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May 23, 2009

05 / 22 / 2009 - Vol. 6, No. 7 - British Columbia Edition

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## Innovative telecom tech firms earn accolades

### Pure technology companies top ratings list for workplace satisfaction

By **Monte Stewart - Business Edge**

Published: 05/22/2009 - Vol. 9, No. 7



Telecom-related technology companies are getting top marks for innovative workplaces in Canada.

A review of the 75 best workplaces, based on ratings by the Toronto-based Great Place to Work Institute Canada (GPTWI), shows seven pure tech firms - i.e. companies that list technology as their core business - rank in the top 25 while several others round out the field. No other sector has seven in the upper echelon.

Many other companies on the list incorporate telecom hardware and software extensively as part of their products and services.

"Technology is a highly competitive market," says Anson Lee, director of customer experience strategy for Calgary-based Karo Group, which placed 13th. "It's also a market that's always trying to innovate with their own product, but also with how they design their own businesses.

"When you have an engineering or design mindset, you can't help but think about not just your own clients' problems but: How do you design a great work experience for your own employees?" Toronto-based Google Canada received the No. 1 ranking while Environics Communications Inc. of Toronto; Protegra, a Winnipeg-based professional services consulting company; and Blainville, Que., software firm D.L.G.L. Ltd., round out the top four. The rankings are based on reviews of 230 companies in Canada.

"Maybe technology companies like to be ahead of others in the way that they look for innovation," says Great Place to Work Institute Canada's president and CEO Jose Tolovi Neto. "Maybe they are seeing before other companies that there is a link between profitability and creating a great place to work."

Research shows companies with the best workplaces are consistently more profitable than their competitors, he adds.

"In theory, a great place to work is a place where you trust the people that you work for, you have pride in what you do and you enjoy the people that you work with," says Tolovi Neto.

GPTWI Canada is part of a U.S.-based non-profit organization that ranks best workplaces around the world.

The 25 top Canadian companies were ranked in order of selection, but the remaining 50 were listed alphabetically to avoid stigmatizing them after they had made it on the select list.

Companies are considered for the list based on nominations from firms. Employees actually have the stronger voice in the selection process, says Tolovi Neto, because two-thirds on the final score are based on employee opinions. The other third is based on GPTWI's audit of workplace culture and human-resources (HR) practices.

"To be on the list, your employees would have to enjoy the work that they do there," he says.

That could be a telling comment about the mood within telecommunications companies.

Only one telecommunications company - upstart Toronto-based wireless phone and internet services provider Globalive Communications - made it on to the list. Major telcos Telus, Rogers and Bell were conspicuous by their absence.

Kerry Jochen, president and CEO of Victoria-based Human Capital Strategies, says telecoms struggle to earn top workplace marks because of their large sizes.

"I'm not pointing to any one telco," he says. "But the bigger you are, the more the risk of having more of a bureaucratic organization ... These are organizations that are more challenged to have a really innovative and inspiring workplace."

Jochen says telecom-related technology companies and firms that use such technologies are as innovative at marketing their human resources as they are at marketing their products and services.

Such firms also tend to be more diverse because they bring in highly-educated employees from other countries and use the best "people practices" to compete globally.

"A lot of companies are very good at branding in terms of their products or services," he says. "They're very effective at selling and making money, but they don't use that same expertise in terms of branding themselves as a good employer and a good workplace."

Karo Group's Anson Lee says companies in a more established profession may not have the same inclination - or inspiration - to change. Such practices could come back to haunt them during the recession.

"There's certainly a need in your workplace to achieve that work-life balance, to have people retreat or customize spaces to their own needs," he says. "Especially in today's climate, being adaptable and flexible is a key to survival."

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Karo, founded in 1971 as a graphic design company, has offices in Calgary and Vancouver and describes itself as a branding and communications design firm. It provides advertising, design, environments (building and interior design) and interactive services, including website creation and online marketing.

"We have what we call a tribal culture," says Lee. "Everyone here has a certain sense of belonging through the types of activities that we have, but also a sense of our own responsibility and commitment to the organization."

There is also a need for flexible work areas, he adds. Karo's Vancouver office has a large, open, collaborative look because of the inter-disciplinary nature of what people do. The Calgary operation, which recently acquired more warehouse space, is also undergoing a renovation to meet its unique needs.

"People need to have easy access to one another (and) have work spaces where we can share and collaborate on ideas," he says. "We have work/lounge areas that serve a dual purpose. One is for relaxing and getting away from our desks but, also, they serve as creative places to meet and brainstorm."

Vancouver-based Nintendo, ranked in the remaining 50 top companies, provides a games room that includes a foosball table and wireless access, as well as the video and computer games, access to vacation properties in Whistler and Hawaii, a public-transit subsidy and Vancouver Canucks tickets.

Among its perks, Intuit Canada, a Mississauga, Ont.-based software company, offers private sleep/nap rooms, an onsite massage therapist and acupuncturist, fitness classes, dry cleaning pickup and delivery reimbursements for recreational fees.

Some firms, like fourth-ranked D.L.G.L., last year's winner, have home theatres to help employees unwind.

But GPTWI's Tolovi Neto says a workplace can not be great based on its amenities alone. Companies must back up their on-site benefits with effective workplace policies.

He points to top-ranked Google as a good example. Google's policy of allowing employees to spend one day out of five - 20 percent of their time - working on projects of their choice outside of their regular duties is credited for developing Google Mail (Gmail) and Google Earth Outreach.

Jeff Muzzerall, head of the corporate connections centre at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, says telecom-related tech companies are able to adapt to the needs of a Generation Y workforce by offering flexible work hours, a focus on learning, interesting work environments, training programs, exercise facilities and creative play and teamwork.

"It's the entrepreneurial environment and the creativity that the founders of rapidly-growing organizations in the tech space, in particular, bring to their work," says Muzzerall. "They work hard and they play hard."

Muzzerall's centre serves 1,000 full-time, part-time and masters of finance students at Rotman and provides lifelong learning and career support for all alumni.

Jothen, of Human Capital Strategies, calls for companies to strive to be employers of choice and stand out from other firms based on their personnel practices.

"Despite the blip right now in the economy, demographics dictate that there are going to be shortages of people, and companies are increasingly going to have to fight to find the talent that they need," he says.

(Monte Stewart can be reached at [monte@businessedge.ca](mailto:monte@businessedge.ca))



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