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Top 100 Employers

The best employers do more than issue paycheques. They improve life in the workplace and in the surrounding community as well.

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THE CAFETERIA at Yamaha Motor Canada Ltd., with its posted daily specials and inoffensive colour scheme, resembles just about any other institutional lunch spot. What's remarkable here is the staff. In a brilliant but too-rare program, people with serious mental illnesses run the counter and toil in the kitchen. Overseen and paid by the Canadian Mental Health Association, they operate the cash, order supplies and bake the lasagna. "It's a recovery program for them. I've seen them go from mentally unstable to happy," says Karin Doss-Reid, a long-time Yamaha employee. "Here," she adds, "they become our friends." Yamaha hasn't been a passive player, says Laura Monastero, the mastermind behind the program and a rehab manager with the Toronto branch of the CMHA. A motorcycle company with heart, Yamaha recently gave gifts recognizing five years of service to two of the workers -- even though, technically, they aren't employed by Yamaha. It also built and outfitted a new, larger kitchen to replace the smaller facility that Monastero and her team started out with in 1995. "Yamaha is incredible. I can't say enough," Monastero says. "They really buy into it, right from the top."

Yamaha's lunchroom program, at its head office-warehouse complex north of Toronto, is just one of the company's policies that ensure it a spot on the list of Canada's top 100 employers. But it's an important one: companies making a difference in the broader community also make their employees feel good about going to work. And from a bottom-line point of view, smart companies know that happy employees are generally more productive. "Companies that make it onto the list are looking at things beyond what's required," says Richard Yerema, author of the full-book edition of *Canada's Top 100 Employers*, to be released next week. "These companies are acting as agents of change."

To be considered, an organization has to be in hiring mode. The list, which includes not-for-profit groups, government agencies and private-sector companies, is created by Mediacorp Canada Inc., a publisher that specializes in employment-related issues. It starts with a review of the 51,000 employers that are regularly tracked for its magazine, *Canada Employment Weekly*. About 6,000 of the fastest-growing companies are invited to participate in an extensive application process, says Anthony Meehan, Mediacorp's publisher. Organizations are compared to their peers -- for instance, pharmaceutical companies are compared to each other, and not, say, to hospitals.

And since apples can't be compared to oranges -- some sectors offer better benefits and working conditions than others -- the list is not a ranking. In the detailed explanations in the book, Mediacorp reveals the grades it assigns to companies in key areas, including health, financial and family benefits, vacation and time off, and community involvement. While pay levels are often cited in job satisfaction surveys as the most important factor for employees, salary is *not* a Mediacorp focus beyond the early stages of the selection process. Companies that skimp on salaries, Yerema says, aren't likely to be making a concerted effort in other areas -- or to make it onto the list.

The organizations selected are the best in their classes -- and they get there because they want not just to woo but to keep the best employees. Some do it with perks. Among the easiest to offer -- and often most appreciated -- are ones related directly to an employer's line of business. The Bank of Montreal has a crisis fund of loans for staffers in sudden trouble; Pfizer Canada Inc., a leading pharmaceutical company, offers its employees over-the-counter drugs at a discount; workers at Husky Energy Inc. can buy gas for lower than normal retail prices.

What Yamaha has to offer is its toys. Not only can people who work for Yamaha buy its equipment at a deep discount, they can borrow a machine, or two, on weekends -- for free. "People are drawn to this company by the product," says Dawn Williams, national human resources manager, who's taken advantage of Yamaha's deals. She and her husband each have a snowmobile, and he's got a dirt bike, too. Even their daughter, at the ripe old age of one, has a dirt bike, although she won't actually ride it until next summer at the earliest. "You can get training wheels," Williams says, laughing at the thought. "At least four wheels are safer than two."

The perks sometimes are simply part of the scenery -- literally. At Banff Centre, a school for the arts snug on the side of Tunnel Mountain in spectacular Banff National Park, the views are unbeatable. "We've looked high, we've looked low," says Lisa Flierjans, who retired two weeks ago for family reasons after 14 years with the Centre. "But we've not found a bad view. The environment is truly dramatic. It has a powerful effect on people who come here."

One factor driving better employment practices is a population that's getting older. Michael Fitzgibbon, a partner at Borden Ladner Gervais specializing in employment law, says some of the best employers are adopting new programs in response to Canada's dramatically changing demographics. In less than a decade, as boomers age, the workforce will be dominated by people between the ages of 45 and 64. "Older people have to be part of the business plan," he says. "The best employers are taking proactive steps now to deal with the demographic shift." Among practices designed for workers approaching retirement are compressed workdays and part-time jobs. "This is new. It is coming to the forefront right now," Fitzgibbon says. "The risk in not taking action is that the competition is."

A policy that suits a workforce of different ages is a flexible benefits plan, a program increasingly being adopted by the best employers. After an internal survey showed dissatisfaction with its benefits plan, Wardrop Engineering Inc., a mid-sized, Winnipeg-based firm, dumped it -- and last year created a whole new package. "The old package was a standard one, average for our industry," says James Popel, Wardrop's vice-president of human resources. The new one allows employees to opt into or out of different benefits, and to increase or decrease their level of coverage. "It's not rocket science. We just listened to the employees," Popel says. "If you can do it without increasing costs *and* improve employee morale, it's a gold mine."

Wardrop, which works on projects as far-flung as the International Space Station and as local as the Provencher Bridge in Winnipeg, has a long history of responding to its employees, and of rewarding initiative. About 25 years ago, Ernie Card was just three years out of school and a junior engineer at Wardrop. Part of his job was to visit remote locations, and like his colleagues, he often used chartered planes and pilots to get there. But service to remote destinations was scarce and he had to cool his heels in the bush, waiting sometimes for days for the next charter once his work was done. So Card decided he could fulfill a dream -- and help the company -- by learning to fly. He tallied the cost of booking planes and pilots, compared it to the cost of flying lessons, and suggested to management that if they covered his training, he'd become Wardrop's in-house pilot.

The idea took off. It was so successful that a few years later, Card managed to persuade his bosses to finance a loan for his own \$50,000 twin-engine aircraft, which he used both for company business and personal pleasure. "Flying is not really part of engineering," Card says. "They found a way to let me chase my dreams." Today, Card isn't flying planes for Wardrop. He's too busy. But as the company's CEO, he's still in Wardrop's cockpit -- and he still recognizes that listening to employees pays off.

Following a dream is a common theme among employees who are happy at work. Tonya Frizzell is a communications specialist at Vancouver City Savings Credit Union. From March 2001 to March 2002, she was on leave from VanCity, working as a volunteer in Albania. Of the five individuals who arrived with Frizzell in Elbasan, Albania's second largest city, she was the only one with a job back home -- the others had had to quit because their employers wouldn't hold their positions for them. "Companies should be more open to this," Frizzell says. "I brought back skills and, after a good, long break, a fresh perspective. It's important to shake things up and not get too comfortable."

VanCity, in the news recently for upsetting the Catholic Church with its gay-friendly ads, is known as a progressive, community-involved organization -- one not afraid to shake things up. Among the few Canadian organizations that grant extended leaves for volunteer work, VanCity has found a way to help employees pursue their dreams, and help the broader community as well. And that makes it, even among Canada's best employers, a trendsetter.

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