

How GCI Took 2,000 Employees Remote-First by Using Achurch Consulting's Intentional Approach

▶ ABOUT GCI

For over 40 years, GCI Communication Corp. (GCI) has been Alaska's largest telecommunications provider, delivering cable television service, Internet access, wireline (networking), and cellular telephone service to more than 200 communities, including some of the most remote in North America. Headquartered in Anchorage, GCI is committed to leading philanthropic efforts across Alaska, donating \$2 million in cash, products, scholarships, and grants to Alaskan organizations each year.

GCI is Alaska's largest telecommunications provider. Before the pandemic, only 5% of GCI's leadership and staff worked remotely. Now, 70% of GCI's nearly 2,000 employees work remotely, making GCI one of the largest remote-first companies in the U.S. Because of the physical nature of some of its business, such as field technicians and a statewide retail presence, an all-remote workforce model is not feasible. Instead, GCI has a **"remote-first for remote-eligible employees"** strategy.

Brad Spees, Vice President and Operating Group Manager for GCI Business, led the executive leadership team who worked with Achurch Consulting on GCI's transition to a remote-first workforce. He said, **"I was surprised how smoothly everything went, but the biggest surprise was how our culture has been strengthened and how our people are engaged because they're free to be productive in the setting that works best for them."**

Achurch Consulting's People-Centered Approach Aligned with GCI's Culture

GCI's company mission is to create value for their customers, opportunities for their employees, and growth for their shareholders. Brad said, **"We've achieved that mission, in large part, by being a people-centered organization, so we were concerned about the impact of this transition on our culture. We wanted to create an environment that would allow our culture and productivity to flourish, where people would feel heard, where they'd know the company cares about them as humans — that's a competitive advantage."**

GCI sought a remote workforce consultant who would help them create an approach that aligned with their company's values while bolstering their competitive advantage. **"Achurch's approach aligned with our culture and values because they emphasized the importance of asking for input from employees early in the transition process."**

Shortly after the shift to remote work in the early days of the pandemic, Achurch designed and administered a GCI company-wide workforce assessment focusing on the employees' work-from-home experiences. This holistic assessment included a detailed review of GCI's organizational structure, applied systems, and high-level policies and procedures; as well as an 80-plus question electronic survey, and 45 hours of interviews with a representative sample of over 130 employees from across the company. Brad said, **"When you involve your people in an initiative, it's a force multiplier. We knew the path to success required as many people on board as possible. When you really listen to your people and let them know their voices are important, that's how you get results."**

And what results they got! When surveyed a year later, 95% of staff said they were satisfied with their current working arrangements.

To reinforce a people-centered approach, and bridge the gap between GCI leaders and employees, Achurch regularly engaged with GCI's Distributed Workforce Strategy Group. This group was comprised of 40 individuals — employees, supervisors, and managers — nominated by their peers and leadership, representing each functional area and business discipline.



💬 *"Achurch wasn't looking for a perpetual engagement. They came in, made an impact, and gave us a nice glide path as we picked it up on our own. That, to me, is what high-level consultants do: come in and share their approach, expertise, and best practices. Ultimately, we have to do it on our own, and now we have the tools to absolutely move forward."* 💬

The Achurch “Idea Machine” Brought Proven Remote Workforce Practices to GCI

The most troubling concern about remote work for many organizations is the potential loss of the camaraderie they assume can only happen in an office setting. GCI can attest that you can maintain and even improve connections and communication with intentional, thoughtful strategies and techniques.

“Achurch is an idea machine,” said Brad. **“They brought a toolkit full of recommendations for providing opportunities for interaction and maintaining the human connection and social aspects of our workplace. They proposed techniques for virtual chats, team meetings, and social gatherings. Achurch extends their focus to people as opposed to making the project strictly about the real estate and technology implications.”**

In the 2021 workforce survey Achurch conducted for GCI, employees shared they were particularly pleased with the **“clarity and effectiveness of communication from senior leaders and managers.”** Achurch encouraged GCI to be very clear in communicating expectations and timelines, so that employees could plan their lives with a high level of certainty – one of several recommendations focused on organization-wide communication.

Achurch recommended a multi-prong communications approach for educating GCI employees about working remotely, including regular company meetings and **“lots of easily digestible resources”** posted on GCI’s intranet site: case studies, white papers, articles, blog posts, infographics, and videos. During the transition, Achurch led lunch-and-learns on pertinent topics.

Achurch Consulting’s Guiding Message: Intentionality



“Achurch has a well-structured process,” said Brad. **“Their initial workforce assessment and the [many] hours of staff interviews were incredibly valuable. They gave us data that explained why they were recommending certain practices and policies. By engaging with outside experts, like the Achurch team, we ended up with great information that informed our actions going forward.”**

Brad pointed out a critical factor in the transition to remote work: **“The theme running throughout this project was intentionality. What has always been a guiding principle for GCI, and was a theme with Achurch’s approach, was to make sure decisions were intentional, equitable, and aligned with our culture.”**

Although GCI is a people-centered company, they weren’t about to run a distributed workforce based on arbitrary preferences. For example, decisions about the remote eligibility of each employee were made by considering the function of each position. Managers and supervisors reviewed each job in their respective areas to determine remote eligibility. Because these decisions were based on job function, they were not left up to an individual manager’s discretion or preference, thereby ensuring more equitable determinations.

“An employee may not like the decision, but they understand the reasoning behind it. They know the decision was made intentionally, not based on a manager’s bias. A consistent decision-making standard like this helps with buy-in.”

Intentionality was also behind the decision not to require mandatory days in the office. Many organizations with hybrid workforces stipulate who goes into the office on specific days. **“We didn’t go down that path because it serves no business purpose; there’s no intentionality behind it,”** Brad said. **“It didn’t make sense to us to dictate an arbitrary day or number of days that our remote-eligible employees had to report to an office. Our results-oriented culture is one of trust, so we didn’t feel that making an appearance in the office was of value.”**

GCI’s Path Forward

Achurch made multiple recommendations for GCI to take an intentional path forward. Some key recommendations included:

- Use a holistic approach.
- Avoid “HR only” initiatives.
- Identify a distributed workforce leader to guide GCI’s remote-first transformation.
- Emphasize transparency and clear communications.

“Achurch helped us establish the foundation for implementation and frame the strategy for our next steps, and we’re now executing on that plan,” said Brad. **“We have a holistic approach to this long-term transformation. It’s a company initiative, not an HR initiative. Achurch recommended having a real advocate take ownership of it moving forward, so we hired a new program manager who oversees all aspects of the distributed workforce.”**

The Achurch Consulting Differentiator

Brad described what led GCI to Achurch Consulting. **“Lots of firms hung out their shingle as distributed workforce consultants during the pandemic, and general business consultants added it to their wheelhouse. But we wanted to work with the best,”** said Brad. **“We did the research, and Achurch came in first place based on the quality of their proposal, responsiveness, and team. We had complete confidence in their expertise and critical thinking.”**

“The Achurch approach was holistic, intentional, insightful, and focused on sound business principles. Their approach was structured but not a template. Their level of engagement was exceptional. They worked so hard to really understand us and what we were trying to do. That level of engagement is unique compared to other consultants we’ve worked with.”

“This is the highest praise you can give a consulting firm: Achurch wasn’t looking for a perpetual engagement. They came in, made an impact, and gave us a nice glide path as we picked it up on our own. That, to me, is what high-level consultants do: come in and share their approach, expertise, and best practices. Ultimately, we have to do it on our own, and now we have the tools to absolutely move forward.”

Move forward they have. GCI enjoyed their two strongest years ever in 2020 and 2021 in terms of financial performance. Brad said, **“Our teams are happy, our business results are strong, and we are continuing to drive our strategic agenda without interruption. The results of our work with Achurch speak for themselves.”**

For more information on how Achurch Consulting can help you reach your business goals in a remote or hybrid work environment, contact us at

✉ info@achurchconsulting.com

