

What Canada's Best Small Employers Do to Engage Their Employees

The firms on our list don't have the budgets of big businesses, but they don't skimp on perks

Mai Nguyen || November 5, 2015



Photo: Robert Caruso

Gibraltar Solutions has only about 50 employees, yet it recognizes its workers' contributions with a generosity that would shame multinational corporations with exponentially larger budgets.

When employees hit their 15-year service anniversary, the Mississauga, Ont.-based IT solutions provider sends them on an all-expenses-paid Caribbean trip for two. The company knows new hires don't arrive expecting a job for life, but if they stick it out, the sunny escape is meant to show their loyalty is appreciated. "It confirms their work is valued," says human resources director Joan Hughson. "And when employees know that, their satisfaction and productivity rises."

Gibraltar also understands few people enjoy the monotony of the same Monday-to-Friday routine, so the company has embraced remote working in a significant way. There is no cap on how many days employees can work from home (or their local café). Also gone are strict start and stop times for the workday, replaced by a requirement that employees be accessible between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Adding more flexibility to their lives, workers aren't assigned a mobile phone but get up to \$2,300 to buy a device of their choice. These combined perks give employees autonomy over when and how they work. This makes them feel trusted and empowered to independently manage their time and responsibilities. "A lot of our work is independent, so employees appreciate that we're not looking over their shoulder all the time," says Hughson. "If we have to do that, then we have the wrong employee."

DLGL, an HR software developer based in Blainville, Que., does look over its employees' shoulders—but only to ensure they're not feeling overwhelmed by their responsibilities. The firm asks its workers to track their hours, which are supposed to average 38 hours a week. If an employee is working significantly more than that, it gets flagged and the company investigates. If the problem is too heavy a workload, extra hands are found to assist. If it's a productivity issue, the task gets reassigned. The source of overtime is found and addressed so employees can enjoy work-life balance, a plus that likely plays into the company's average employee tenure of 17 years.

The company has also taken proactive steps to improve the "life" side of that balancing act. When DLGL noticed its employees were struggling to find family doctors, it decided to hire one—along with a physiotherapist—to work in its office two days a week. About 60% of employees are patients as well as their spouses and children. This not only keeps staffers' health in check, it means they're likelier to stay loyal to the company. Best of all, they don't need to shave hours off work to make their appointments; they just walk up a flight of stairs when the doctor is ready to see them. "When people are in good condition, they make smarter decisions," says president Jacques Guénette.

For Nulogy, a Toronto-based software supplier, engagement starts on an employee's first day. Recognizing that starting a job is always awkward, Nulogy puts new hires through an intensive orientation. In the second month, they get face time with the CEO, who explains the company's vision. They are taken to customer sites to see first-hand how the company's software is being used. This process not only shows new employees how much they matter, it creates transparency around the company's operations and demonstrates how their work contributes to the whole.

The company also empowers workers to solve problems for themselves. Taking cues from a 2001 book, *Software for Your Head* by Jim and Michele McCarthy, Nulogy adopted a few core protocols to help even the most timid staffers feel like they have a voice. For example, teams vote on disputed issues, like whether a meeting should last five minutes or an hour. "People are people, so they can't always work well together," says chief technology officer Jason Yuen. "If you show them how to make their views more explicit, they become more engaged." By giving employees a clear, formal process to achieve decisions among their peers, they feel a greater sense of ownership and accomplishment in their projects. Plus, a collaborative workforce is a happier workforce.

SEE WHO MADE THE 2016 AON BEST EMPLOYERS IN CANADA LIST

SMALL AND MEDIUM EMPLOYERS



LARGE EMPLOYERS

