

A Fine Balance

The values of today's workers are shifting, and taking human-resource practices with them

By CHRISTINE MATTE

As the Capital Region's labour market diversifies and shrinks, Labour Market Dialogues has found employers who thrive to make quality of life a priority. The Labour Market Dialogues project was designed by the Community Council to identify barriers to employment and uncover inclusive and sustainable hiring and retention practices that reflect the shifting values of workers. Started in late 2006, the first two phases focussed on appreciative inquiry with workers, service agencies, those with barriers and employers to determine the keys to engaging employees.

By 2010, the number of people leaving the workforce in B.C. is expected to exceed the number of people joining and, by 2011, 100 percent of the growth in the labour market is expected to come from immigration. According to Dialogues project manager Alvaro Moreno, that shift is challenging employers to re-learn what will attract and retain talent as conventional values about work change.

"What we're experiencing is a shift in the culture of work. Demographic change is putting pressure on the labour market," says Moreno. "We find in our work places there are people from four different generations sharing the same space and maybe from different cultures or countries too, who all have different values and goals for their workplace."

Although offering a competitive living wage gets applications, the project team found that retaining employees has become a balance between supporting their lifestyles and development. Employers of choice offer flexibility, learning and growth opportunities and practical perks that improve their employees' day-to-day lives.

With these key tactics identified, the current and final phase of the project is fostering business-to-business learning and recognition to create a culture of innovation among employers. Their *Employer Challenge* e-newsletter has a growing distribution list of over 60 employers, and features have included such locals as The Bottle Depot and Value Village. Both offer job-sharing and alternative schedules that allow employees to balance education, family devotion and participating in their communities.

At Delicados in Oak Bay, owner Sarah Brenner retains employees by helping expand their skills and offering them opportunities to develop their related interests in the field. Of all the quality-of-life indicators and barriers to employment that Dialogues explored, these key values re-appeared across generations and cultures. In general, we want our work to be rewarding—but fewer of us are willing to show our loyalty by taking time away from the other things in our lives that nourish us.

"We're seeing and suggesting simple things," says Rachelle McElroy, the project's employer liaison. "Like allowing for starting a little later, or leaving a little sooner. With parents, that's something that can give them an increased quality of life, if they're able



The Labour Market Dialogues Project's Rachelle McElroy presents a Quality of Life Challenge award to Clean Conscience's Amanda Schofield

to walk their kids to daycare in the morning or pick them up and spend time with them at night." Some employers have also found greater value for moving wage-raise funding to another perk, like subsidized bus passes or a gym-membership program. "These are things that show they acknowledge and care about their employees' lives outside of work," explains McElroy. As such, these gestures can make a bigger impact on life in and outside the workplace.

In addition to sharing success stories in the newsletter, Dialogues recognizes innovative employers of choice with Quality of Life decals—including Hemp and Co., who offer subsidized purchasing power for employees, and Clean Conscience, where owner Amanda Schofield covers travel time, mileage and cell-phone allowance for her cleaning staff to get to and from their job sites.

"You really have to be able to think outside the box now," says Schofield, who was awarded a Quality of Life decal at a recent meeting of the Business Network International. "We're beyond just offering good pay or a good benefits package." She relies on the newsletter for ideas and encouragement that she's on the right track to addressing the high turnover and near-constant labour shortages that plague the service industry today.

Schofield is also one of many businesses that has recognized the importance of making work a unique place for people to seek happiness, social gratification and dialogue. She holds regular goodie-laden staff meetings to discuss staff concerns and listen to their ideas, and conducts surprise inspections of job sites, rewarding her employees with lunch out when they pass. Schofield works every angle of potential benefit to her employees.

According to Moreno and McElroy, it's a necessary shift that must eventually become commonplace. Adds McElroy "If work can be a positive experience where you feel excited to share in what you do, if it's something you feel proud of, and if you feel like you have a chance to contribute—that enhances your individual quality of life and ultimately, the community's quality of life." M

