

The End of the Road for the Best Workplaces Study?



Bob Lee
CEO, Great Place to Work® Institute Ireland

Does the current economic downturn signal the end of our long-running study of Ireland's Best Workplaces?

Organisations that once struggled to fill key positions are now spoilt for choice of great candidates, and job seekers who in recent years could pick and choose between open positions now count themselves lucky if they can even find a job to apply for. Employees who once looked for job satisfaction are now satisfied just to have a job, while employers who previously threw lavish annual staff celebrations will instead celebrate if their business can just manage to survive to the end of this year.

Against this background, surely the Best Workplaces study is no longer necessary or relevant?

You might be surprised to learn that it's just the opposite case! Far from abandoning the study, many organisations now consider it to be more necessary and more relevant than ever before. Indeed, many have formally committed to take part in the study in each of the *next three years* and have gone to considerable lengths to communicate this commitment to their employees.

What's driving this continuing interest in the study?

For some organisations, it's business as usual despite the current economic challenges. Their commitment to building high-trust workplace relationships is sincere, and the Best Workplaces process gives them unique access to specialist knowledge; directly relevant benchmark data; peer networking; and education and action-planning activities that together help them to build and maintain workplace trust.

For others, it's a way to reassure their people that trust still matters, despite the difficult decisions that have been made and implemented recently. Taking part in the Best Workplaces study shows employees that trust is not being abandoned, and that the organisation remains committed to being a great employer. It also shows that it intends to be around, and thriving, in three years time!

Despite the softer labour market, many organisations are still under pressure to fill key positions with the best available people, and to hold on to the key people that they already have. Top talent

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is a finite resource. The tougher the economic conditions, the greater the demand for top talent – and therefore the greater the need to be independently verified as being a Great Place to Work®.

Finally, many organisations recognise that they are facing their sternest-ever test of character, and that their adherence to their stated values and beliefs is coming under unprecedented scrutiny from staff and other stakeholders. They know that if they are seen to walk away now from their previously stated commitments to building a high-trust workplace, they can never go back – because who will believe them? And they also know the devastating impact that a further drop in trust will have on employee morale, productivity, turnover in key positions, and overall business outcomes. For them, in making a long-term commitment to the Best Workplaces study they are also showing their long-term commitment to trust, and allowing their *true* character to shine through.

A few examples, please.....

Microsoft Ireland, this year's overall 'Best Workplace', is just one of the many organisations to have already committed to the process until 2012. So what's their reasoning?

"The Business World is changing. New opportunities are emerging that require continued innovation, and engaged employees with high levels of trust drive innovation", Clara Malone, HR Project Manager with Microsoft Ireland, told me, adding "Our employees are our greatest resource, and a culture of high trust generates greater return on this investment, ultimately ensuring our continued business success".

Medtronic Ireland is another organisation that has made a three year commitment to take part in the study. Explaining their decision, Dorothy Kelly, Director of Human Resources told me that she believes that trust has an important role to play in any organisation, particularly in the current business environment. "Great workplaces nurture a culture of trust – employees trusting in the vision and leadership of their management; and managers trusting in the capabilities and competencies of their employees. Building this level of trust is key in any successful organisation and requires a strong ongoing commitment by management to communicate openly, thus engaging the workforce in delivering common goals and building the organisation of the future together"

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For **Tourism Ireland**, it's about demonstrating their commitment to building a high-trust workplace over the long-term, driven by the strong links between a committed, motivated staff and stakeholder satisfaction, according to Marjorie Farrelly, their HR Manager.

NCPS is another company that has made a three year commitment: "Our business is all about trust. We must trust our staff, and they in turn must trust us and see management as being approachable" explains Chief Operating Officer, Ray Whelan.

That was then and this is now.....?

You might perhaps have noticed that these comments could as easily have been made at any time during the past seven years – in good times or in bad – and that's the whole point!

Our clients' commitment to building their high-trust workplaces is genuine. They are in business for the long haul, and they know and appreciate the extraordinary Power of Trust to drive and sustain their business success. So, faced with a challenging business environment and the need to take difficult decisions in the short term so as to ensure that their organisations will thrive in the long term, how do they act?

They don't abandon their belief in trust, nor do they lose interest in benchmarking against, and learning from, the world's most trusted employers. Instead, they act with increased determination to demonstrate their strong belief that if trust was **important** in recent years, it's **vital** this year, and it will be **absolutely essential** in the challenging but potentially better years ahead.

So, does your organisation intend to participate in this year's study, and what message will you be sending to your people? Will you be telling them that trust is no longer so important - that your commitment to building high-trust relationships is off the agenda until things get better? And if so, how will that message impact on workplace morale and productivity? And how can you credibly get trust back onto the organisational agenda in the future?

Or will you instead be showing them your sincere belief that trust matters now more than ever, and demonstrating your sincere commitment to building a high-trust workplace that will be around long after the current crisis ends?

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Management at **Eirgrid** – another three year committer - are clear on where they stand. “Long term engagement and involvement of employees across the board is essential at Eirgrid. Our challenge – based on a partnership approach – is to tap into the creativity, intellect and brainpower of our people and this can be done most effectively in a high trust environment”, according to HR Director, John Cloonan.

I’m sorry that this article has been a little on the long side (!) but I really wanted to get the point across to you that our Best Workplaces study is more relevant – and more in demand – than ever before. To be candid, we have been slightly surprised at the extraordinary take-up on our two and three year commitment options, and we are tremendously reassured to see that so many of our clients place such high value on the need to continue to build trust even in the midst of the present downturn.

If you – like most employers - have had to take and implement some tough decisions in your organisation this year, your employees will be scanning the work environment for signals of what the future holds. What better way for you to inspire a vision of a brighter and more prosperous future than by telling your people – “We are still committed to high trust; we are still committed to being a great employer; and we are still committed to the Best Workplaces process.”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Lee".

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If you would like more information on the many practical ways in which the Great Place to Work® Institute can help your organisation to develop lasting competitive advantage through building a high-trust culture please contact me, or any member of the team, at:

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You can find further articles on a wide range of trust-related topics at <http://www.greatplacetowork.ie/education/articles.php>