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SoFi Brings High Tech to High Altitude



Five years ago, a fast-growing personal finance company expanded from the ocean breeze of California to the mountain air of Montana, bringing a wealth of high-tech jobs to a workforce of talented software engineers ready for a new opportunity.

It started with David Thompson. Now a vice president of engineering at SoFi, Thompson initially signed on with the company as a remote employee — one of its first in Montana. Offered the chance to move from Helena to San Francisco, Thompson proposed an alternative: bring San Francisco to Helena.

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It worked, and shortly SoFi would have an office in a charming, vibrant town nestled between Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks full of western history, world-class biking trails and some of the best geocaching around.

"We got to find a lot of key resources very quickly for engineers that were looking for something like this," said Thompson. "There hadn't been a San Francisco-type company move into Helena. So that was really interesting. We were able to pull some great talent very quickly together and start the office."

Today, 140 staff in Helena form a large core of the company's engineering department, which continues to grow with another dozen openings recently posted to its career website.



Some of the company's best recruits come from Montana's university system, which Thompson said produces "fantastic" engineers, while others come from outside of the state, easily attracted by Montana's outdoor recreation opportunities and work-life balance.

"We've also pulled in a lot of really good engineers from outside of Montana and have been able to recruit because of the opportunities that Montana provides, everything from biking trails here in Helena that are just fantastic to the fly fishing out on the Missouri and down on the Big Hole, and the hiking and camping capabilities. We've got one gentleman that moved here and was just ecstatic after he moved thinking about the opportunities he would have that he didn't have where he lived before."

SoFi provides a variety of products to help "get your money right," everything from loans to investments to checking and savings. Its products occupy a virtual space; there are no branches, for example, only a fully featured mobile app and website. Behind the scenes, SoFi's offices bridge eight states representing diverse geographies.

The Helena office occupies the Old Liquor Block downtown. Once a state liquor warehouse, the 1930s brick building has been redeveloped to function as a collaborative and connected office environment. With its open floor plan and abundant natural light, the space encourages working in groups but also features small rooms for employees to step away and focus whenever necessary.



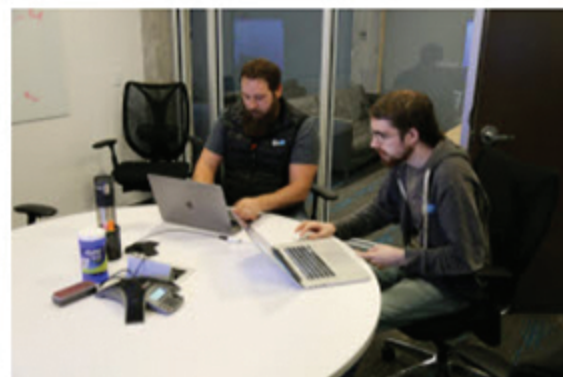
"We built the office space specifically knowing that we needed to telecommute, so there's lots of conference rooms. Every conference room is set up with our video conferencing systems. It allows us to have this instant communication. Of course, there's always email and phone calls, but it's amazing the amount of interaction you can have with the video conferencing systems."

Thompson said the distance from the other offices is a lot shorter with modern technology and ever-growing air infrastructure. Helena's early-morning flights allow for same-day round-trip visits to Salt Lake City, another hub of SoFi's engineering team, and from there to San Francisco is only one more flight away.

Plus, he said, a little distance can be positive:

"They actually appreciated some of the distance that it gave because it allowed us to focus and actually build the software faster."

That said, it's important for any company with multiple offices to synchronize. According to Thompson, everyone at SoFi marches to the beat of the same drum but with enough freedom to create their own subcultures too.



"Each of our offices follow the same 11 core values that we've defined as a company. We see the culture from our core values being able to work in all of the locations but still have that identity that people like to have in an office. So, it's been very exciting to see how we can still fit our 11 core values, our corporate culture, and still have our own identity as well within that."

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Unsurprisingly, Thompson is partial to the Montana office:

"Here in Montana, I feel like we're one of the best cultures because we continue to have that family atmosphere. We work together. We play together. We do a lot of things together, and we have a lot of fun together."

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