

## **The 50 best employers to work for in Canada**

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**Report On Business**

The economy may be in a downturn, but the mood was decidedly upbeat last week at information technology company Protegra Inc. as employees gathered at its Winnipeg head office to plan strategy for the year ahead.

Gathered in the boardroom, Protegra's 63 employees enthusiastically joined in a discussion of developing new business, offering a range of suggestions for improving project efficiency and company performance. They smiled and cheered when they were told Protegra expects to grow its profits by 20 per cent this year and expand its business with an acquisition of another company.

Such animation might be expected from a group of employees who consider themselves partners in the privately held company, many of whom actually own shares, and who know their ideas and efforts will be key to the company's future, says Wadood Ibrahim, whose title may be chief executive officer but who is "just Wadood" to the company's staff.

The fact that there are no titles nor any corporate ladder to climb is one of the key factors Mr. Ibrahim believes is behind Protegra's top ranking in this year's list of the best small and medium employers in Canada, expanded to 50 this year from 25 last year.

It's the fifth annual survey by Queen's Centre for Business Venturing at the Queen's School of Business and Hewitt Associates, a global human resources services company, in partnership with The Globe and Mail.

The rankings are determined on the basis of surveys of employee engagement and effective human resources practices.

And, like many of the other winners, Mr. Ibrahim believes his company's emphasis on the strengths of its people will set it up well to face off against the rocky economy.

"We want to be around for the long term," Mr. Ibrahim says. "In difficult times, if you encourage people to innovate, they will find creative solutions."

Such a belief in the value of employees is what makes this year's 50 stand out over others, says Einar Westerlund, director of project development at the Queen's Centre for Business Venturing.

"What each of these winners has done especially effectively is to shape its strategies, policies, programs, practices and approaches to the uniqueness of its own particular work force and business needs," Mr. Westerlund says.

Employees in the winning organizations give high marks to their employer's ability to recruit and hire people who are able to fit in smoothly, as well as their support for employee development and efforts to acknowledge staff input and reward their contributions to success, he explains.

Those are the kinds of factors that are likely to keep employees motivated and give their employers an edge as they face an economy in which engagement, teamwork and innovation could mean the difference between thriving and merely surviving, Mr. Westerlund says.

What else does it take to become a Top 50 employer, and what lessons can be drawn from their experience? Here are six key ways in which top-ranked employers stand out:

### **ALL IN THE FAMILY**

Winning companies share a focus on recruiting and retaining talented people who fit well with their corporate culture, Mr. Westerlund says.

For instance, at No. 3-ranked information technology developer Gibraltar Solutions Inc. of Mississauga, "we hire people who will think of each other as peers in a family," says managing director Don Lee.

Gibraltar looks for self-starting, experienced employees with a track record of success, he says. Many of its hires, in fact, have been found through existing employees, who nominate people they feel would make good family members.

And they are rewarded for their scouting efforts: \$1,000 is paid to an employee for a recommended recruit who joins the company.

The family feeling "creates a culture in which people go out of their way to support each other," Mr. Lee says.

And that makes for little need for micromanagement.

"Everyone is treated as adults and professionals who know their part to play and are given the autonomy to make their own decisions," he says.

Mr. Lee believes Gibraltar's approach will give it a competitive edge in this fast-changing economy, when strategies must be adapted and implemented quickly, he says.

### **EVERY VOICE COUNTS**

At top-ranked Protegra, employees are encouraged to participate in goal setting and decision making at monthly staff meetings. "We focus on the employee as a member of a team as opposed to a title," Mr. Ibrahim explains.

"There is no corporate ladder to climb or titles to attain. Instead, each employee has a portfolio of skills and a role that varies according to the project they are working on. The focus is on doing work that is satisfying and gives experiences that helps you grow as an individual."

Employees appreciate the approach, he says. Protegra has managed to have a turnover rate of about 2 per cent a year in an industry in which turnover is typically 10 per cent or higher.

Regular communication is also a priority at No. 2 ranked Miele Canada Ltd., the Mississauga-based appliance maker, so much so that in an office redesign, all the work areas and the president's office were given glass walls to encourage managers and employees to seek each other out and collaborate closely, says spokesperson Kelly McDavid.

Senior management holds weekly meetings to give updates on a regular basis on the company's results and future plans and get staff input on goals and strategies, which keeps staff reassured, she says. "Everyone knows where they stand and no one is ever surprised by anything."

## **EMPLOYEES ARE EMPOWERED**

At top companies, not only do employees have a say in setting direction, they are also given wide berth to run with their ideas.

Ian Scatliff, a design implementation specialist at Protegra, recalls how supportive the company was when he proposed a new idea to harmonize how projects were co-ordinated within the growing company. "Basically, leadership said 'Good idea, go,'" he says.

He and a group of co-workers were freed up from other work for about three months to team up and work on the harmonization idea.

Since taking that initiative, Mr. Scatliff says he is now seen as a leader and has been able to take on more managerial roles in the company.

Everyone at the company is encouraged to take such initiative, Mr. Ibrahim says.

"By empowering and trusting your employees, it will create continuous improvement, and we will be able to help clients be more innovative and more efficient in these tough times," he says. "That is why we are confident we will remain successful."

## **EFFORT IS REWARDED**

At No. 2-ranked appliance maker Miele Canada Ltd., accolades don't just come from bosses: Employees all the way up the ladder are encouraged to show appreciation for colleagues who work hard and come up with innovative ideas.

And under an awards program, employees can nominate fellow workers they see go beyond the call of duty for \$250 gift certificates. At the end of the year, the names of all of the winners are put into a hat and six names are drawn to win family vacations to the Caribbean or Europe.

Last year, that brought Diane Manson, Miele's sales division project co-ordinator, a five-day trip to Milan, Italy, where she participated in a cooking course.

Ms. Manson says the program has been a great morale booster.

"That your colleagues appreciate the hard work you do makes you feel good. To have them vote for you makes you feel special," she says.

"I find it makes me want to push myself and excel beyond the expectations. And I find it makes all the employees work harder to see if they can get the award next time around," Ms. Manson adds.

And the company has seen benefits. "Employee opinion surveys show employees consistently feel that the company notices and appreciates the efforts they make and that makes them want to work harder," says Miele human resources manager Kelly McDavid.

## **GROWTH IS NURTURED**

Sean Novak aspired to a management role and got plenty of support in achieving that goal from his employer, No. 4-ranked ISL Engineering and Land Services Ltd. in Edmonton.

He joined the company three years ago as a newly graduated engineer, whose sole job was to design sewer systems.

He let his supervisors know he wanted to advance. They recommended additional training he would need, paid for the courses and textbooks he needed, and got him assignments to broaden his experience. And it has paid off: After experiencing a range of roles, he has risen to the level of a project manager.

Everyone in the company gets that kind of encouragement to continually develop their skills, says Gary Mack, ISL's president and CEO.

The company pays for Dale Carnegie leadership training and, for the third of employees who have taken up the offer, "we find it has created a positive outlook for themselves and in their work," he says.

Mr. Mack believes that the company's highly motivated employees were a big factor behind the company's business growth and record profit in the past year.

And it shared in the rewards: Everyone on staff got paid a bonus the equivalent of about a month's pay.

## **ADAPTABILITY IS ENCOURAGED**

Engineering firm Hood Group of Edmonton, ranked fifth on the list, has learned from past experience that the oil and gas industry is cyclical, and so it has taken business steps to make sure there is always work for its employees — and that those employees are well-positioned to make the most of new opportunities.

It encourages employees to constantly develop new skills and will arrange flexible work hours to help them pursue further training; it also encourages employees to be multi-talented and look for new opportunities.

Managers meet weekly with their teams to update them on new business the company is seeking to develop, and encourages staff to be on the lookout for new niches it could be pursuing, Hood president Trevor McCallion says.

Employee suggestions have led to new clients and projects in areas the company was not previously involved with, including energy efficiency and environmental protection.

The jobs may not be as large or the contracts as long as the big oil field projects the company did in the past but, collectively, they will keep the company profitable no matter what happens to oil prices — and fears of layoffs won't keep employees up at night, Mr. McCallion says.

"There is a genuine sense that we are all looking out for each other and this has the effect of keeping morale high."

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## **METHDOLOGY**

- This year's Top 50 ranking of Canada's best small and medium employers is the fifth annual undertaking by Queen's Centre for Business Venturing at the Queen's School of Business and human resources company Hewitt Associates, in partnership with The Globe and Mail.
- More than 250 companies registered for the study; in the end, the rankings were made on responses from more than 100 eligible companies involving nearly 19,000 employees and 1,000 leaders.
- To be eligible, a company must have 50 to 399 employees, been in business for at least three years, and meet certain survey completion response rates.
- To determine rankings, participating organizations completed three surveys. The first was an employee opinion survey, measuring and analyzing 18 drivers of employee engagement. There was also a leadership team survey, completed by senior executives, to determine how well their goals and values align with those of their staff, and a human resources survey, asking about organizational practices, policies and programs to determine how well they match up with goals and values.
- Rankings were calculated from a combination of scores from all three surveys, with employee engagement results the most heavily weighted.
- For more information, including instructions on how to participate in the upcoming survey, log on to:  
[business.queensu.ca/centres/qcbv/bsme\\_study/en/registration/online.html](http://business.queensu.ca/centres/qcbv/bsme_study/en/registration/online.html).