

## A Riddle or Lesson: How Does a Client Become the Highest Priority in an Environment Where Employees Come First?

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The answer to this riddle is baked in the strategic make-up of a Chicago-based company called Chicago Style SEO (CSS) – a full-service digital marketing agency, offering Organic SEO, PPC, Web Development, and Content Marketing. This spirited company launched at a time when most businesses were shutting their doors, and unemployment was at an all-time high – March 2009. The founders of CSS however (Ben Robinson and Rod Holmes) believed 2009 was primed to support an accelerated growth curve for the digital marketing industry; fueled by an across-the-board desire to convert a relatively new low cost/no cost communication channel (the internet) into a robust sales channel. For these two entrepreneurs, the time to capitalize on the early adoption, in conjunction with their own unique digital skill sets, was at that moment. Fast forward, and nearing their 10<sup>th</sup> year anniversary, their business instincts have continued to support consistent year-over-year growth, and emerging “green shoots” that will soon spin-off to new revenue centers.

[CultureFit](#) had a chance to interview Rod Holmes, who continues to wear many hats, but has a passion for business development. The goal of our discussion: to gain a better understanding of how CSS not only jumped ahead of the early adoption digital marketing curve, but also how they keep up with new business when the tech talent shortage and competitive “grab” for talent is beyond fierce.



**Rod Holmes**  
Founder



**Ben Robinson**  
Founder

## **What's the secret sauce? Hint: It's the Basis of the Riddle**

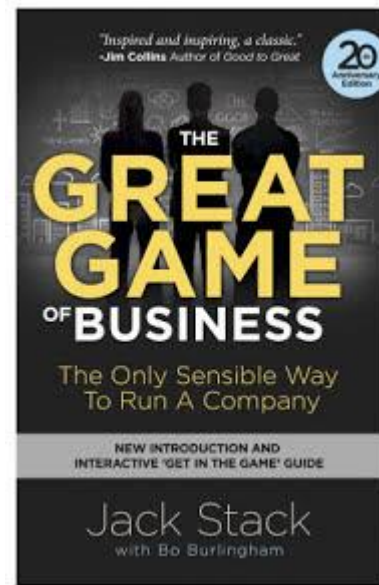
“Our employees are always our highest priority, and the well-being of our clients fall right behind. It’s been that way since the beginning.” The response was a bit startling and far from customary, but Holmes doubled down on the sincerity behind the value, stating – “we’ve actually had to fire a couple of clients because of how poorly they treated one or more of our employees.” This type of management loyalty for the employee(s) breaks from the more traditional model that supports the goal of building a loyal employee base for the company, but Holmes added some context to explain the method behind what some may deem the madness, “Considering the timing of our launch, we learned quickly we had to create a model that allowed us to operate as leanly as possible - hiring the necessary skill sets without the experience (a nice way of saying, fresh out of college) supported the financial necessity.” Stating further, “In 2009, the approach was a way to keep expenses as low as possible”, but the team of two entrepreneurs also found they were able to train and educate these young candidates with the disciplined skills that they themselves applied to establish the best outcome possible for their clients. In 2009 the approach was a key survival ingredient, today it’s a model that’s repeatable and helps CSS avoid the compensation battles that inevitably erupt around the more seasoned talent.

## **What about the Solution to the Riddle? Hint: It's All About the Culture**

Over time, Holmes’s and Robinson’s managerial approach established a culture that’s contributed to very little employee turnover. The management savvy CSS managers also recognized their team had evolved into their most valuable asset – a strategic road map to delivering great results, client acquisition and retention, and growing their company. The decision to rely on a well-trained and highly skilled tech labor force introduced the next major challenge; despite an economy that was nearing full-recovery, the demand and shortage of quality tech talent had created a compensation war. CSS simply opts not to compete – rather, they have continued their 2009 model of hiring and training entry level talent with a baseline of necessary tech skills, but added three new strategic pillars that work to deliver their “employee first commitment”:

- 1) Robust benefits package, including healthcare, life, and retirement plans
- 2) Soft benefits such as flexibility to work on or off premise, and
- 3) Financial transparency

Holmes stated he believes the first two pillars keep them competitive, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> pillar is how their team, by their own initiative, made sure clients and their marketing goals were set as their highest priority – not because of a management dictate, but because each team member wants to be a part of the company’s growth. Holmes explained how they made sure this 3<sup>rd</sup> pillar didn’t become a pithy talking point – stealing a page out of [The Great Game of Business](#), and **Open-Book Management** – steeped in the belief that all people have a universal need to “win”, and the more an employee understands the financial successes and losses of a company, the more they take ownership to deploy improvements where needed. To deliver on this approach, each month CSS has an “all hands” operating meeting that reviews a summary of the profit and loss statement, at both the company and departmental level. As a team, they celebrate the company’s “wins” and they rally as a team to course correct any failures. The payout of the seemingly radical approach, according to Holmes:



“Although management has an established value of ‘employees first,’ the employees are empowered to make ‘the clients first.’ And they do.”

Chicago Style SEO launched at a time when most companies were retreating. Born as a two-man team, they are now a productive and skilled team of 15 and preparing to launch a couple of new spin-offs that will no doubt realize similar successes. They are a lesson in valuing employees, establishing a culture that’s both empowering and adaptable to any economy, and the courage to embrace their business instincts vs. pontificating great ideas.



## About Chicago Style SEO



The team at Chicago Style SEO is committed to advancing every client's online business interests in a personalized, timely, and professional manner. We are determined to provide measurable and lasting results for every project. To do this, we stay on top of the ever-changing trends in the internet marketing world. Hailing from a wide variety of locales and experiences, each member of the team is unified by their passion for growing their clients' businesses.

We develop and execute measurable digital marketing strategies that work to achieve your business growth goals through presence on the Internet.

## About CultureFit



CultureFit Technology Staffing has over 20 years of local, IT Recruiting experience and is entrusted to hire permanent and contract employees in Greater Chicagoland and nationwide. Each year, they're charged to recruit, negotiate, and place 100's of open positions with quality talent that meet skill set requirements as well as compliment an organization's culture. Their unique position has afforded them the opportunity to identify hiring trends from both the organization and the talent's perspective.