

Employee Retention Through Architecture

BY JOANNE SMITH



We live in a competitive world with companies continually being faced with the challenge of attracting and retaining the best people. Some of the traditional methods used to attract staff include salary, incentives, growth opportunities, a flexible and challenging work environment, as well as the social atmosphere within a firm. The question is how does the physical environment that a person works in contribute to their work life satisfaction? In our practice we have seen a growing realization that the building within which a company operates has the ability to not only attract and retain staff, but create equality through all departments, and create a pride of ownership that further contributes to an excellent work environment.

We all witnessed the flood of people who moved north to take advantage of the high wages when the economic boom hit Fort McMurray, Alberta. What wasn't as visible was the constant movement of people between companies. If their expectations were not met, they would simply walk across the road and find equal or better pay. Rather than continually increasing salaries a few companies with a little forethought decided to invest in

their buildings as a means of attracting and retaining staff. They took the time to design buildings that accommodated work flow, took advantage of natural light, paid attention to the interior design of the spaces, and were in general, enjoyable places to be. This last point seems very obvious, but it was not always being considered as cost and construction schedules were the drivers for the majority of the building projects.

One of the first tasks that an architect has to perform is the planning of the space. It is through this exercise that the architect has the opportunity to shape the way in which employees will relate to the building as well as each other. If one employee has an office right off the main corridor and has a window, the employee who sits in the back corner that no one can find is not going to feel as valued or as valuable. By providing equal access between office spaces and the building amenities, as well as clear circulation and wayfinding, the architect has the ability to create equality through the building design. Through good design, each employee has access to the main circulation spaces, and as such shares access to the other departments, meeting spaces, and lunch rooms. This approach eliminates the

The OPTI Canada Long Lake North Administration Building located 45 minutes outside of Fort McMurray is an example of the growing trend of attracting and retaining staff by investing in their physical environment. This project was constructed prior to the completion of the upgrade so that employees working on startup were working out in the same building as the long term operational staff.

'have/have not' culture that can be a result of their physical space.

Attention to the physical environment is also a means of creating a feeling of pride of ownership among the employees of a company. If a building is cheaply constructed, or seen to be temporary, there is little incentive for employees to look after it or contribute to its maintenance. On the other hand, if the building is well built and reflects the values of the company through its construction and detailing, employees are much more likely to treat it with respect. This ability to influence how an employee will react to the building will contribute to the long term performance of the building, and enable the building to continue as a major factor in attraction and retention.

Even within cost restraints, it is critical to find an element of the building that will enable those who work within it to take ownership. What the architect can bring to these companies is the ability to create a working environment that employees will support.

As architects we need to think about how you make a building in the middle of an upgrader site that lives in darkness for four months of the year attract employees and provide them with an environment that is enjoyable. Similarly, how do you create high design when the space you are given is the basement of a hospital. We need to strive to find the design elements that will transform the given conditions into a place that will attract employees to a company, foster a sense of equality, and enable workers to take ownership of the building so they will collectively work to maintain the physical environment of the workplace. **CB**

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