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UHB's 3rd annual list of Top Northern Employers

By Lauren McKeon Once again, we asked employees from across the North to write in and tell us what makes their company a great place to work. Those that topped the list have accomplished a truly Herculean feat: Their employees like Mondays. Actually, we're convinced they love Mondays, in a go-to-bed-Sunday-dreaming-of-Monday kind of way. You may think it's the perks: iPods, laptops, fleecies, beer Fridays. Yeah, they're great. But enamored employees often forgot to mention them – so put your chequebook away. Like any love, employee love is complex: a mix of flexibility, training, atmosphere, being treated like an adult, not being treated like an adult, community involvement and opportunity to grow. This year's six winners pull off this magic mix every day. We'll tell you how, plus other useful tidbits on how to stop the revolving door, and earn the trust, loyalty and admiration of your staff.



EDI Environmental Dynamics

Location: Whitehorse, Iqaluit
Year founded: 1994; the Yukon office opened in 2000
Employees: 35 company-wide; 12 in the Yukon
Industry: Environmental assessment and monitoring
Love potion: Safety, education and an all-about-the-employees attitude

Here's a new one: safety. Admittedly, it doesn't sound too sexy. Makes you think yellow hardhats, fluorescent vests and corporate platitudes. But, if you're out in the middle of Northern nowhere – as EDI employees often are – safety is suddenly Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. In a helicopter. "While we're out on the field, we're supposed to check in at a certain time," says Ben Schonewille, a biologist at EDI. "If we don't check in within that hour time period there is a helicopter coming to look for us. There's help coming." It's not just helicopters, either. Schonewille says when it comes to safety, cost is irrelevant. That's a tremendous comfort for employees who often put themselves in potentially dangerous situations. But, it also lets employees know what's really the top priority: them.

Indeed, EDI vice-president Pat Tobler exudes an all-about-the-employees attitude. The guy's so humble he balks at taking any credit for his winning workplace. "Our office is a bunch of passionate people that are keen about what they're doing," he says. "It's not the management that makes it great. It's the people." It's simply his job to help them maintain that enthusiasm. A large part of employee giveback is education. At EDI, each employee has a training budget, which is theirs to use for conferences, workshops and courses. The only stipulations: employees choose something in their field or something "that might benefit the company down the road." Employees say they've never been told "no."

And, why should they? Tobler says the training budget is there to make more qualified and well-rounded professionals, and that's exactly what he's getting. Take Matt Power, who came to EDI five years ago with a general renewable resources diploma. Power was keen on learning more about geographic information systems (GIS). EDI paid for annual GIS training – a specialized discipline Power admits is "not really cheap to learn." Today, he's the GIS manager. "I've really been able to set goals for myself," he says, "and realize those goals."

Trinity Helicopters

Location: Yellowknife
Year founded: 2009
Employees: 14
Industry: Aviation
Love potion: Team consultation, empowerment and a helicopter

Rob Carroll's philosophy may make him a disastrous contestant on Who Wants to be a Millionaire, but it's a great way to run a business. "As president of the company, I don't think my answer is the final answer," he says. "It has to be a buy-in at all parts [of the company]." To get that buy-in Carroll surrounded himself with talented people who want to make a great company – then he empowered them to do exactly that. While this can mean relinquishing the final say, it's more about fostering an open environment where staff are encouraged to share ideas. "It can't be a place where everybody is just tapping on keys," Carroll says. And, it can't be a place where people don't learn.

"You've got to invest in employees," Carroll explains. Trinity sends employees to courses, but it also brings experts to Yellowknife. The helicopter company recently hired pilots with low flying time. Rather than do standard training, Carroll will bring a top-notch pilot from western B.C. to first assess the pilots, then develop an individualized training program. "If it requires 50 more hours of training with some of our guys, then we'll do that," he says. Trinity gets a gold star for training its other employees, too. From engineers to quality assurance staff, everybody gets a course. Sound expensive? Well, Trinity finance manager Joanne Beaudoin says Carroll's strategy also makes good money sense: "If you have qualified and happy employees around you, your company will flourish."

It doesn't hurt if you help them buy them a helicopter, either. To further empower employees, and to give their jobs more value than a day-to-day wage, Carroll started an employee-owned company. The employee company will buy an aircraft and Trinity will lease it – something Carroll likens to buying a house and already having a renter. He adds the return for employees will be better than an RRSP or pension plan. And, yes, that is his final answer.

Lamarche Pearson

Location: Whitehorse
Year founded: 2007
Employees: 7
Industry: Law
Love potion: Humour, professionalism and encouragement to be yourself

Serge Lamarche doesn't want his employees to be stereotypical lawyers; he wants them to be themselves. For Lamarche himself, that means being a goofball. Don't get us wrong, the guy's a consummate professional, but he also knows how to have fun, and encourages his employees to do the same. It's all about turning the stuffy stereotype on its head, fostering a team environment and, in turn, putting customers at ease in potentially stressful situations – after all, most people don't go to a lawyer for fun.

Take one of Lamarche's favourite tricks. When nervous first-time homebuyers walk in with a large sum of money for a down payment, Lamarche will stick it in his pocket and walk away. "You get the look like, 'Whoa, what a minute, who is that guy and what is he doing,'" says Lamarche. And then, almost magically, the clients laugh, and then relax.

"It's like going to a dentist's office," Lamarche says. "Everyone has this, 'Oh my god, this is going to hurt' [feeling]. Lawyers offices usually have the same 'This is going to hurt' approach, and I just want to make sure they're at ease." Lamarche's philosophy has endeared him to employees, who keenly follow his professional-without-being-stuffy lead, delighting both clients and fellow colleagues by being themselves.

When you have staff members that are comfortable and at ease, Lamarche has realized, you will, in turn, have comfortable customers. "Clients will know it," he says. "They'll feel it when they walk in the door. They can sense if there's tension [in the workplace]."

Like other top employers, Lamarche has accomplished a tricky feat: He's created a place where his employees like spending their days. Employees describe the environment as fun, and full of genuine camaraderie. "The first thing you'll notice about our office is the laughter," says Monishia Leidtke-Thompson, the firm's receptionist. "Humour, laughing, and joking around are normal here."

Avery, Cooper & Co.

Location: Yellowknife
Year founded: 1969
Employees: 25
Industry: Accounting
Love potion: Flexible hours, respect and no breathing down the neck

Theresa Siator began working at Avery Cooper back when acid-wash jeans, Madonna and John Hughes flicks were (first) in style. She's not the only one. Avery Cooper has excelled in that elusive Northern business dream: employee retention. While their success relies on a bunch of factors, being bendy has a whole lot to do with it. "The partners are extremely flexible when it comes to working days and working hours," says Siator, the firm's business writer. "They really believe people deserve a life and people should have a life." In other words, adds firm partner Cathy Cudmore, Avery Cooper recognizes the best companies get the best results by allowing staff to "work the time that works with their lives."

This doesn't mean Avery Cooper is full of slackers. Many employees work overtime during the firm's busy time and bank their hours. This allows parents to take summers off to be with their kids, or travel bugs to take several vacations per year. Others are set up to work part, or all, of the day at home. Some work part-time hours – four hours five days a week, or five hours four days a week. The key: It's whatever works for the employee. "They treat us like adults," explains Siator. "That really goes a long way." Like five, 10, 15, 20 years of a long way.

Of course, being treated like an adult isn't only about flex hours. At Avery Cooper, there is a feeling of mutual respect between employee and employer, says Siator, and a genuine desire to ensure employees enjoy their workday. This often means challenging employees, and enabling them to go beyond the usual on-paper job description. For instance, Avery Cooper has been donating some of Siator's time to the Yellowknife Community Foundation since 1996. She's able to administer the organization – taking care of mail, tax receipts, annual reports, expense checks and more – largely on company time. "It gives me a chance to do a really good thing for the community," she says. "And I'm getting paid to do it. It's the best of both worlds."

Northern Vision Development

Location: Whitehorse
Year founded: 2004
Employees: 125
Industry: Property management
Love potion: Equal parts high expectations and great on-the-job education

Northern Vision CEO Rich Thompson has high expectations. How high? Well, you know when you're on the plane and there's this point where everything below starts to look like Lego? A little higher than that. "Sometimes [people] look at us and say, 'You guys are crazy. You expect too much,'" says Thompson, "but so far we have met our expectations and as a consequence we all feel better about the company we work for." Don't think he's kidding himself: Thompson's employees praise and adore his tough demands and slouches-are-out attitude. They want to be pushed.

Really, this isn't surprising. Thompson has built a company of high-achievers who are all hungry for one thing: being on a winning team. And, boy, does he feed them: experience, opportunity, independence – gourmet stuff. One employee describes it as an accelerated MBA program. "Rich has been an enormous mentor," says Adam Gerle, Northern Vision's director of sales and marketing. Gerle adds he's encouraged to go "outside" for conferences and workshops, especially when such big city education isn't available locally. At such times, Gerle isn't the only one who benefits. Thompson requires any employee who attends a workshop to write a report for other staff. See, at Northern Vision, it's all about learning, all the time.

"My expectation is that each and every one of these guys will also get involved with organizations outside of our own," adds Thompson. Gerle is a director of the Yukon Chamber of Commerce. Another employee is a director of the Whitehorse Chamber. Thompson is the chair of the Yukon Senior Marketing Council. "By exposing ourselves to other people in town here, our competitors included, we're seeing a bunch of ideas," he says. "And learning to be better businesspeople." Just as valuable? Learning to make mistakes. Thompson may have high expectations, but it is, in his books, OK to fail. "We encourage people to really make the effort: to try, fail and try again. And to learn from it."

SSI Micro

Location: Yellowknife
Year founded: 1990
Employees: 70
Industry: Technology
Love potion: Great atmosphere, great teamwork and a beer fridge

When SSI micro employees talk about Nerf wars, nose rings and dogs at work, what they're really talking about is atmosphere. Atmosphere is one of those elusive things the dictionary defines as "a surrounding or pervading mood, or environment." It's also something many employers believe, or hope, will magically sort itself out. Not Jeff Philipp. For Philipp, atmosphere is a big part of making a great workplace. It must be deliberately and carefully constructed.

Indeed, when it came time for SSI to build its new Ottawa facility, Philipp was not about to take a hands-off approach. "It's taken me about six months longer to approve the floor plans than everybody wished it would," he jokes. "I'm very, very detailed about how I want it to look." The new building is about 12,000 square feet, complete with a staff lounge, big kitchen, pool table and roll-up glass doors to a front lawn seating area. All this good atmosphere will cost about \$5-million, but Philipp is unapologetic about that too: "It's my bank account so I'm allowed to do these things." After all, he adds, "I work there as well. I want to work in a nice environment."

Back in Yellowknife, where Philipp's been working his magic and spending his bank account for decades, employees aren't complaining. "I'm one of the newbies here," says Jenna McCrindle. "I absolutely love it. I love the team environment." Though she's only been at SSI for a few months, McCrindle says it didn't take her long to realize everybody was willing to help everybody else. While McCrindle surely has the clubhouse and free beer to – partly – thank for SSI's relaxed attitude, the company's great atmosphere has a deeper core. Philipp has assembled a group of employees who love their work, love being challenged and love talking about it. "No matter who you're talking to, or who you pass by, there's always something interesting going on," says Stephen Walters. "Nobody has a problem with me going up to their desk and saying, 'What are you working on, can I help?'"

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