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CANADA'S BUSINESS NEWSMAGAZINE

APRIL 10-23, 2006

# THE BEST WORKPLACES IN CANADA

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# THE BEST WORKPLACES IN CANADA

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BY LAURA BOGOMOLNY, PETER EVANS, ANDY HOLLOWAY,  
ZENA OLIJNYK, ERIN POOLEY AND ANDREW WAHL

# BEST WORKPLACES



You've heard executives say it countless times: "Employees are our most valuable asset." But how many times have you actually believed it?

At the best workplaces, managers don't just pay lip service to the importance of their employees. They prove it. And they don't do that with rooftop patios and foosball tables, free pop, discounted gym memberships or even great dental and eye-care benefits. Instead, they prove employees are important by forging a workplace culture of respect, fairness, camaraderie and, above all, trust.

Those are the findings of more than two and a half decades of research by the Great Place to Work Institute in San Francisco, a management consultancy that has created the global gold standard for evaluating workplace cultures: the Trust Index employee survey. The Great Place to Work Institute Model has served as the basis for *Fortune's* ground-breaking annual list of the 100 Best Companies to Work For in the U.S. since 1998, and is now used in 28 other countries. In 2005, some 500,000 employees were surveyed at about 3,000 companies worldwide—and the institute is now looking at a global list of multinational best workplaces.

And now, for the first time, that global gold standard has come to this country. The Great Place to Work Institute Canada, founded by the workplace experts at the Graham Lowe Group in Kelowna, B.C., analyzed nearly 10,000 employee surveys across Canada during the fall of 2005.

The results are our Best Workplaces in Canada 2006: 30 organizations—both large and small, publicly traded and private—that are profiled on the following pages. Together, they demonstrate what it takes to create a truly great place to work.

For managers, it's not just a matter of being able to hire and retain the best workforce—although that plays a big part. Companies that have been recognized as having leading cultures by the Great Place to Work model consistently outperform their peers on the stock market over the long run. The Russell Investment Group builds annual indexes of companies based on the *Fortune* Top 100 lists. If you had reinvested equal amounts of money every year in the publicly traded companies on the *Fortune* lists between 1998 and 2005, that investment would have grown at an annualized rate of 14.75%,

versus the S&P 500's 4.8% return over the same period.

The key is that the Great Place to Work model zeroes in on what employees really want: a workplace that they trust. Unlike other lists that try to identify great companies to work for by placing an overriding emphasis on compensation packages, human-resource practices or employee perks, the Trust Index is based on extensive employee surveys. Through a series of 57 questions—and two open-ended opportunities for participants to provide candid remarks—the model reveals the true nature of a company's workplace culture.

Here's how it works. The Great Place to Work model is designed around five broad themes that influence trustful relationships in a workplace: credibility, respect, fairness, pride and camaraderie, each of which is further defined by different qualities. For example, a positive response to the statement "People here are willing to give extra to get the job done" reveals one component of a respondent's sense of pride, while "Management does a good job of assigning and co-ordinating people" is but one element that underscores credibility in the workplace (*for the full methodology, see page 66*).

"Trust between employees and managers is *the* distinguishing criterion in a great workplace," says Amy Lyman, co-founder of the Great Place to Work Institute in San Francisco. "If management is credible, for instance, that means they have to share information, they need to be competent about how they manage people in the business, and they need to have integrity."

How a company achieves a trustful workplace culture—the

practices its managers use to share information, for example—will be different depending on the kind of business it is. But research shows that for employees to find management credible, and therefore to trust it, information must be shared effectively—that much is universal.

Previous efforts by consulting firms to benchmark "best practices" that could be incorporated into other companies often flopped. Lyman chalks it up to how important it is for any given practice to fit a company's individual culture. "You have to find your company's specific way to do it," she says. "You really need to know what the culture of your organization is, and to be very clear about that."

That's not to say a high standard of benefits and compensation won't help. But the Great Place to Work Institute's research has shown the value of those things diminishes as a workplace moves from just being good to great—it's no longer a question of high compensation, for example, but *fair* compensation in a job that is also fulfilling in other ways. Lyman says the benefits at companies near the top of best workplace lists are often distinct, but they're not all that different from other organizations. "What they do in great workplaces is create a culture in which people are able to take advantage of all those benefits," she explains. "And they create a culture that's so special, people associate it with the benefits."

Sometimes, a company doesn't need to offer a big, formal health-care package to prove it cares for its employees'

## The global gold standard for evaluating workplace culture hits Canada

# BEST WORKPLACES



well-being. Consider Back in Motion Rehab Inc., a small chain of rehabilitation and disability management clinics, based in Surrey, B.C. When one member of its staff was diagnosed with breast cancer in early 2005, the company did not yet offer health benefits. Nevertheless, management supported her financially until she was well enough to return to work. That kind of genuine caring earned deep respect from employees (see “Back pack,” page 70).

You’ve probably never heard of Back in Motion—it has only 57 employees. In fact, several of the names on our inaugural Best Workplaces in Canada list will be unfamiliar. That’s because the survey was open to any organization with more than 50 employees. Canada, of course, is a nation of small businesses: the vast majority of people work in companies with less than 100 employees. “In a dynamic, truly innovative economy, today’s small firms are going to be tomorrow’s medium-sized and next year’s large-sized firms,” says Graham Lowe, co-founder of the Great Place to Work Institute Canada, and a 30-year expert on workplace practices. He argues there are many lessons to be gleaned from organizations of all sizes. “The small firms have something to teach the large firms, and vice versa,” Lowe says.

Lowe points to how the Great Place to Work survey model emphasizes concepts that are often big reasons why people prefer to work at small companies—like opportunities for close collaboration or a sense of community. “Those are the natural properties of a high-performing small organization,” he says. “And big organizations go to great lengths to try and emulate those characteristics.”

The No. 1 finisher in our Best Workplaces in Canada list—2,000-employee B.C. credit union Vancity—demonstrates it’s possible to strike a happy balance between the big and the small (see “On the money,” page 68). CEO Dave Mowat emphasizes that one of the most important ways a company can build a great workplace is through simple, genuine gestures. Vancity, for instance, distributes Starbucks gift cards to managers, who hand them out to employees who deserve a bit of recognition. It’s

not about the coffee, of course. It’s to remind people to regularly say two very important words: *thank you*. “You’d be amazed at how managers in some places don’t do that,” says Mowat. “Lots of times we don’t really know where the great results are coming from. But the employees all know. What managers really need to do is quietly—privately—go and talk to the three people who put 80% of the volume through. They’re not looking to be singled out, but they sure want you to know.” Likewise, Vancity managers are encouraged to phone or write a note to the spouses of staff who are putting in extra hours. “We’re all human beings,” says Mowat, “and we need to hear how we fit in and how we’re part of the success of the organization.”

Workplace culture, Lyman says, is increasingly being identified as the competitive advantage that it is. “More companies are recognizing the importance of it, the value of it,” she notes. “It helps not only the social element of the workplace, and the community, but boy, does it ever have an impact on the bottom line. That has fuelled a lot of people to say, ‘I really should be paying a lot more attention to this.’” Our Best Workplaces in Canada package is a very good place to start. ANDREW WAHL

## METHODOLOGY

**T**o choose the Best Workplaces in Canada, we rely on two things: our evaluation of the culture of each organization and the opinions of the organization’s employees. We give the latter more weight: two-thirds of a company’s total score comes from employee responses to the Trust Index survey (comprised of 57 scaled and two open-ended questions) created by the Great Place to Work Institute in San Francisco. The survey goes to a minimum of 400 randomly selected employees from each company (or all employees if less than 400) and asks about such things as credibility, fairness, respect, pride and camaraderie.

The remaining third of the score comes from our evaluation of a culture audit submitted by each company. It examines demographic makeup, pay and benefits programs, and how the companies themselves say they exhibit the core elements of the Great Place to Work Institute Model, which is based on trust: credibility (two-way communication, competence, integrity); respect (support, collaboration, caring); fairness (equity, impartiality, justice); pride (in personal job, team, company); and camaraderie (intimacy, hospitality, community). Culture audits are evaluated by a team of trained evaluators. Individual evaluators score each submission and present the company or organization to the team, providing a rationale for their scoring. Team members ask questions, weigh the scoring against other submissions, and ultimately come up with the final score.

After evaluations are completed, our team conducts various searches to ensure that the organization has not been involved in any unethical business practices in the past year. If news about an organization comes to light that may significantly damage employees’ faith in management or suggest that they would not be a good example of a great place to work, we may exclude it from the list.

This methodology is identical to that used by the Great Place to Work Institute to compile lists of “best workplaces” and “best companies to work for” in 29 countries around the world. About 110 organizations contacted us to participate; of them, 60 finished the survey process.



**THE DEADLINE** for applying for next year’s Best Workplaces list is July 31, 2006. You can link to the Great Place to Work Institute’s nomination form at [www.canadianbusiness.com/bestworkplaces](http://www.canadianbusiness.com/bestworkplaces).

# BEST WORKPLACES



Vancity employees in Vancouver's Pender and Hornby branch; CEO Dave Mowat in the credit union's Smart Car (top right)

## ON THE MONEY

### VANCITY

VANCOUVER | FINANCIAL | 2,000 EMPLOYEES

**V**ancity chief operating officer Ian Warner and his colleague Kari Grist, the vice-president of marketing, arrive at the Fraser Street Community Branch in East Vancouver at 8:30 a.m. It's an hour before opening, and only a couple days after the last-minute RRSP crush, but branch manager Gerry Collins and all 27 of his staff are already waiting, chatting quietly over a light breakfast on Vancity-red paper plates.

Executives never quite know what to expect when they walk through the door on these branch visits. Twice a year, Vancity's 15-person senior management team divvies up the credit union's 60 divisions—including 46 branches in B.C.'s Lower Mainland, Fraser Valley and Victoria—and travel in pairs to sit down and talk with all 2,000 employees. Neither Warner nor Grist have ever been to the Fraser Street location, so they're not sure what they're getting into. "Each branch is a little different,"

says Warner. At one meeting this year, the COO was cast as the star witness in a mock inquiry into company practices, which was presided over by two employees acting as "justices."

This occasion turns out to be more sedate. The group quickly settles into chairs set out in the main customer area. They let out a cheer as Grist congratulates them for beating their RRSP-season targets. She then hands out two shades of Post-it notes. The employees break into small groups and, on the yellow squares of paper, they note what work initiatives or accomplishments they're proud of; on the blue, they write questions or concerns. "Anything goes," Warner says. "We don't have anything prepared. Any questions are fair game."

The positive comments that follow come as no surprise. Vancity (formally Vancouver City Savings Credit Union) is widely recognized for supporting many community-related and environmental causes, and that clearly resonates with employees. Likewise, its progressive workplace policies, such as tuition reimbursement of up to \$2,400 a year and other training initiatives,



are also lauded. But often, the most important thing for a manager to do well is to address problems, so talk quickly turns to the blue Post-it notes. One staffer is concerned that lineups are long because the largely South Asian immigrant community in the area doesn't read English well enough to use the ATM for simple transactions. Someone else wants to discuss mortgage rates and how they stack up with nearby banks. The burning question, though: When is the branch slated for the renovations that are being gradually rolled out?

Warner and Grist, of course, don't have all the answers. But as awkward as such visits can sometimes be, they have become a critical way for senior managers to connect directly with employees. Vancity puts a lot of effort into internal communications—and listening. Employees are not an afterthought. Just like its clients, they are one of the key groups that Vancity strives to impress every day.

With \$11.8 billion in assets and 330,000 members, Vancity is Canada's largest credit union. But it's still dwarfed by the financial clout of the Big Five banks. Vancity tries to differentiate itself through its service, and even takes on what CEO Dave Mowat sees as an "advocacy role"—promising to get the best deal for its members. Of course, all the banks claim to "put clients first," too. So Vancity has to prove it in subtle ways. "If you walk into our branch and get a mortgage," says Mowat, "you can feel that difference, in how you're treated, the language we talk to you in, the respect we have for your business." But that strategy, he emphasizes, is only effective if employees buy in. "People have to believe."

Vancity's focus on employees shows up in unique ways. Take its executive compensation model. It's based on five equal performance measures, one of which, naturally, is profitability—but that accounts for only 20% of the total, because, as Mowat sees it, financial results reflect events already past. To gauge its current health, Vancity tracks membership growth and the depth of its relationships (the number of accounts and their size). A fourth measure is member satisfaction, based on a survey sent out every year to some 40,000 people. The feedback has a tangible financial impact: members who respond in surveys that they are "totally satisfied"—5 on a five-point scale—have, on average, four-and-a-half times the amount of business with Vancity than those who circle 3, for "satisfied." The only way to boost those member-satisfaction scores? Employees. So the final fifth of an executive's compensation is based on employee surveys. "That's the secret sauce," says Mowat. "But it's super hard. Execution is everything. It's a whole lot more challenging to manage and motivate humans than it is turning on a computer every morning."

Communication is critical, Mowat stresses. "There is so much stuff that's misunderstood in an organization, and there is even more stuff that's just not known about." So Vancity takes as professional an approach to communicating internally as it does externally, with the equivalent of four staffers dedicated to the job. Their efforts are managed strategically—for instance, they

distribute memos in weekly e-newsletter briefs instead of a barrage of daily e-mails, and post short stories about employee and community achievements in lunchrooms and elevators. The staff intranet, Insite, is an expertly designed, plain-language repository of all things Vancity. It includes Discoveru, an extensive resource for career planning that allows employees to map out their professional development.

Annual employee surveys are scored for meaning and opportunities to improve. In 2004, the survey showed that while overall engagement scores were 77%—among the highest in North America, according to the consultants—only 63% of employees felt they could voice their opinions. The executives were stumped. So Mowat turned to the Employee Advisory Committee, a group formed 20 years ago with a representative from every branch and department, to offer ideas. Committee members were asked to gather stories about experiences in their workplaces.

What they reported back was that loyalty to teams at Vancity is so strong that individuals are often reluctant to offer opinions that counter perceived consensus. The executive team, in response, set itself a goal to improve employee voice—and even wrote a four-point commitment statement. Since then, they've launched efforts to recognize people who speak up, and a program called "Courageous Conversations" that teaches managers how to engage employees in open dialogue. Mowat wrote an all-employee letter to express his personal surprise about the problem—and what management was pledging to do about it.

But there is likely no greater evidence of Vancity's trust in the role of employees than how it used their ideas to update the company's public face. In late 2003, the credit union undertook an 18-month process in which employees and members were asked what they felt makes it special. From that, themes emerged that were collected into the *Story of Vancity*, a 48-page book that now informs everything from executive decisions to Vancity's branding and advertising. It's also a template for how everyone—from members to front-line tellers, right up to Mowat—talks about the organization.

In fact, as the CEO sees it, those initiatives resonate only because Vancity's culture stresses that success starts with employees. "We don't do it to be nice and win awards," says Mowat. "We're doing it because our ability to compete with companies 35 times as big as we are rests in the fact that when somebody walks through our door, an employee will walk up to them and treat them really well, treat them with respect. And *that* makes us money."

At the Fraser Street branch, Ian Warner and Kari Grist do their best to field questions with frank responses. Some ideas seem to stick, like posting a branch renovation schedule on Insite. And what they don't know, they promise to look into. As 9:30 nears, the staff grows restless—a lineup is forming outside the branch. Warner and Grist know it's time to go—and let the Vancity employees do what they do best.

ANDREW WAHL

OVERALL  
1st

CAMARADERIE  
1st

**94%**  
of Vancity staff  
surveyed say it's a  
"friendly" workplace

# BEST WORKPLACES



A lighthearted moment for members of the Back in Motion team at their B.C. clinic

exams. "There is lots of mentoring," says Vicky Forsyth, a physiotherapist and program manager. "And the directors are good at including managers in strategy sessions."

The Workers' Compensation Board of B.C. is BiM's main customer, which means the majority of its patients were injured on the job. BiM's responsibility is to get them back to work as fast as possible, without compromising their care. Physiotherapist Darren Chuang says he left a previous employer because he was under pressure to manipulate the length of treatment. "That type of stress shouldn't exist in rehab," he notes. "And it doesn't exist here."

Ramon Ruffly, a kinesiologist and single dad, applauds BiM's flexible hours. So does Cameron Brine, who started as a kinesiologist in 1999 and is now finishing an online MBA degree while

doing marketing and business development for BiM. Brine also commends the company's policy of promoting from within. "They've been able to keep me interested," he says.

Cynthia Abbott, a vocational coach, recalls being absolutely shocked when, accompanying her first raise, she received a handwritten note from CEO Debbie Samsom praising her accomplishments. And the feedback goes in the other direction, too. Annual corporate-culture surveys help directors evaluate what they're doing right, and where they need to improve.

In 2005, before BiM offered health benefits, one of its managers was diagnosed with breast cancer. Still, the company financially supported her through that tough time, and she is now healthy and back at work. Several employees report that after watching BiM's directors take such good care of a sick colleague, their loyalty shot way up. Most are also pleased that, despite BiM's small size, it now offers health insurance. "Our people understand our job is helping other people get back to work," says Samsom. "We are pretty clear in our objective, and we attract people that share that belief." Laura Bogomolny



## BACK PACK

### BACK IN MOTION REHAB INC.

SURREY, B.C. | HEALTH CARE | 57 EMPLOYEES

**W**hen Back in Motion first opened its doors in 1993, its founders, four health-care practitioners and one administrator, weren't sure the small chronic-back-pain clinic would fly. Thirteen years later, the private company offers full-service rehab and disability management care, and has 57 employees in three locations. The goal is to reach \$10 million in revenue by 2010.

Among rehab specialists, BiM has made a name for itself as a great place to work. "Rehab is a small world," says Tim Winter, who, four months ago, left a hospital job to work as an occupational therapist there. "Word gets around pretty quick. Thankfully, I've found all the talk to be true. There is a lot of support from the directors, and they are very approachable."

BiM's directors are 100% committed to their team of occupational and physical therapists, kinesiologists, psychologists, physicians and vocational rehab counsellors. Case in point: in 2002, after a few years of expansion, the company had a rough year. Rather than lay anyone off, the directors gave up their own salaries for eight months. What's more, once the company was back on its feet, they instituted a profit-sharing plan—and in fiscal 2004, 48.1% of distributed profits went to staff. BiM also makes its financials available to all its employees, even though, as a private company, it is under no obligation to do so. The highest-paid director earns just over twice what an average employee makes.

BiM offers each worker an annual education allowance of \$700, and up to six paid days off each year to study for

**100%**  
of Back in Motion Rehab employees say, "People care about each other here"

## THE FARM TEAM

### ADFARM

CALGARY, WITH THREE SATELLITES |  
ADVERTISING | 81 EMPLOYEES

The first thing that strikes you when someone from AdFarm hands you a business card is that it gives no job title. From the office receptionist up to CEO Kim McConnell, all there is to identify a person is a name. That omission sums up the culture at the Calgary-based advertising and public relations agency, which specializes in the agricultural sector. Laura Laing, a PR specialist who moved from London, Ont., to Alberta last year to join AdFarm, says, "Titles aren't important. What is important is that everyone feels part of the team."

McConnell acknowledges the best way to get everyone working together is accurate information. In addition to regular team meetings and updates, he gives quarterly "state of the union" addresses. They are so important to the company's culture, AdFarmers will attend even when they are on vacation—or get patched in by conference call. (While AdFarm is headquartered in Calgary, it has satellite offices in Guelph, Ont., Fargo, N.D., and Kansas City, Mo.)

It's difficult to compete directly with the higher salaries in the oilpatch. Yet there's little turnover at AdFarm—less than 5%—unusual in a business where churn rates can average about 30%. McConnell attributes the loyalty to a profit-sharing program, good benefits and flexible working hours, as well as formalized performance reviews. Then there's AdFarm's physical space—like the colorful office in the Mission area of southwest Calgary. Its lobby was created inside a grain silo, and clients are greeted by dancing papier-mâché pigs. "Staff bring friends and family to see what the office looks like, and clients prefer to hold their meetings here," McConnell says.

AdFarm was formed in 2002 from four predecessor agencies controlled by two owners. It was a challenging integration,



CEO Kim McConnell (with sign) and members of his team have no titles on their cards

especially since the combined entity inherited two huge accounts, Dow and Bayer, that compete with each other. This meant a "firewall" had to be put up between employees and some staff don't get to interact with others on a daily basis.

So the firm must find opportunities to galvanize employees. One way it does that is through a "matrix" corporate structure that cuts across all the AdFarm offices, rather than dividing the company into location-based silos. Staff in different locations work together with the help of video-conferencing and webcams. Says McConnell: "We're a one-agency company, not a company of four similar-named agencies."

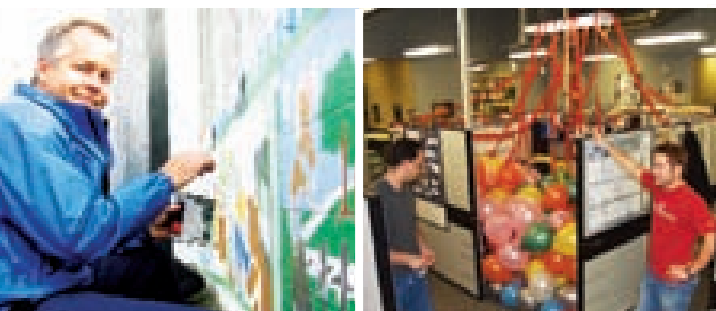
And then there are the two farms AdFarm operates on leased land. One is about a half-hour drive northeast of Calgary, the other near Fargo, and both specialize in grain and cereal crops. (A third operation with a livestock emphasis is on its way to AdFarm staff in Guelph.) AdFarmers can purchase up to four shares in one or both farms for \$25 each, and with the help of a full-time manager, make decisions about what to grow, what fertilizers and practices to use, and when they'll sell the harvest. "We go through the same decision-making processes that real farmers use," says Laing. Whatever profits are made are divided among AdFarm shareholders. AdFarm staff are encouraged to participate directly in the operations, an especially valuable experience to those who have skills in advertising, but don't know much about life on the farm. "For some, it's the first time they've ever driven a combine," says Laing. McConnell sums it up this way: "We're not trying to make them farmers, but it allows us to live out our grand promise."

ZENA OLIJNYK



**98%**  
of AdFarmers say managers  
"show appreciation for  
good work and extra effort"

## LESSONS FROM SOME OF THE BEST



(Clockwise from top left) CEO Cameron Gatey volunteering at Kamloops Boys and Girls Club; employee birthday; assembling bikes for disadvantaged kids; foosball table in the coffee room



**“I am treated with respect and on an equal level with management**

—A RESPONDENT TO OUR EMPLOYEE SURVEY FROM URBAN SYSTEMS

### URBAN SYSTEMS LTD.

KAMLOOPS, B.C. | CONSULTING IN ENGINEERING, PLANNING AND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE | 227 EMPLOYEES



In March, the 40 partners who together own consulting firm

Urban Systems gathered for their annual general meeting. One agenda item was to affirm formally a long-standing principle: the company is not for sale, at any price.

It's a message that employ-

ees hear often—and warmly receive. Management's message is clear: we're not out to use your hard work to line someone else's pockets; we see you as future owners. "There is certainly stability in knowing that this is not a short-term thing," says Samantha Ward, a consultant who joined Urban Systems in 2001, one year after graduating from

Queen's University with a civil engineering degree. "If you're here and enjoy what you do, you could feasibly spend the rest of your career at this company and not feel limited in any sense."

What makes such enthusiasm possible is a supportive and collaborative atmosphere, where responsibilities and rewards are shared. Knowledge transfer is emphasized through internal training sessions that bring together staff from the company's six offices in British Columbia and Alberta, and "novice consultants" (who have two to five years' experience) pick personal coaches who offer career advice and mentoring. "It's very informal and interactive," says Ward. "It's not like you sit down once a year and go through your goals and walk away."

Founded 31 years ago by eight equal partners, Urban Systems prides itself

on a flat management structure, rejects authority based on seniority, and has an actively designed and managed corporate culture. But the firm has grown quickly in the past five years—and preserving and revitalizing that culture is a top priority.

Each year, for example, principals take employee suggestions and select an annual theme based on a timely or important aspect

### AT A GLANCE



OVERALL  
4th  
PRIDE  
1st

of Urban Systems' culture, such as "generosity," or this year's theme, "commitment to excellence." The managing partner at each office then asks one employee—usually a relatively newer staff member—to build a volunteer team to devise and plan a series of events that advance that concept throughout the year. Ward was part of a team that organized a "generosity" event in 2004 that got small teams at each of the firm's offices to compete in small groups building children's bikes—surprise gifts for needy children who were invited to come and receive them. "It was certainly a sense of pride for the whole office to be able to contribute to the community in that way," says Ward.

Cameron Gatey, a 14-year veteran and a partner who in December succeeded co-founder Gordon Petersen as CEO, says Urban Systems is very much like a family. "When people feel that connection," he says, "they are more inclined to think their contribution actually has meaning. I think they feel that their contribution helps to ensure the longevity of the organization." ANDREW WAHL



A tug-of-war at Calgary's Dragon Boat Festival, where a novice Trico team won division gold

## TRICO HOMES INC.

CALGARY | CONSTRUCTION AND REAL ESTATE | 76 EMPLOYEES

The way Trico Homes CEO Wayne Chiu sees it, a work environment that encourages the Calgary home builder's employees to participate in the charitable and cultural life of the city pays back in spades. "I want to create a culture where we work as a team—where each person covers the other's butts," says Chiu, a Hong Kong native who started up Trico in 1993. Helping the wider community by organizing or taking part in events, like Kids Cancer Care Foundation of Alberta, Hong Kong Days or Paint the Town Red (when staff descend on a low-income senior's home for a "Trico Extreme Makeover"), he adds,

is "great for the company, great for morale, great for the team." A high participation rate in non-work events (in some cases more than 80%) is important, Chiu emphasizes, when you're a fast-growing company. Trico is now the eighth-largest builder in Calgary, compared to 15th five years ago, and has almost quadrupled its number of employees in the same period.

The community spirit has had a huge impact on how employees work together to handle the challenges of being part of the red-hot Calgary real estate market. Trico may have many of the same organizational features that other companies use—weekly executive, marketing, sales and operational meetings and biannual company-wide gatherings more focused on strategic planning—but bonding outside the office makes its long-term planning and development that much more successful, according to Chiu. He cites the example of how Trico came up with a five-year strategic plan in an all-staff "bottom up" process that outlined expectations for the future. Says Chiu: "The five-year plan is owned by the people who work for Trico, not by senior management, not by me."

Another important aspect of Trico's work culture is promoting multiculturalism. As the booming Alberta economy and high oil prices attract people from all over Canada—and, indeed, the world—Calgary is becoming more culturally diverse. A

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### SOFTCHOICE CORP.

TORONTO | INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY | 343 EMPLOYEES

Managers and high-potential employees devote two of 12 annual training days to learning what their strengths are, and how they can manage and build a team around those skills.

### EDWARD JONES CANADA

CANADA WIDE | INVESTMENT ADVICE | 1,768 EMPLOYEES

People like to work here because many of its HR programs are flexible. Avoiding excessive formality and hierarchy, the company adapts

to different people's circumstances. A popular scheme gives \$5,000 in assistance to employees who adopt a child, as well as full medical benefits for the new arrival.

### JOHN G. HOFLAND LTD. MISSISSAUGA, ONT. | FLOWER WHOLESALE | 120 EMPLOYEES

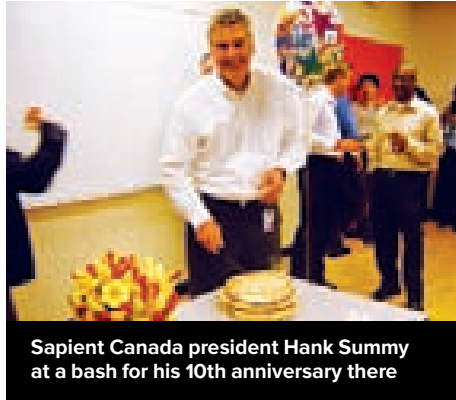
Has an Outstanding Employee of the Month program. Winners, picked by their peers, get month-long rights to a prime parking spot. Every other week, each employee gets a bouquet of flowers to take home (poinsettias at Christmas; roses around Valentine's Day).

# BEST WORKPLACES

good number of Trico's staff members—about 15%—are visible minorities, but involvement with Calgary's Dragon Boat Festival, the Calgary Immigrant Aid Society and English as a second language programs also gives the firm a good "in" when it comes to figuring out the housing needs of people from other cultures, one that can be used in marketing its homes. "Ethnic buyers are probably going to be one of the more significant growth markets we'll see," says Richard Gotfried, vice-president of marketing.

Another pillar of Trico's culture is diversity of experience and background. "We like to bring people with different skills to the company," says Norm Mross, vice-president of operations, adding that "aptitude and attitude" are often more important than experience. "I can teach people the skills they will need for a particular job. I can't teach attitude."

ZENA OLIJNYK



Sapient Canada president Hank Summy at a bash for his 10th anniversary there

## SAPIENT

TORONTO | INFORMATION-TECHNOLOGY CONSULTING FIRM | 117 EMPLOYEES

Openness. It's a word that comes up a lot at many of Canada's best workplaces. But consulting firm Sapient Canada takes the concept rather literally. "Some people claim their doors are always open," president Hank Summy jokes, "but I don't even have a door."

Neither does anyone else at the company. Far from being chained to their cubicles, the 100-plus people who work at Sapient's bright offices on the edge of Toronto's financial district sit with co-workers in wall-less pods, arranged according to the projects they are undertaking



**100%**  
Of Sapient employees said "People here give extra to get

at any given time. That an open office environment can make a real difference may sound a little hokey, Summy acknowledges, as he walks past his own wall-less workstation, but managers at Sapient have learned that the simple act of being able to see the people who work with you can indirectly go a long way toward creating happy employees and healthy profits.

Whether it's small gestures like creating a more collegial work environment, or larger perks, like \$6,000 in tuition reimbursement and negotiable 12-month sabbaticals after only six months' employment, Sapient takes the concept of investing in its people to new levels.

Of course, in the knowledge-based consulting industry, it makes sense to focus on your workers, so perhaps it's no wonder Sapient invests in human capital. If the company's financial performance is any indication, it's

## AT A GLANCE

### IT/NET

OTTAWA | IT CONSULTING | 99 EMPLOYEES

Staff at IT/Net, which offers consulting services to a growing roster of public, private and not-for-profit clients, are invited to attend any meeting they wish, whether it's a gathering of the top brass or a more informal brainstorming session.

### FULLER LANDAU LLP

TORONTO | FINANCIAL SERVICES (ACCOUNTING) | 84 EMPLOYEES

Fuller Landau holds "Fridays with Michael," a monthly meeting where employees anonymously pose questions to managing partner Michael Epstein. There are also annual staff evaluations of directors and managers.

### ERNST & YOUNG LLP

TORONTO AND 13 OTHER LOCATIONS | PROFESSIONAL SERVICES (FINANCIAL) | 3,242 EMPLOYEES

A job with professional financial services provider Ernst & Young can be tough to snag: less than 5% of applicants are hired. One reason:

the firm pays all fees associated with the chartered accountant, chartered financial accountant and chartered professional accountant designations, and offers plenty of customized training programs.

### NEWHEIGHTS SOFTWARE CORP.

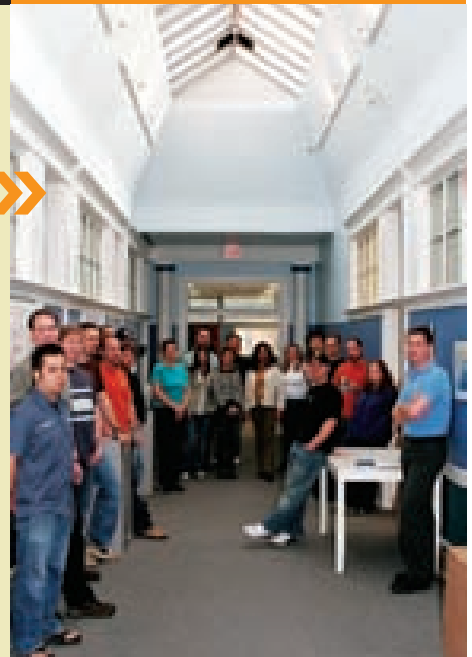
OTTAWA (AND VICTORIA, B.C.) | COMMUNICATIONS SOFTWARE | 53 EMPLOYEES

At NewHeights, employees get an extra week of paid vacation after they get married. The company also encourages them to bring kids into work when necessary.

### CERIDIAN CANADA LTD.

MARKHAM, ONT., WITH NINE SATELLITE OFFICES | PROFESSIONAL SERVICES (HUMAN RESOURCES) | 1,439 EMPLOYEES

There are only seven salary grades between an entry-level position and the president's job at Ceridian, so "great contributors" can make as much as or even more than senior managers.



## Employees surveyed are willing to "do the job done"

getting a pretty fair return on investment—revenues at U.S. parent Sapient Corp. jumped 26%, to US\$319 million, in 2005. Clearly, Sapient's people-first strategy is paying off. And even when there are short-term costs to incur, the company doesn't let a focus on the bottom line trump strategic investment in staff, senior manager of technology Michael Tayag points out.

A few years ago, when Sapient decided it would open an office in India, it filled the facility with expatriates from western offices, at western salaries, eschewing the obvious cost benefits that drew other North American companies to the subcontinent. "There were around 30 or 40 of us, so it was a significant hit," Tayag says. "But they saw the long-term gain of installing that Sapient strategy, so they took the short-term pain for long-term gain."

Indeed, far from costing money, the Sapient example proves how having a great workplace can boost morale, decrease turnover, increase productivity and pad your bottom line. As Tayag puts it, "People don't realize that the benefits outweigh the costs. If you're going to claim something is a core value, you have to be willing to make concessions to adhere to it, and I see that every day here."

PETER EVANS



TD employees engaging in a fun team-building exercise

### TD BANK FINANCIAL GROUP

TORONTO | FINANCIAL SERVICES | 54,995 EMPLOYEES

Size can be a great tool for taking advantage of economies of scale. But when it comes to effectively managing office culture, it can be both a blessing and a curse. That's why it's important for large organizations to put a high priority on monitoring workplace culture. To that end, TD Bank Financial Group checks in twice a year with employees via a survey, says Teri Currie, executive vice-president of human resources.

Like many financial institutions, TD has an attractive compensation package, with competitive base salaries and a popular employee stock-purchase plan that 75% of its staff signs up for. But creating contented workers isn't all about cash. "We've found that it's really about

pride," Currie says. "Making that goodwill sustainable means helping your people achieve their own definition of success. They stay because they're proud to be here."

\$27.5 million to charities in 2005, but it encourages employees to get involved by allowing paid time off—over and above vacation days—for volunteer activities. Though the bank works with countless organizations, some of the major beneficiaries in 2005 were the Children's Miracle Network, the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, the United Way and Habitat for Humanity. TD employees can also apply for a grant for charities they support, after accruing at least 40 hours per year volunteering with the organization. "Our program allows them the flexibility in their schedule to be out in the community donating their time, and backing that activity up with corporate funding," Currie says. At the end of the day, giving back to employees and their community pays for itself in spades. "Employees like to work for winning organizations," Currie argues, "and winning organizations tend to create engaged employees, which produces results, which enhances shareholder value. Our internal research shows that's clearly the case at TD."

Though Currie says TD has

**"I am proud of how we do business and the pride we take in giving back to those around us"**

—A SURVEY RESPONDENT FROM TD

One of the best ways that TD has found to instill that sense of pride, Currie says, is by actively supporting volunteerism. And here again, it's not just about the money: not only did the bank give

a long track record in employee relations, the tipping point might have been the bank's acquisition of Canada Trust in 2000. "Both organizations had a strong history of listening to employees and acting

# BEST WORKPLACES

on suggestions. But post-integration, it became important to define the culture because the road map had changed." Employees needed to know what the new corporate focus was. So Currie says that making the corporate values clear and displaying them in a practical way that resonated with all staff members was vitally important—and benefited everyone in the long run, because they knew what they had to do to get ahead. The TD-Canada Trust union wasn't just the largest bank merger in Canadian history; it was a blending of two successful corporate cultures, Currie adds. And it's worth noting that the new bank's CEO, Ed Clark, came not from the original TD, but from Canada Trust, the acquired company. It just goes to show: at TD, even a small fish can one day find himself the biggest fish in an even bigger pond.

PETER EVANS



Hilti Canada employees in Mississauga exchange back massages during a company team-building exercise

## HILTI (CANADA) CORP.

MISSISSAUGA, ONT. | CONSTRUCTION EQUIPMENT | 274 EMPLOYEES

For 10 years, Hilti developed a can-do attitude using *Gung Ho!*—the title of a book by Escondido, Calif.-based international management training and consulting guru Ken Blanchard—as its mantra. The slogan appeared on internal communications.

Employees even used it as a salute. But *Gung Ho!* was also a training program—complete with a sometimes unintentionally hilarious video—designed to introduce employees to the construction-equipment manufacturer, whose products range from hand-held drilling tools to demolition equipment.

Hilti takes its culture very seriously. So seriously, in fact, that new recruits get two days of “culture training” before they begin four weeks of product and sales training. That’s after four weeks of pre-training.

Last year, though, *Gung Ho!* was transformed into a new program called Culture Journey. It’s not as catchy, certainly, so don’t expect employees to use it as a salutation. But Gareth Lewis, vice-president of human resources for Hilti in North America, says it’s kind of like *Gung Ho!* all grown up. Over the past year, nearly every Hilti employee has gone through a mandatory two-day Culture Journey that not only reintroduces the company’s culture, but also examines how it is using employee and customer feedback

## AT A GLANCE

### BUSINESS OBJECTS

VANCOUVER | INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY; SOFTWARE | 1,245 EMPLOYEES

Management listened when a company-wide vote made it clear that relocating to the suburbs was not an attractive option. Instead, they renovated their building in Vancouver’s Yaletown into an interior-design-award-winning office. Business Objects also supports a wide range of philanthropic events.

### BANFF CARIBOU PROPERTIES LTD.

BANFF, ALTA. | HOSPITALITY | 352 EMPLOYEES

The company, with seven hotels in the Banff area, offers full-time employees with three years’ service a 10-year interest-free loan in the form of a second mortgage matching their down payment of up to \$20,000 on a home.

### FAIRMONT HOTELS & RESORTS

TORONTO | HOSPITALITY | 10,411 EMPLOYEES

Every new worker at the chain’s 21 Canadian hotels walks in the client’s shoes for at least two days as part of their orientation. They get the same service—and may even receive a spa treatment, a welcome reception or an overnight’s stay to get the full guest experience.

### INTUIT CANADA

EDMONTON | IT/SOFTWARE | 385 EMPLOYEES

Intuit, a developer of tax and accounting software, has reading and nap rooms to get the creative juices flowing. Meeting-free Thursdays and no dress code help promote an informal, bottom-up approach to work.



**93%**  
of Hilti’s  
Canadian  
workers  
surveyed  
agree with  
the following  
statement:  
“People here  
are given  
a lot of  
responsibility”

# BEST WORKPLACES

surveys. "Team camps" are broken down into workshops that focus on three specific principles: we do worthwhile work; we take self-responsibility to achieve our goals; and, we encourage each other and recognize results. "At the Culture Journey we sit down and take a critical look at ourselves and say, 'This is where we are not so strong, this is where we need to improve,'" says Lewis. "Because if you don't know where you are and where your problems are, how can you set a direction for the future?"

High-brow ideals aside, the Culture Journey makes sure every employee knows what Hilti stands for and expects. That's especially important given the parent company is a US\$3-billion worldwide behemoth based in Liechtenstein that deals directly with its customers through account managers and its retail outlets Hilti Centers and Hilti Pro Shops. While neither the company's framework ideals of integrity, courage, teamwork and commitment, nor its underlying business philosophy have changed, Culture Journey is meant to be interpreted locally, says Lewis, giving employees a say in how they deal with their customers. That means an account manager in northern British Columbia doesn't have to call head office over every little detail.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Culture Journey is that it's a process that never ends. Preparations are underway for Team Camp 2 this August.

ANDY HOLLOWAY



Family fun at the summer Canada Games in Regina, which SaskTel contributed to as a major corporate sponsor

## SASKTEL

REGINA | TELECOMMUNICATIONS | 4,146 EMPLOYEES

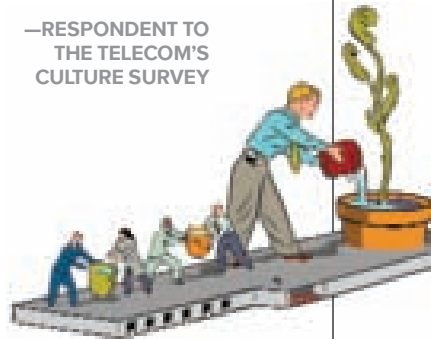
The first time Lena Tanner invited her SaskTel colleagues to participate in a traditional sweat-lodge ceremony to learn more about her Aboriginal heritage, she was understandably nervous. "I don't think a lot of people understand Indian culture," says Tanner, 50, who helps develop new products and services for the Regina-based telecom. She needn't have worried—the ceremony, held in October 2004, was a resounding success for all the participants, both Aboriginal and not. "When a corporation is prepared to invest in initiatives like these, it's because it cares about its people," says Tanner, who also organized a "medicine walk" on the Piapot First Nation reserve to educate coworkers on the healing

powers of indigenous plants and flowers. In both cases, SaskTel senior management threw its full support behind each event. "Where else could you work that gives you that?"

Caring about its Aboriginal employees is a strategic goal for this 98-year-old Crown corporation, which provides cellular, phone, Internet, and multimedia services to 13 cities and more than 500 remote communities in Saskatchewan, many of them inhabited by First Nations and Métis people. Those groups currently make up almost 8% of SaskTel's workforce, a number company president and CEO Robert Watson is hoping will one day mirror the provincial population of 13.5%. But what makes SaskTel different, says diversity manager Terry

**"SaskTel gives every employee opportunities to grow and expand knowledge and skill"**

—RESPONDENT TO THE TELECOM'S CULTURE SURVEY



Bird, is that the \$1.2-billion company does more than pay lip service to its representative workforce strategy. By valuing Aboriginal participation and supporting the goal of self-determination for Saskatchewan's 130,000 Aboriginal people, SaskTel

## AT A GLANCE



also encourages its employees to think of new ways of doing business that will directly benefit First Nations and Métis people.

**Case in point:** For the past seven years SaskTel has contracted a call centre to service its customers in three different First Nations languages. In 2004, the company also set up a high-tech, interactive drop-in centre at its Regina headquarters to encourage Aboriginal youth to consider careers in Saskatchewan's growing telecom industry.

SaskTel says such moves have helped position it as an employer-of-choice in a province where a rapidly aging workforce threatens to create skilled-worker shortages. "Making the workplace more inclusive benefits everyone," says Carolynne Warner, human-resources diversity manager. "This is not just about engaging our employees within the workplace, it's about creating opportunities for them outside these walls too. Saskatchewan's youth are our future employee base—and our future customer base." ERIN POOLEY



Regular floor-hockey games are just part of the family atmosphere at S. C. Johnson and Son Ltd.

## S. C. JOHNSON AND SON LTD.

BRANTFORD, ONT. | MANUFACTURING, PERSONAL AND HOUSEHOLD GOODS | 463 EMPLOYEES

**S**. C. Johnson is a family company. No, really, it's right there next to its name: S. C. Johnson, A Family Company. Yes, it's true that the 119-year-old manufacturer of household goods with international headquarters in Racine, Wis., has been run for five generations by the Johnson clan. But the company—whose products include such well-known brands as Edge, Pledge and Windex—also treats its employees like kin. From an on-site massage therapist and recreation complex to local day care and a cottage resort on ritzy Lake Joseph in Ontario's Muskoka region, S. C. Johnson offers the kind of perks you'd want your relatives

to have. Not to mention an excellent bonus system that includes extremely generous profit-sharing, something the company offers to each and every employee. Perhaps that's why more than one-quarter of its workforce has been with Johnson for more than 15 years, and the company has never had to lay off a single employee. Ever.

Drew Franklin, president of S. C. Johnson's Canadian division, says that while those benefits certainly stand out, it's the company's flexibility and informal culture that attract and keep people working in Brantford, a 90-minute drive southwest of Toronto that is a little off the beaten track for most consumer packaged-goods businesses. For example, S. C. Johnson allows employees to telecommute or work flexible hours to meet the needs of their families and do their jobs. "More students and new recruits are looking for some of those intangibles," says Franklin. The organization also lets workers recover from illness or family emergencies at their own pace by offering two weeks of sick leave at full pay and 24 weeks at two-thirds pay after just one year's service. After five years, employees get 10 weeks of sick leave at full pay, and 16 weeks at two-thirds pay.

One Canadian-only program is the company's Kid's Camps, which operate on days such as Easter Monday and school breaks when day care is closed. Instead of forcing employees to choose between finding alternative child care or taking vacation time, they can, for a nominal

### DELOITTE & TOUCHE LLP

CANADA WIDE | TAX, AUDIT AND FINANCIAL SERVICES | 6,041 EMPLOYEES

A generous medical benefits package (everything from acupuncture to nutritional planning) is covered from Day 1 on the job.

### GT HIRING SOLUTIONS INC.

VICTORIA, WITH 28 SATELLITES | HUMAN RESOURCES (ABORIGINAL FOCUS) | 92 EMPLOYEES

When your operations are spread out geographically—and many offices are staffed by just one person—you need one heck of a team-building experience. An annual January conference provides professional development and recreational.

### CARSWELL

TORONTO | INFORMATION SERVICES PROVIDER | 683 EMPLOYEES

Research and information-services provider Carswell has a popular Very Important Peer program, in which staffers recognize each other's accomplishments with simple notes and gifts. More than 1,000 awards were handed out in 2005.

### CANADIAN HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH FOUNDATION

OTTAWA | HEALTH CARE | 50 EMPLOYEES

This non-profit gives policy advice to health-care decision-makers. In addition to vacation and sick time, staff are given extra "wellness" to "help recharge their batteries."

# BEST WORKPLACES

fee, bring their children into work, where they are taken care of by YMCA staff, says Shirley Harries-Langley, vice-president of human resources. The company will also hand out pagers for a period of time if employees need to be instantly reachable by their families. Harries-Langley says the idea started for expectant parents, but has evolved to cover many other scenarios. "We allow our employees to have a relationship with us that provides them with a situation where there are fewer work/life trade-offs," she says.

Although S. C. Johnson has sales offices in Calgary and Montreal, and a small manufacturing plant in Varennes, Que., most employees work in the Brantford facility, where there is a full-sized gym—which doubles as an assembly room for semi-annual full-employee meetings—a squash court and a weight room that spouses and children can also use free of charge. Two or three times a week, a ball-hockey game will break out during lunch. After all, the family that plays together, stays together.

ANDY HOLLOWAY



Keller Williams Ottawa Realty donates \$3,000 to Harmony House, a women's shelter in the nation's capital

## KELLER WILLIAMS OTTAWA REALTY

OTTAWA | REAL ESTATE | 175 EMPLOYEES

**N**o matter how great a workplace is, it won't be a perfect fit for everyone. A successful company must attract and nurture the right mix of people. Case in point: the real-estate franchise Keller Williams, which has more than 380 branches in the U.S. and Canada. Its values statement gives "spirituality, family and then business" top priority. At the Ottawa office—quite a culturally diverse agency—some 20 co-workers gather over lunch every Tuesday to discuss the Bible. That's not a common practice in your typical

secular workplace in Canada, but Keller Williams promotes such soulful pursuits, even urging individuals to adopt a "personal mission." For some, it may sound strange. "Often-times, we're called an airy-fairy company, or we're called a cult," says CEO Mo Anderson on a recruiting DVD. "And I just say to people who just get so worried about that, 'Oh honey, don't worry about it. They're just ignorant.' They don't know the difference between the words "cult"—that's where you drink the Kool-Aid—and "culture," which is simply a belief

# 86%

of Keller Williams Ottawa employees say they receive a fair share of company profits

system or a value system that you have clearly defined and you attempt to follow."

Keller Williams' pay structure encourages teamwork—quite uncommon in the ultra-competitive real-estate world—because profit-sharing is based on the commissions of recruits agents refer to the company and, in turn, those people's referrals. Each year, agents give up 30% of their first \$50,000 in commissions to the agency (about 10 house sales), but keep 100% over and above that. And unlike most real-estate brokerages, if they fall short of target, they don't have to top up the difference. The result? A positive atmosphere that supports new recruits. "There is a learning environment that I've never seen at any other real estate office, and this is my third," says Lori Briard, director of agent services. In less than five years, Keller Williams' Ottawa office has become one of the largest agencies in the city. That's good for more than just the soul.

ANDREW WAHL

### AT A GLANCE

#### SAINT ELIZABETH HEALTH CARE MARKHAM, ONT. | HEALTH-CARE SERVICES | 3,633 EMPLOYEES

Serving 21 regions across Ontario, virtual capabilities allow health workers to come up with new ways to deliver the best home care. Nurses, for example, use digital photography to send images to wound specialists for timely advice.

#### GLOBALIVE COMMUNICATIONS TORONTO | TELECOM | 61 EMPLOYEES

This niche telecom services provider—whose diverse product line and services include discount long-distance, VoIP and video-conferencing—brings in New York City-based career coach Malcolm Cullen to help all employees (30% of whom are visible minorities) with everything from how to take initiative to how to integrate with their team.



#### JOHN WILEY & SONS CANADA TORONTO | PUBLISHING | 127 EMPLOYEES

Flexible hours, job sharing and work-at-home schedules and cross-border job shadowing have kept turnover low at this professional, trade and educational publishing company. Since it acquired a smaller publisher in 2002, only one of its new employees has left voluntarily.



# TRUST IS TOPS

How you can build a better workplace culture

BY GRAHAM LOWE



More and more executives are equating corporate culture with business success. In fact, the once fuzzy notion is gaining a strategic edge.

At a minimum, an organization's culture—"the way we do things here"—must promote core values and ethical standards.

But a vibrant workplace culture can do much more, forging a strong link between people and performance. This happens when culture comes alive in the relationships that bind employees with each other, with their managers and with customers.

A positive culture energizes employees to excel in their jobs and supports them to meet their personal needs and goals. With a talent crunch upon us, the quality of the culture an organization builds will either be a competitive advantage or disadvantage. Research by the Great Place to Work Institute, a global workplace consulting firm that compiles best-workplaces lists in 29 countries, shows

that *trust* is the bedrock of a positive organizational culture. A high-trust culture defines great workplaces, regardless of an organization's size, sector or country. Employees trust managers who are concerned about their well-being, listen and respond to their input, are open and honest about change, and consistently act the organization's values. Trustworthy managers also help instil in employees a sense of pride in their work and a true sense of camaraderie.

**Employees must be more than engaged. They must be inspired**

This powerful combination of trust, pride and camaraderie inspires employees to be creative, innovative, and to take risks—in short, to operate like business owners. That has a powerful impact on performance. Independent analysis shows that publicly traded companies on

*Fortune's* list of 100 Best Companies To Work For in the U.S. and the *Financial Times'* list of best workplaces in the U.K., both compiled by the Great Place to Work Institute, consistently outperform their peers financially.

So it is not surprising that 78% of the employees on the *Canadian Business* inaugural list of the Best Workplaces in

# BEST WORKPLACES

Canada indicate they regularly look forward to coming to work every day. And that trend is not exclusive to Canadian organizations. The Great Place to Work Institute reports similar findings in all of its lists published around the world. Employees at these leading workplaces are more than engaged; they are truly inspired by their jobs, their co-workers, and their company. In contrast, the average Canadian employer is lucky to have one-third of its workers feeling so inspired, according to a recent survey by EKOS Research Associates Inc. and the Graham Lowe Group.

Closing the inspiration gap often requires a shift in how senior managers think about their people. In great workplaces, leaders view their organization's culture through a strategic lens. Consider how managers in diverse organizations across Canada and the U.S. have built cultures that are both people-focused *and* high-performance. Vancity's growth into Canada's largest credit union is the fulfillment of its values and commitments, one of which is to ensure that it is a truly great place to work. At Urban Systems, a Canadian engineering and urban-planning consulting firm, the philosophy is "happy staff means happy clients," a belief reinforced by company-wide conversations about how to live each of the firm's core values. Leaders at Baptist Health Care, in Pensacola, Fla., recognized that culture can either drive or drag strategy, and proceeded to create a culture that equally values patients and staff.

Another lesson from great workplaces is the steps leaders take to ensure that *all* employees are involved in continuously reinforcing what's distinctive about the culture. For example, new recruits at Hilti Canada receive intensive training on the multinational construction-equipment-maker's distinctive culture, which emphasizes the importance of worthwhile work, being in control of achieving your goals, and celebrating others' successes.

In all these organizations, business metrics are linked to the goal of creating and sustaining a positive, unique and trust-based culture. But metrics don't give the full picture. When a CFO sees dozens of anonymous comments from an employee survey saying, "I love working at this place," the people strategy comes alive. In the past year, CEOs at a number of organizations associated with the Great Place to Work Institute mobilized cultural change by committing to make all their workplaces "great by 2008." That's a stretch goal, but the journey is what matters. Here are five principles that can help managers get there:

**1 DETERMINE WHERE YOUR ORGANIZATION** is on the trust continuum. Is it relatively easy to have open conversations about how business decisions affect employee trust, or is trust simply not talked about at the executive table?

**2 MANAGERS NEED TO UNDERSTAND** that every interaction is an opportunity to build trust, and that missteps can quickly break trust.

**3 FOCUS ON A FEW KEY TRUST-BUILDING CHANGES** and pursue these consistently and relentlessly, recognizing that transforming a culture is evolutionary, not revolutionary.

## ARE YOU CUTTING IT?

### A manager's checklist for creating a high-trust culture that instils pride and builds camaraderie

#### ACTIONS ON CREDIBILITY

- How visible are you with your staff?
- Do managers' behaviours match their words? Do they keep their promises?
- How effective is the two-way communication?

#### ACTIONS ON RESPECT

- Do you view someone as an "employee" or as a whole person?
- How collaborative is decision-making?
- Have you put the right people in the right jobs and given them the resources to be highly effective?

#### ACTIONS ON FAIRNESS

- How consistent is the distribution of benefits and perks?
- Are promotion processes widely understood and consistently followed?
- What can employees do when they need to appeal a decision?

#### ACTIONS ON PRIDE

- Have you defined what you want your employee experience to be?
- Would you recommend your company as an employer to your close friends?
- How have you connected an employee's job to a tangible outcome?

#### ACTIONS ON CAMARADERIE


- How do teams and supervisors welcome new employees to the company?
- How much fun is it to work here?
- Are you better at task accomplishment than relationship building?
- How are employees involved in the community?

SOURCE: GREAT PLACE TO WORK INSTITUTE

**4 UNDERSTAND THAT HOW** you actually carry out changes to improve the work environment—*especially* by involving employees in the process—is more important than what the changes are.

**5 LEVERAGE WHAT'S ALREADY SPECIAL**, encouraging employees to communicate and celebrate the unique strengths of the culture that energize them to contribute their best.

Implementing these action principles requires senior managers to reach out to employees. That may push their comfort levels. But this small risk is well worth taking, and will pay off in improved employee commitment. One of the practices that distinguishes organizations on the Great Place to Work Institute's best workplaces lists from their peers, in Canada and elsewhere, is a relentless focus on active communication with employees through multiple channels: town-hall meetings, focus groups, surveys and, perhaps most important, face-to-face interactions between senior managers and workers on the front lines.

This year, look for your future competitive advantage in your workplace culture. Start by finding the biggest levers you can put your hands on to increase trust. Just ask your employees—they can help point the way. 

*Graham Lowe is one of the founding partners of the Great Place to Work Institute Canada and president of the Graham Lowe Group, a consultancy firm based in Kelowna, B.C. He can be reached at [glowe@greatplacetowork.ca](mailto:glowe@greatplacetowork.ca).*