

Engaging Workplaces

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Image by: Adam Blasberg

Every day is salad day at Vega, where staff have access to a fully stocked kitchen.

B.C. employers are setting the bar for employee engagement and healthy places to work

Judging a workplace based on the calibre and frequency of its staff lunches, the decor of its lounge areas or its liberal policy with video-game time is a bit like picking a college based on the ferocity of frosh week. When the hangover clears, you've got real life to deal with.

In real life, when employees feel ineffective and undervalued, like work is taking over their life, or that they're out of the loop and dread walking through the door every morning, no number of staff barbecues or dog days are going to set things right.

That's not to say that companies that have what Graham Lowe, author of *Creating Healthy Organizations*, calls "window dressings" can't also be fantastic places to work. It's just that there has to be some substance behind the curtains. The key to telling the really great employers from the imposters, says Lowe, is to look at the motivation behind the perks: are they prescriptions borrowed from a how-to list, or are they the authentic manifestations of a respectful and supportive organization?

A number of B.C. companies are setting the standard, showing us that there's more to a healthy workplace than shiny paint and chrome finishes. We looked under the hood of dozens of businesses across the province, and consulted with the experts in order to dig beneath the clichés to find out what really makes a healthy workplace tick.

Wellness

The first and most essential piece in a healthy workplace is exactly that: health. An efficient and productive operation demands workers who are fit, physically, mentally and emotionally. What makes a company a truly great workplace depends on how it builds upon that foundation.

A healthy workplace starts with a benefits package, usually including an employee assistance program. Many of the companies *BCBusiness* examined offer a range of additional options for promoting health and wellness, from bike rooms and shower facilities, to kitchens stocked with healthy staples, gym memberships and lunch-and-learn seminars on a variety of topics such as nutrition and finances.

Wellness encompasses physical and mental health, which includes stress management. Supporting employee wellness requires attentiveness and flexibility. Joti Samra, a psychologist and organizational consultant, believes that businesses should understand that “work fits into the context of life.”

Marie Mac Donald, a corporate culture consultant, says leaders need to be empathetic and to continually check in on employee wellness, asking, “How is my team doing right now? Is the stress over the roof? Am I putting too many demands?”

Emotional support is part of the equation too, according to Julia Kaisla, who heads workplace initiatives for the Canadian Mental Health Association in B.C. Companies can inspire a more mentally healthy workplace by adopting socially supportive initiatives. “Sometimes they’re as easy as saying, ‘The next time we go for lunch, we’re going to invite a different person so they don’t feel excluded.’ That way they’re creating a greater sense of inclusion in the organization,” explains Kaisla. Along the same lines, Mac Donald suggests that leaders encourage staff to have a friend at work. “I’ve heard a lot of senior leaders sort of scoff at that and say, ‘Well, what does that have to do with anything?’” The answer, she says, is “social connectedness.”

CASE STUDY

Vega (Sequel Naturals Ltd.)

Number of Employees: 82

Location: Burnaby

Vega employees eat a lot of greens. And it's not just Vega's own plant-based products; they have the option of partaking in a chef-prepared meal or blending up something of their own in the large, stocked kitchen.

To round out the wellness picture, the company encourages employees to share its goals: to “know better, eat better, feel better and do better.” These goals are prominently posted on the wall so staff can support each other in reaching them. Once goals (or general good work) are achieved, staff post paper “high-fives” as a means of recognizing their peers.

Other wellness motivators include the company's "do-good day," when everyone volunteers together, and a workspace that has been designed for personal interaction, including a space in the reception area that is kept clear for yoga classes.

The company even gives bonus points for those who have a best friend at work. Friends aren't hard to come by, since "it's a culture of joiners," says company president and founder Charles Chang, with many team members taking on challenges together, such as the Tough Mudder.

CASE STUDY

Royal Roads University

Number of Employees: 470

Location: Victoria

When it comes to psychological and physical health, Lisa Robinson, manager of recruitment and organizational development at RRU, says the university's surroundings play an invaluable part. She notes that in addition to "the sheer physical beauty" of a campus on 565 acres with old-growth forest, the trail system and the recreation centre make staying active easy.

RRU doesn't stop at physical fitness in its holistic approach to wellness. In addition to benefits and an employee assistance program, Robinson says, the university offers seminars on such topics as financial well-being, and hosts a wellness fair where employees mingle with health experts. The university also encourages volunteering, invites feedback for improvements, provides kitchens, bike storage and change facilities and has progressive inclusion and anti-bullying policies.

For something a little different, employees can get an emotional pick-me-up at the lunchtime choir club or the annual croquet tournament.

Professional Development

"The actual pay that people receive, in itself, rarely is a huge source of satisfaction," says Creating Healthy Organizations author Graham Lowe. He believes that as long as staff are fairly compensated, job enjoyment comes from being given challenges and being trusted and supported to meet professional and personal goals.

Those goals, says Cissy Pau of Clear HR Consulting in Vancouver, should come from the employee, not the employer. "If they don't believe in it, they don't think they can achieve it and they don't want to do it, it's never going to happen," she says. "But if they're involved in coming up with that target, if they're involved in creating the plan of how they're going to get there, they're going to be that much more engaged."

Setting goals and facilitating employees to meet them includes opportunities for promotion, but traditionally also includes on-the-job training and internal development and mentoring programs. Allowances might also be available to attend conferences and take courses. Corporate culture consultant Marie Mac Donald believes that the evolution of professional development means an organization becomes a learning environment. "It's all about, 'We're all learning together,'" she explains, adding that it's an idea whose time has come. "The complexity in today's workplace makes it really challenging at times to come up with the one right thing to do and so, often the groups that I work with are having to learn their way through it." It's an approach that keeps companies nimble in an ever-changing economy

and provides employees with ample opportunity to function with some autonomy, take on challenges and develop their abilities on the job. All of which leads to a more engaged staff.

CASE STUDY

Coast Capital Savings Credit Union

Number of Employees: 1,660

Location: Surrey; 50 branches in Metro Vancouver and on Vancouver Island

It's Your Call is an initiative that gives employees autonomy to provide real help to customers, without delay. It's just one of the programs Kathy McGarrigle, chief operating officer, cites as an example of empowering employees and helping them grow. She also mentions the credit union's mentoring program, internal training, external training and individual career mapping as further examples of its approach to professional development. On a personal level, the company offers access to self-improvement articles and online courses, and allows employees to take paid time off for charitable activities. Perhaps the most telling initiative is the credit union's employee promise: to change the way employees feel about work forever.

CASE STUDY

Goldcorp Inc.

Number of Employees: 150

Location: Vancouver

Paul Farrow, senior vice-president responsible for people and safety, says that employees are encouraged to be entrepreneurial and are rewarded for acting autonomously. Ideas tabled under this core value have resulted in changes at the organization, including the creation of an initiative to attract more women to the mining industry. In addition to internal training, Goldcorp offers its employees internal growth opportunities. All global positions at the director level and below are posted internally and employees are encouraged to apply. That includes applicants who might not be directly qualified. "If we develop your career, it won't necessarily be a straight-line career," says Farrow. He uses an accountant as an example: "You might have to go to one of the mines to become a senior accountant, back to corporate to become a finance director, then maybe back to the regions to become a regional finance director. That's how we develop the careers of individuals; they are not always straight lines."

Corporate Culture

Describing a good corporate culture often devolves to a simple list of perks, because explaining the underpinnings of something so intangible can be elusive. Corporate culture consultant Marie Mac Donald sums it up simply: "It's all about respect," she says, "and another element of it is trust—trusting your employees." Those two principles mean treating people well, acknowledging their contribution, being inclusive, supporting a healthy work/life balance and ultimately, keeping employees engaged. According to Mac Donald, "86 per cent of employees who are engaged feel happy at work."

Corporate culture is not something that can be written up and handed out, like a new set of bylaws. It needs to be organic and authentic, never forced. "A lot of companies say, 'Well, we don't have a culture,'" says Cissy Pau of Clear HR Consulting. "Well, you know what? You do. You have it based on

how people treat each other and the example that's being set by the manager and the manager's manager and the CEO." Those examples and how the employees follow is what creates the culture.

CASE STUDY

Disney Interactive Worlds

Number of Employees: 300

Location: Kelowna

"I don't know really how it happened," says Lynn D'Albertanson, director of communications and engagement for the Kelowna business formerly known as Club Penguin, designer of an interactive children's website. "The culture here is definitely one where everyone respects each other. Everyone thinks that it's all about the kids, so, everything that you do is centred around, 'Does this matter to children?'" she explains.

The culture also inspires workers to volunteer, be goal-oriented, and communicate respectfully. The company further fosters this through shows of appreciation such as providing a space that is social and ergonomically designed, celebrating team achievements publicly, perks that include Disney park passes and supporting a positive work/life balance.

"If you walk through here at 5 p.m., it's a ghost town," says D'Albertanson. While she claims not to know where the culture originates, she admits that the company is always looking for "fit" when it interviews new team members.

CASE STUDY

Arc'teryx Equipment Inc.

Number of Employees: 570

Location: North Vancouver

Innovation and a passion for the product lie at the core of the Arc'teryx culture. "The reason people come here is because of the brand; they can relate to it," says Jennifer Martin, senior manager of human resources. "Then, once you are here, a lot of it has to do with being supported to be innovative."

That support comes in the form of flexible work schedules, in-house personal and professional development programs called Arc U, and being able to climb in the bouldering cave at head office.

The company also supports a culture of communication. It recently launched a website for employees to provide feedback on topics including innovation, quality craftsmanship, onboarding and corporate social responsibility. Martin feels it's a fun and friendly place where people work hard because they care about what they are doing.



*Image: Adam Blasberg
Team-building at Arc'teryx
includes such projects as
building a hiking trail on
nearby Fromme Mountain
in North Vancouver.*

Safety

It may not be the top attribute people think of when listing the merits of exceptional workplaces, but providing a safe environment is a big part of the equation. Creating Healthy Organizations author Graham Lowe says that employee involvement is a key to creating a physically safe work environment. “There is actually quite a body of research on what’s called participatory ergonomics, showing that equipment design and workspace design will have better results in terms of reduced injury if the people who will be using that equipment or that space are directly involved in the design process.”

Decreased threat of physical harm isn’t the only factor in feeling safe at work. The National Standard of Canada for Health and Safety in the Workplace, released in January 2013, has put psychological safety at the forefront. The Mental Health Commission of Canada website reports that mental-health problems and illnesses are the No. 1 cause of disability in Canada. Companies keen to be great workplaces are now adopting these voluntary standards. Psychologist Joti Samra believes it starts with a policy specifying zero-tolerance of bullying and harassment. She adds one more priority: “Making sure that we are mindful of the kind of behaviours that particular leaders in an organization are modelling, because you get a top-down, trickle-down effect.” And this, she continues, can create a culture where people think that behaviour is okay.

Julia Kaisla of the Canadian Mental Health Association cautions that staff behaviour must also fall in line daily through a grassroots socially supportive environment. These are the foundations of a physically and psychologically safe workplace.

CASE STUDY

Vancouver Airport Authority

Number of Employees: 400

Location: Richmond

Safety “is at the heart of everything we do,” says Craig Richmond, president and CEO of the Vancouver Airport Authority.

That may be expected at an airport, but Richmond says YVR goes beyond the requirements dictated by commercial aviation. It also fosters a fundamental culture of communication to ensure that employees feel empowered to raise issues, report concerns or admit to mistakes. “We don’t penalize,” explains Richmond. “We have a culture of not being punitive.”

The airport also aims to ensure it’s a psychologically, as well as physically, safe place to work. Initiatives include a wellness program (with 99 per cent employee participation), a culture that invites entrepreneurial ideas to improve the environment, access to training, an extensive recognition program and strong communication values (including regular video blogs by Richmond).

CASE STUDY

B.C. Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres

Number of Employees: 33

Location: Victoria



*Image: Nik West
Jamin Zuroski creates art that reflects the philosophy of the B.C. Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres and is on display in their new offices.*

Creating a psychologically safe workplace is critical to the BCAAFC because the culture at the association's head office trickles down to the 25 friendship centres around the province and the communities they support. "Many of our people, aboriginal people, are coming from very, very difficult circumstances," explains Carl Mashon, general manager, making a sense of safety paramount. He says the association's approach is to use traditional teachings (including the medicine wheel), offer paid cultural leaves, encourage volunteerism and provide a supportive community within the workplace.

"We're a very love-centred organization," says Mashon. "That can mean different things for different people, but at the very fundamental level, people feel that we are always going to be there for them."

Leadership and Communication

"People don't quit jobs; they quit bosses," says psychologist Joti Samra. She feels managers who use emotional intelligence and open communication engage and retain their staff better.

According to corporate culture consultant Marie Mac Donald, good employee/leader relationships require leaders who are supportive and connected, and listen to their staff. "The old-style leadership was kind of command and control and in today's workplace you need to be engaging and empowering employees," she explains.

Engagement is a critical element in creating a happy workplace and in boosting the bottom line. Mac Donald explains the connection: "When employees feel engaged, they have a strong sense of meaning and purpose and they grow and develop themselves. They believe in the work they do and they believe in the organization and then they're connected to the organization's goals."

Cissy Pau of Clear HR Consulting agrees, noting that "employees want to feel a part of it, they want to feel like they are making a difference, they want to be in the know about what's going on and when they don't have that feeling they're not going to be working in the best interest of the company."

Leaders should focus on the quality of their communications, not just the frequency. "It's all about emotional intelligence," says Mac Donald. That means being self-aware and empathetic, and ensuring communication is not unidirectional. Good leader communication should provide insight, invite connections, celebrate successes and recognize good work. According to "State of the American Workplace," a 2013 report by Gallup Inc., naming a manager is the single biggest decision an organization makes because it dramatically impacts employee engagement.

CASE STUDY

B.C. Lottery Corp.

Number of Employees: 350-400

Location: Vancouver and Kamloops

Michael Graydon, CEO of BCLC, is so committed to the open-door policy that his office doesn't even have a door. "I walk about the company every day. I get up and I walk about the halls, talking to people, saying hello and building a relationship where I'm approachable," he says of his efforts to stay connected and familiar.

He points to BCLC's well-used intranet site YAK (Your Access to Knowledge) as another example of daily communication and access. Graydon focuses on connecting with both the Vancouver and Kamloops offices regularly, which includes his quarterly "coffee talks," where he reiterates the corporate values, asks for input and encourages leadership groups to communicate well with their teams. To ensure that communication lines are always open, BCLC has a whistleblower policy that allows staff to confidentially report concerns.

CASE STUDY

Kicking Horse Coffee Co. Ltd.

Number of Employees: 50

Location: Invermere

CEO Elana Rosenfeld (below centre) doesn't like email; she'd much prefer to walk down the hall and talk to her team face-to-face. Those chats could also happen on the chairlift, across a raft or up a trail on one of the two annual staff fun days. The one place staff won't reach her is at home. "I don't access my technology at home," explains Rosenfeld (a habit that telegraphs the company's commitment to work/life balance).



The company's production leaders also focus on communication, with a daily meeting followed by a body stretch. Appreciation for good work is shared with internal RAVE awards (Recognizing Actions, Values and Ethics) and Kaisen awards. There is also plenty of connecting over steaming (free) cups of fair-trade coffee. Perhaps the most critical communiqué comes when the phone rings from the top of Panorama Mountain reporting that 30 cm of snow has fallen that day, triggering the automatic Powder Day Rule: fresh tracks trump office time every time.

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