



The First 15 Reading Program

Imagine walking into the office first thing in the morning, coffee in hand, to no computer screens glowing, no phones or tablets buzzing, and everyone with their nose buried into a real, physical book! When our team heard of such a reading program in place at Swindoll, Janzen, Hawk, & Lloyd we couldn't wait to chat with Chet Buchman more about it! We're excited to share his insights and hope to inspire you to start your day reading. Here's *The First 15* in a nutshell:

What? A program that encourages and allows all firm employees to charge 15 minutes a day to reading a nonfiction book.

Why? Improve office morale, foster a culture that embraces lifelong learning, and improve firm production and revenue!

How? Provide a library of nonfiction books for firm employees to read for 15 minutes at the start of each work day.

Curious to learn more and implement *The First 15* in your firm? Read on for a more details from Chet Buchman CPA, CVA, CEPA, CGMA, managing partner of Swindoll, Janzen, Hawk & Lloyd, LLC and founder of *The First 15* reading program.

We Pay Our Team to Read

At my firm, Swindoll, Janzen, Hawk and Loyd LLC, we believe that a key component in overcoming the constantly changing and complex accounting profession is a commitment to helping our team members improve. We believe that our people are our most important asset, and our firm has always fostered a culture of investing in the talent we have to help them grow, and foster a culture of lifelong learning. There are several different ways in which we do this, including a mentoring program for all staff, specialized training to help team members grow their careers, and continually looking for various opportunities to serve our clients. However, one of the most successful, and unique, programs that our firm has implemented is our reading program. This simple concept allows our team members to read a nonfiction book for the first 15 minutes of every workday and the benefits have proven to be countless.

The Benefits of Reading

There is a direct correlation between reading and success. People who are truly successful, not just financially, but in all aspects of life, are readers. They have a commitment to learning and knowledge. Personally, I didn't consider myself an active reader until about 10 years ago. Once I started, I was able to see the payoff in my own life and began to think of how I could implement this idea on a larger scale. I started talking with peers and colleagues about my idea, and kept hearing the same things: everyone could see the benefit potential; they just didn't have the *time*.



That's when I thought, "what if we paid our people to read?" You can't control what people have going on at home, in their personal lives, but you do have the ability to influence what happens when they're on the clock.

Our firm put a reading program in place in January of 2014. We asked, on a voluntary basis, that team members read for the first 15 minutes of every day, before they even turn on their computer. We ask that they read a physical book, no e-readers, as technology can easily become a distraction. We also request that they read nonfiction. That can be anything from self-help to spiritual to leadership and management. We believe it is important to choose books that have real application and that you can truly take something away from. Our firm provides the books, and we allow employees to take them home to continue reading if they prefer. We also have a web-based tracking component that allows team members to keep up with how many books and pages they've read. Before implementing the program, 90% of our employees were not reading. Now, in the last year, our team members have reported reading 439 books and a little over 76,000 pages.

The benefits of the program are very clear. Team member morale has improved considerably. The things they're learning are not only helping them advance their careers, but their personal lives are improving as well. I receive at least one email a week from a person who has read something that has helped them through a personal or professional issue, or to ask if they can borrow a completed book for a friend or spouse or even their kids. The knowledge they've gained from reading a book by authors such as Patrick Lencioni or Jon Gordon has been enlightening.

Our production and revenue have also increased, which probably surprises people. Conventional wisdom would say that we would be losing both the hard cost of the reading time, as well as the opportunity cost of not working with clients during that time. However, all of our indicators are up. The program has definitely had a positive impact on our firm, our staff, and our clients.

Commit to Learning

Talking about our reading program has garnered a lot of interest. We have even assisted a local law firm in implementing a similar program for their employees. Our exact model may not be a fit for every firm or business, but the key is being able to find what works. If you are interested in trying something similar at your firm, below are some key considerations.

- 1) **Make time.** First thing in the morning may not be the best time for your firm, but it has worked very well for us. The most important thing is to make the time, wherever it is feasible for you. It will take a level of commitment and focus to make this effort successful.
- 2) **Build momentum.** In the beginning, be sure to choose books that will be successful. Pick something short and easy to read (that also has application) rather than delving into something very dense and technical. We have found that once people finish their first book, they're proud and excited, and that can build positive momentum very quickly.



- 3) **Be flexible.** As with any new initiative, things might not work perfectly at first. You may have some obstacles or resistance. At our firm, we found that as more team members bought into the program and spoke positively about it, participation was not an issue. It will be vital to keep an open mind when working through any challenges that may arise.

Ultimately, investing in your team is crucial for your firm, regardless of how you do it. Nontraditional methods, models and ideas are becoming essential to keep up with the changing landscape of the profession. Embracing knowledge and constant learning will position you, and your firm, for continued success.

Swindoll, Janzen, Hawk and Loyd LLC is located in McPherson, KS; Hutchinson, KS; Manhattan, KS; Salina, KS and Wichita, KS. They have 85 employees and 10 partners. Chet Buchman CPA, CVA, CEPA, CGMA is managing partner and founder of The First 15 reading program.