

Best companies bridge the generation gap

TRACY TJADEN

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Work-life balance has always been important to Anthony Di Carlo. But rather than rushing home to a young family or spending time at a summer cottage, the 30-year-old senior associate at PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP carves out time to be a true soldier of fortune.

“It’s auditor by day, infantry officer by weekend,” says the upbeat Montreal resident. “I had been contemplating how to make these two passions work in my life, and it was one of the main reasons I came to PwC.”

The GTA's top employers for 2011 As part of the consulting company’s flexible time away program, employees can take an unpaid leave or a reduced workweek and remain covered by all benefits during their time off. Mr. Di Carlo, who is a 2nd Lieutenant at the Canadian Forces Army Reserves Regiment Fusiliers Mont-Royal (FMR), opted for a summer leave to continue his military training.

“It speaks to my generation in the way that sometimes our hobbies add as much to our lives as our professions,” he says. “I perform better at work because I have these contrasting interests – it’s never dull.”

PwC may soon face greater competition to lure people in the workforce similar to Mr. Di Carlo. As the battle for talent escalates, employers are realizing they can’t appeal to all employees in one fell swoop. The young, tech-savvy Gen Y marketing major wants flexible workdays while the baby boomer is swayed by phased-in retirement options.

More than ever before, many of the companies on this year’s Best Employers in the GTA are spending time and money in an effort to close the generation gap among employees. First, that means realizing the one-size-fits-all approach to employee satisfaction and success will not fly. Then, companies must survey employees in different demographic groups to ensure everything from benefits packages to daily work schedules are tailor made.

“Baby boomers are more loyal to the team – they might have bad years but are more likely to stick it out,” says Adwoa Buahene, a managing partner with N-Gen People Performance Inc., a Toronto consulting company that advises companies on managing generational differences in the workplace. “But for Gen X and Ys it has to be a win-win deal. They have higher demands and a lower tolerance for lack of execution. And remember, Ys are also accustomed to a world where their opinions are listened to and acted upon.”

Peter McAdam, vice president of employee experience in corporate HR for TD Bank Financial Group, says accounting for generational differences is directly linked to a company’s financial success.

“We’re a growth company and we need talent in order to grow,” he says. “We want to be the place where the best people want to come to and we know there’s a cost to not doing that.”

He’s right – companies that ignore generational differences in the workplace will pay a price, says Ms. Buahene. “It impacts the bottom line,” she says. “If you do not have engaged employees, you have higher turnover which costs money and results in lower customer engagement.”

Aside from the flexible work programs, PwC is trying to close the generation gap by partnering less experienced workers with senior staff on larger projects. Gen Y workers, who tend to learn best while doing, shadow senior staff and get the chance to brainstorm over major accounts. The firm also places a premium on technology, ensuring employees have the tools they need to support individual work styles.

The consultancy, as well as other companies that made the list, also offer flexible benefits packages that cater to different age groups, family care programs that include caring for ill parents as well as young children and phased-in retirement.

Hazel Claxton, a partner and human capital leader at PwC, says it’s all about gaining a competitive edge. “We’ve been talking for a long time about the war for talent but that war is going to become increasingly more fierce,” she says. “You need to attract and retain people and ensure their success because that leads directly to your firm experiencing success.”

Ms. Buahene says when dealing with Gen Yers, employers must be transparent and honest communicators, highly responsive and consistently collaborative.

Mr. Di Carlo, who commands a platoon of 30 soldiers at FMR, says those rules apply to the boardroom and the battlefield. His flextime work arrangement allows him to apply them to both. He has learned things in the military about good organization and prioritizing tasks that can be applied at work. At the same time, work practices such as mentoring and brainstorming across skill levels translates well to military life.

“Using guns and doing army drills isn’t comparable to sitting behind a computer, but there are elements in the way we do things at work that I’m using with my soldiers – a new way of teaching, shadowing, teach don’t tell,” he says. “And there are organizational things in the military that can be integrated into how we do things at work.”

At TD Bank Financial Group, Mr. McAdam is also shaking up the terrain. Four months ago the bank executed an “agile workplace strategy” that allows employees who don’t deal directly with clients on a regular basis to work remotely. The pilot project includes employees from three groups within the bank – wealth management, corporate real estate and corporate HR. “They work remotely most of the time and come into the new offsite workspace when they need to collaborate with colleagues or attend meetings,” Mr. McAdam says. “Technology is the real enabler here.”

Nan Oldroyd, senior director of talent at Loblaw Companies Ltd., says the retail chain is also using IT to address generational differences. It recently began offering an e-learning course to help employees understand the different demographic groups, believing the insights would help improve communication across generational lines.

Mr. Di Carlo, who joined the army reserves in 2008 and hopes to one day participate in a United Nations mission, says PwC's flexible work program helped him achieve the right work-life balance, and he won't give that up.

"Being in the military complements the values of the firm and of the profession – honesty, integrity and duty to my country. I try to pursue the truth and communicate the truth in both."

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