed to prevent the stress of last-minute fire drills that are so typical in our industry. With

organization, coordination, and planning, the team is able to prepare for most eventualities. And with cross-training, especially at small- to mid-size language services providers, team members can jump into other roles as needed to allow each other time off to recharge.

Sure, there are days when things are crazy and everyone is working long hours—discussing a project with an engineering team in the Philippines, holding conference calls with a client in China, or bending over backwards and begging linguists for help meeting seemingly impossible deadlines. Responsible adults should understand that on those days, it's all hands on deck. But with proper organization, communication, and foresight, those days could be few and far between, allowing project managers the great luxury of setting their own schedules and getting their work done when they feel the most productive. Many project management tasks can be performed at odd hours, even on weekends. Clients or projects are generally not affected if a project manager goes to a morning spin class. And with a typical setting of several project managers in a team, scheduling time off shouldn't cause any issues or interruptions to the workflow.

HOW TO BUILD A ROWE

But how do you do it? Becoming a ROWE company doesn't have to be an overwhelming process. Let's examine the steps you can take to make the transition successful.

Lay a Solid Foundation: This is definitely a culture shift, so you need to have everyone's support. This is why holding workshops and seminars to educate people on how the system works is important. If applicable, make sure you investigate how the transition affects the employee handbook, time-off and vacation policies, and the company culture as a whole. You might also want to ask your accountant to produce a cost-benefit analysis to see if the transition will actually save the company money. It might also be a good idea to consider hiring a workplace consultant to help you build a framework.

Clearly Define the Mission:

Align organizational goals with the company's mission. This will help you

align team competencies and resources to organizational goals. This is a useful strategy for organizations of any size.

Create Measurable Results: Once you're focused on the goals, you can create measurable outcomes that are supported with specific deadlines and responsibilities. Then, communicate expected results to team members so everyone has a clear picture of expectations. After measurable outcomes are set, it's up to the team to determine what they do on a daily basis to achieve that result.

Provide the Necessary Tools: In a ROWE culture, employees focus on achievement. Rather than worry about when and how employees accomplish work, companies should invest in technology that enables employees to achieve results.

Experiment, Analyze, Adapt: Once you have the appropriate goals, results, and tools in place, team members are ready to get things done on their own. This autonomy is a huge change and can be challenging. Therefore, feedback, recognition, and transparency is key. If results aren't being achieved, analyzing and refining both sides of the system is necessary.

DON'T SLUDGE!

One particular element that is harmful to a successful implementation of a ROWE culture is the negative language that it can foster. Statements such as "Well, look who's decided to join us" or "Another vacation? Really? How many days is that now?" are considered toxic. This so-called "sludge" is hard to shake and comes out when team members don't understand the ROWE concept, when communication among team members is lacking, or when people in different roles with different job functions collide.

Realistically, every role has different job functions and requirements. Interpreting schedulers, for example, have to be sure that the phones are staffed all day, while project managers on the translation side tend to be able to keep their schedules more fluid.

To eliminate such sludge and negativity among team members, workshops and open discussions

are needed to clarify the concept, to encourage communication, and to figure out how everyone can benefit in this culture, regardless of the role.

Here, I invite you to check out the sludge videos we made in the sidebar on the right. I promise they are short and entertaining (created using our existing film budget of zero dollars).

WHO'S A GOOD CANDIDATE?

A successful implementation of the ROWE concept in a translation production department involves not only the right motivated, overachieving, close-knit team, but also the right technology, foresight, and flexibility. In this type of work culture, team members are treated like adults, with adult responsibilities, adult accountabilities, and adult choices. They work autonomously with no other measures of performance but the results they produce. With little to no involvement from management, they coordinate time off with anyone that might be affected by their absence. While this setting may be conducive to low performers in a standard company setting, dead weight rises to the top pretty quickly in a ROWE company, thanks to continuous performance measuring.

The Internet, cell phones, Skype, and other work-sharing platforms allow team members to not only choose their most productive times to work, but also to work from anywhere they have an Internet connection. When a team is spread out all over the world and across various time zones, communication is key. And, while many meetings are optional in a ROWE, some meetings—which must show a purpose and specific goal—are important for all team members to attend (in-person or online) to ensure that nothing falls by the wayside. To this end, brief 10-minute daily huddles are suggested. These simply serve to check in and keep each other informed of priorities and potential issues for the day. In longer weekly production meetings, the week ahead is discussed and planned.

WHAT'S THE DRAWBACK?

Naturally, a ROWE works better for driven team members who can work without a lot of supervision than for those who tend to be unfocused and unorganized. To this end, every new team member must be screened carefully before being selected. Each team member also needs to be allowed to discover and work in his or her specific “sweet spot.” To ensure that the workload is evenly balanced and that there are not just one or two project managers doing the heavy lifting, coworkers should be sensitive to each other's needs. This means that time off should be distributed fairly. Asking your teammates if it's okay to take your third cruise this year while a coworker who hasn't had the chance to take any time off to unplug picks up the slack might not go over very well.

To ensure a smooth operation and company growth, personal needs and plans should be balanced with client demands. When clients call in with questions or new project requests, they expect responsiveness. As these calls most often happen during normal business hours, someone should be available to communicate with them. But this task doesn't require the entire team to hover around the phones. Since corded desk phones are a thing of the past, these calls can be taken at a coffee shop around the corner or on the beach in France.

After the initial introductory seminar about working in a ROWE culture, regular refresher workshops should be held. These serve to reinforce the personal freedom and the opportunities for growth and development a ROWE culture fosters. They also teach newer team members in detail what the concept is all about.

DOES IT WORK?

For our company, the concept has been working very well and is one of the main factors that help us maintain our productivity and sanity. This year, we'll have team members spending time in Canada, Peru, and Germany. As for me, I'm going to be spending some time in Hungary. However spread out our team is, we know we have a system in place that ensures continued productivity. ●

Check Out These References for More Information on the ROWE Concept

Choice Translating's Sludge Video 1
<http://bit.ly/2a18t9k>

Choice Translating's Sludge Video 2
<http://bit.ly/2b4faAL>

Results-Only, LLC.
www.gorowe.com

“The Results-Only Work Environment: Are You Ready?”
<http://bit.ly/2bnY5DB>

“Digital Exec 34 Misconceptions and FAQs About the Results-Only Work Environment”
<http://bit.ly/youtube-ROWE-FAQ>

“Work Sucks! with Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson, Co-Creators of the Results-Only Work Environment”
<http://bit.ly/youtube-ROWE-cofounders>

Puckett, Jenna. “How to Transition to a Results-Only Work Environment”
<http://bit.ly/ROWE-transition>

Reynolds, Michael. “How to Unlock the Hidden Potential of Your Team with a Results-Only Work Environment”
<http://bit.ly/ROWE-unlocking-potential>

NOTES

1. Ressler, Cali, and Jody Thompson. *Why Work Sucks and How to Fix It* (Portfolio, 2010).
2. Ressler, Cali, and Jody Thompson. *Why Managing Sucks and How to Fix It* (Wiley, 2013).



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