

A CARSWELL BUSINESS PUBLICATION

BANKING ON YOUR REPUTATION

Employers looking to recruit and retain top talent can only get so far with cash. Sometimes there's no more to offer, and what differentiates an organization from the competition becomes a question of career growth, work-life benefits and the work atmosphere. Far from intangible, these issues will make or break employers pursuing the title "employer of choice." For HR the task is to create, and capitalize on, a good reputation.

A place for people and growth

How two 'employers of choice' sell their reputation

BY UYEN VU

Well before recruiter Jeff Vainio joined CNC Global in April, he was already familiar with the company.

The Toronto-headquartered information technology recruiting firm had a reputation in the industry for ethical conduct: practices like interviewing every jobseeker, checking references before recommending a candidate and keeping personal details confidential.

"In terms of work ethics, at the agencies where I've worked before, there was a lot of dog-eat-dog sort of thing. Sometimes co-workers went behind your back to get a placement, but here everything's by the book, which was what I liked about it," said Vainio.

His co-workers like different things about the firm. For recruiter Susan Kim, it was the intimacy of the working environment that convinced her to leave a larger company two years ago. For Stephen Scruton, account manager since last November, the access to senior managers means he can always approach them with questions and learn from their experience.

People are drawn to jobs for different reasons, but those reasons tend to fall along the same common themes: a sense of community at work, an opportunity to learn and grow, a sense of purpose in the job. Pay is not high on that list. Ask Vainio, Kim and Scruton: they work on full commission.

In a 2001 survey of 2,500 Canadian workers conducted by the Canadian Policy Research Network, researchers Graham Lowe and Grant



Photo: Larry Nicols, CNC Global

Human resource director Leandra Lackie puts people first at IT recruiter CNC Global.

Schellenberg found that employment relationships matter the most to workers. People often think of "a good job" as synonymous with a standard job — one that's permanent, full time and comes with bene-

fits. But not all non-standard jobs, said Lowe, are characterized by weak relationships. Likewise, not all full-time, permanent jobs offer workers the

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RECRUITMENT & STAFFING: BANKING ON YOUR REPUTATION

More than just a branding exercise

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fulfilling employment relationships they're looking for.

'It's the people'

At CNC Global, human resource director Leandra Lackie discovered the importance of relationships on her own — and by asking. Three years ago, after the slump in the IT job market compelled the company to close an office in the United States and lay off about 40 people, morale plummeted. And in response, Lackie undertook a “branding exercise.”

“I sat down with the managers, the support staff, the salespeople and asked them why they were here?” said Lackie. “Everybody had the same reasons. The number one reason was the people that they worked with.” Second on the list were the opportunities for growth and learning, and third was the company's flexibility.

The concerns they expressed also spoke to the importance of a good relationship with the employer. “Back then, they were concerned about the organization not caring, because we had to make these tough decisions. They wanted more openness. Three years ago, there were a lot of closed-door meetings and employees wanted to know what was going on,” said Lackie.

As a result of these consultations, the CEO now delivers quarterly reports in front of employees at the head office, and over the phones to people

at the company's eight offices across Canada. “People now rank our management team as very open.”

Lackie also implemented other programs to encourage a strong relationship between employee and firm. Under CNC Global's mentorship program, a new hire is matched up with someone from another branch who has to remain available to the new hire for three months in exchange for extra pay. And every year, high performers get a chance to “contribute to the strategic direction of the company,” said Lackie.

“They have an executive leader who works with them and challenges them, ‘What do you think are our top three threats?’ It really pushes them to think strategically and to think like a leader. And ultimately, that helps them when they're in front of the client.”

Lackie's efforts paid off. This past year, the company came out on top in a new ranking of small and medium enterprises conducted by the Queen's Centre for Enterprise Development at Queen's University and Hewitt Associates, the consultancy behind the 50 Best Employers in Canada survey.

Asked why the “employer of choice” strategy was important to her at a time when job hopping wasn't a concern, Lackie pointed to the 50-some employees in sales who had five or 10 years of experience at the company. “That's a huge selling factor because the staffing industry tends to have

high turnover. We're proud of our ethics, of our people and of our tenure. So we could take the approach that these people are replaceable, but I don't think that would have gotten us where we are today.”

Not just about keeping people

All too often, said Lowe, an “employer of choice” branding strategy remains just that — branding. This approach can only backfire, as job candidates — sooner or later — realize it is hollow rhetoric, said Lowe.

At Edward Jones, a Toronto-headquartered brokerage firm that has twice made the 50 Best Employers list, human resource manager Veronica Ding said she seldom thinks of being a good employer as a branding strategy.

“We really care about the well-being of each associate,” she said. “And we want to be a good corporate citizen. Not everything we do is profit-focused. We want associates at Edward Jones to have valuable and challenging opportunities.”

Many other organizations look at being “employer of choice” as a strategy for recruiting and retaining people, but Ding said she's not so focused on whether people stay or go.

“I can't speak for other departments, but in HR there are a few people who've left who still keep in touch. They move to other firms, but sometimes when they come up against

challenges, they'll call us for help,” said Ding.

“We have had people who join other firms, even competitors, who two years later will reconsider. They may decide that Edward Jones was better, and they would come back.” In exit interviews, Ding added, “people will often say that they considered Edward Jones a good employer,” even if they were leaving because they didn't get along with their co-worker at the small two-person brokerage offices.

Like many employees at CNC Global, brokers at Edward Jones earn only commission. That's why the company puts so much stock in training, said Ding. Even when the stock market hit the steep downward slide, the company didn't cut back on the \$5,000 tuition reimbursement available to each employee, said Ding, who herself has been working on an executive MBA at York University's Schulich School of Business in Toronto.

“Many companies don't spend that kind of money on an HR person. They'll send a CEO or a CIO, but not someone from HR,” said Ding. “Where we can cut costs, we will, like we'll encourage people to print on both sides of the paper. But we believe in investing in people.”

Ding said being in the business of investing has helped the company learn to look at things in the long term. “We can't react to short-term market changes. I think we're always prepared for market downturns, even in good days.”