

Are we having fun yet?

Executives beware: Your employee retention and productivity could depend on it



BY COREY VAN'T HAAFF

If you have to ask if your employees are having fun yet, they probably aren't. Work should at least approach the 'fun' level at times, but more so, work is about respect and reward, concern and communication.

"You can't be everywhere as CEO," said **Don Elkington**, CEO of **Coast Spas**. "The employees are your greeting cards – the receptionists, the manufacturing staff, even the guy keeping the building clean."

Without each and every one of them,

said Elkington, you can't have a successful business. So if you have a 100,000 square foot manufacturing facility and build about 10,000 hot tubs a year, how can you attract workers and, perhaps more importantly, keep them?

Elkington started where he saw a problem. Nine years ago, he noticed his workers lining up several times a day to buy food at a mobile concession and he figured he could do better. So he headed to a restaurant supply store and bought a pizza oven, deep fryer, grill and every-

thing he needed to open a not-for-profit cafeteria for his staff.

"I had no idea what to buy. I'm not a restaurant guy," he said. But in offering affordable breakfasts, lunches and snacks (he loses about \$2,000 a month on the deal), his workers come in a bit earlier, eat healthier, and take full advantage of the swipe-card payment system, with the cost of meals coming off their cheques on payday.

To augment the cafeteria, he converted 7,500 square feet to an employee lounge,



Don Elkington

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- Don Elkington, CEO, Coast Spas

complete with a few pool tables, a foosball table, a sound system and a satellite TV. It's air conditioned in the summer, which is great, he said, as it gets quite warm on the production floor. There's also an outside deck and, on the first Monday of each month, Elkington barbeques for his entire staff.

“The HR department is located off the lounge,” he said, “because the heart of the HR department is the employees. Payroll and personnel are there too. I wanted them to be close to the employees. If they have questions, I want them to be able to speak easily to those with the right answers.”

For Elkington, communication with employees is at the very centre of his key strategies and he takes full advantage of this at his monthly assemblies where goals and objectives are shared along with birthday wishes and attendance rewards.

“If employees are educated and communicated with about the company, and rewarded for hard work, if they understand from the owner that I care enough about the employees to create a café and to thank them and to flip burgers or give them the opportunity to tell me a better way to do something, it says we are listening,” said Elkington. “No one can do their jobs better than them. It all comes together as a big puzzle. Employees are happier, more educated about the company. These are really important factors to keeping employees long-term. It costs a lot to hire someone, train them, and then have them leave.”

Unsatisfied workers, he said, are going to have a negative impact on service levels, and on the bottom line.

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the day makes a difference, even in manufacturing.”

Fun can be part of the equation. **Lee-Anne Ragan**, president and director of training for **Rock Paper Scissors Inc.**, said that the key to happy workers is learning what makes them tick in relation to their own context, whether it's cultural, generational, familial or gender. One of the problems is employers are not spending enough time connecting with workers and having a real dialogue.

“A lot of executives are busy fighting fires,” she said. When a vacancy arises, they try to fill the position quickly without taking a long-term view. And for Ragan, that long-term view should include the use of humour, not just to improve morale, but also to improve business practices, reduce stress, share information and reduce conflict.

Ragan had one client that found its workers saying less-than-nice things about the company on Facebook.

“Both employees and managers didn't understand the big picture. The company had grown in leaps and bounds and they didn't understand the vision and how they fit into the vision.”

Sharing the vision, she said, is very important but not necessarily very interesting, which is where humour comes in.

Humour helps the important things to be memorable – to stick.

It's a four-part strategy. First is the strategic use of humour. Then it's sharing the social responsibility and values of the company. Third is being creative and innovative. Fourth is acknowledging diversity – being aware that there are different ways of looking at the world.

“Don't be afraid to start small,” said Ragan. “Just try.” ■

