



Staff attraction and retention: Jacques Whitford experience

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ABSTRACT

Attracting and retaining engineering, technical and other professional staff is a growing challenge for all organizations in Canada and elsewhere, whether they are private or non-private. Poor response to job advertisements and the increase in the number of placement and recruitment agencies attest to the reality of the supply and demand imbalance for technical staff. The regional differences that exist in Canada in 2008 and which will likely exist for the next several years, cause additional pressures on getting the right geotechnical engineers and technicians in the right places to meet the growing work demands. The paper will describe the recent experiences of Jacques Whitford, a 1,600 person consulting firm with offices across the country from St. John's to Vancouver, in regards to attracting and retaining technical staff. In 2007 and 2008 Jacques Whitford was awarded the designation of Top 10 and Top 100 Employers by various organizations in Canada. Employee expectations vary widely and also evolve with time. Organizations must be proactive in their approach to human resources to minimize negative impacts associated with not being able to attract and keep the right personnel. The paper will describe the issues organizations such as Jacques Whitford face, and the various approaches and solutions that have been used to deal with this challenging issue.

RÉSUMÉ

Attirer et retenir les services d'ingénieurs, de personnels technique ou d'autres professionnels est aujourd'hui un défi croissant pour tous les organismes privés ou publics au Canada et partout ailleurs. La faible réponse aux annonces de travail et l'augmentation du nombre d'agences de placement font preuve du déséquilibre entre l'offre et la demande en ce qui concerne le personnel technique. Les différences régionales qui existent au Canada en 2008, et qui existeront probablement pendant plusieurs années à venir, exercent aussi une pression additionnelle afin de trouver les bons ingénieurs et techniciens en géotechnique pour les bons postes et aux bons endroits, tout en satisfaisant la demande croissante. Cet article décrit l'expérience récente de Jacques Whitford, société en consultation de 1600 personnes avec des bureaux à travers le pays de St John's à Vancouver, dans sa démarche pour attirer et conserver le personnel technique. En 2007 et 2008, Jacques Whitford a été reconnue comme l'une des 10 et/ou des 100 meilleurs employeurs selon diverses organisations au Canada. Sachant que les attentes des employés varient et évoluent considérablement avec le temps, les organisations doivent être proactives dans leurs modes de gestion des ressources humaines afin de réduire le plus possible l'impact négatif lié au faible pouvoir d'attraction et de conservation du bon personnel. Cet article décrit les diverses problématiques auxquelles font face les organisations telles que Jacques Whitford à cet égard, ainsi que les différentes approches et solutions employées à date pour répondre à ce défi.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Jacques Whitford

To In 1972 Hector Jacques was a young engineer who had immigrated to Canada from Goa. He received his Masters degree in soil mechanics and foundation engineering in Nova Scotia, and then worked for four years in the geotechnical department of a national engineering firm. One of Hector's talented engineering colleagues in that department was Mike Whitford. Shortly after their employer was acquired by a larger international company, Hector and Mike decided that it was time to try things their way, and, in September 1972, Jacques Whitford was launched in Halifax. Thirty six years later the company has a staff of more than 1,600. Jacques Whitford began with a philosophy to hire the absolute best and brightest people - to be thought of as the employer of choice among top graduates of engineering and science programs. As Hector says, "If you hire the best minds, you can't expect them to stay around unless you grow. Bright people want opportunity, and if you let them expand the company, if you support them and don't

create a lot of bureaucracy, they do it and growth happens organically."

By 1980, Jacques Whitford was in all four Atlantic Provinces. The development of Atlantic Canada's offshore oil and gas industry provided the firm's biggest early break. Against advice that only the big multi-national consulting firms could win the opportunities, Jacques Whitford secured its first contract with Mobil Oil. "We showed them what we could do," says Hector. "Frankly, we did a really great job for them".

Widespread growing concern over environmental issues in the late 1970s and early 1980s led to the next big step forward for Jacques Whitford. The firm expanded its capabilities to perform some of the early Environmental Impact Reviews associated with oil and gas development. Buoyed by the growth of our client base, the range of our staff expertise and their desire to grow career opportunities, Jacques Whitford opened an Ottawa office in 1988. New disciplines and technologies were added, first in environmental engineering and sciences and, over time, in a broad range of consulting, planning and management disciplines bearing on both natural and built environments.

Other offices were opened steadily across Canada including Toronto (1991), Calgary (1992) and Vancouver (1996). Our first U.S. office was opened in 1992, and our first international office in Russia in 1993. In 2005 AXYS Environmental Consulting in Calgary became part of the Jacques Whitford group. In 2007 the company became the first carbon neutral consulting firm in North America. Consulting services in the area of sustainability are an important pillar of the company's current service offering. Today, the company vision is to become the "premier employee-owned provider of engineering, environmental and earth science solutions in North America."

Jacques Whitford started out as, and remains an employee-owned firm. It is interesting to note that most of the growth of Jacques Whitford over the last 36 years has occurred organically by the attraction and retention of many exceptional men and women.

1.2 Generational Differences

There are inherent generational differences in most organizations that have been around for very long. These differences are often described as summarized below. Note the Jacques Whitford current demographic is indicated in parenthesis:

- The Veterans. Born before 1947 (3%).
 - Self sacrifice and deferral of rewards
 - Team work
 - Dependability
 - Loyalty
 - Hard Working
 - Wisdom & Experience
- Baby Boomers. Born 1947-1964 (26%).
 - Optimism
 - Self-Fulfillment
 - Non-Conformist
 - Workaholic
 - Acceptance of stress
 - Team oriented
- Generation X. Born 1964-1974 (27%).
 - Adaptive to change
 - Acceptance of diversity
 - Immediate gratification
 - Sacrifice personal life for advancement
 - Desire for job security
 - Desire to be recognized
- Nexus Group. Born after 1974 (44%)
 - Adaptive to change.
 - Optimism
 - Variety seeking
 - Continuous development of skills
 - Less likely to commit
 - Work-life balance
 - Fun and communal workplace

Clearly, the elements of attraction and retention may be quite different and to be effective must reflect the expectations and desires of the different age groups.

2 ATTRACTION

Getting the attention of top professional and technical people in a world saturated with information and employment opportunities is no easy task. Many elements are needed to achieve success. A brief description of the some of the elements our organization uses is presented below.

2.1 Brand

How do others see your organization? Those on the inside and with the organization a long time, may be surprised by what others say. You have to present an image through your materials and actions that reflects the values of your organization. Asking people outside the organization is necessary if you want to present the correct image. Focused recruitment campaigns such as "Get There" show people how their career might advance. Geographic diversity combined with life career opportunities are important parts of this communication.

2.2 Web

First impressions are important. Websites are often the tool to give that first impression to students, new graduates and to experienced workers. The tendency with engineering consulting websites has often been to bury the reader in excessive detail. More effective websites use less words and more images. Information must be correct and kept fresh with news items. Looking at a website that has not been re-freshed in 2 years gives the impression of a less than dynamic firm. Examples of recent projects, technical publications and awards won provide valuable information to prospective candidates about the organization.

2.3 Process

It is important to maximize the recruitment experience for applicants. The initial contact is often by e-mail, and prompt responses are important. The interview process is two way. Well organized and prepared interviewers with timely follow up to candidates are critical to maintain interest.

2.4 Student Programs

Engineering schools and colleges produce the individuals with the desired education. Participation in co-op programs and summer or seasonal employment give the students and the employers an opportunity to check each other out before graduation. Company scholarships and stipends or awards linked to an employment period can be effective in attracting students. Undergraduate and graduate programs with full or partial funding from employers and/or industry or research organizations can also be effective. These can be particularly attractive to employees how have been with you a few years, and who are committed to further their education.

2.5 Senior Practitioners and Technical Leaders

Aspiring technical people want to work in an environment with experienced proven people that have the benefit of years of experience so they can learn. Technical leaders and Principals need to take active roles in technical and life mentorship. Active participation in professional groups is a keep element encouraged at all levels.

2.6 Culture

Employees that believe in the organization, what they do on a day to day basis and its future can have a significant influence on others they talk to outside the firm. Employees are encouraged to get involved with the recruitment process, be aware of the needs of the organization and to actively seek the best people.

2.7 Recruitment Incentives

Recruitment incentives for existing employees who help attract new people have been in place in many organizations. A well thought out incentive program can be a very effective tool to help bring new people on board. Our experience has been very positive when a valued employee recommends another individual to hire.

2.8 Compensation

The compensation package includes many other elements besides salary. These include vacation, health benefits, employee assistance program, an incentive program based on individual and team/company performance, professional and technical membership dues, financial support for training, publication stipends, share ownership and various non-cash rewards.

3 RETENTION

Many of the elements of retention are carried over from recruitment, however there are several additional key aspects that are added. Jacques Whitford, for the last several years, completes an internal survey. The survey is open to all employees and covers a wide range of topics that include communication, leadership and alignment within the company as well as general feedback. The survey results are collated and shared with all employees. The top three items for improvement for each office/area are identified, and the go forward plan targets those specific areas. Subsequent surveys are compared to prior year to gauge improvement and to help determine future actions.

3.1 Career Plan

Employees are encouraged to develop a career plan which identifies where they are now, where they want to go, a gap analysis and how they can achieve their goals.

3.2 Performance Planning and Review (PP&R)

The PP&R process is an interactive tool used by the employee and their manager to set goals for the year and to monitor progress and adjust where necessary. Our system is set up on a quarterly basis, so once every 3 months the employee and manager sit down to review progress.

3.3 Succession Planning

Employees are supported and encouraged to meet their current goals, and to consider what they want to do next. Succession planning is an important part of the process. In simplest terms those who want to take on a new role or perhaps to move to a new city or location, are encouraged to work with their manager to identify and help develop their successor.

3.4 Continual Learning

Continual learning is fundamental to people growth and development. In Jacques Whitford there are a number of formal and informal programs to promote academic and practical learning. Formal processes exist for employees to apply for and pursue conventional academic programs at educational institutions including bachelors, masters and PhD with financial support from the company. Opportunities for specific technical and managerial skill upgrade are also readily available and encouraged. The company has developed several internal training elements that cover a wide range of topics such as project management, standard operating procedures for technical activities, quality management, health and safety and many others. Offices promote internal "Lunch & Learn" sessions where employees present the results of current projects. In 2007 one of the Jacques Whitford offices successfully established its own Toastmasters Club to help employees hone their communication and presentation skills. Recognizing the gap in business and people skill training for engineers and scientists, Jacques Whitford has linked with the business school at Queens to provide business and manager training to a select group of intermediate professionals.

3.5 Communication

A key aspect to the success of any organization and the satisfaction of its employees is effective communication at all levels. For the last several years Jacques Whitford has worked hard to improve communications. Current communication strategies include: intranet (internal) site for sharing resource tools and general news and announcements which is updated daily, quarterly and annual report to all company by the leadership team on past performance and look ahead, monthly office meetings and celebrations of success, weekly group and team meetings, webcasts for key training and information distribution and on an individual basis, the quarterly review process between employee and manager.

4 CONCLUSION

The bar is constantly being raised for all technical organizations in the area of attraction and retention of personnel. The organizations that will thrive and succeed in the long term are those that recognize this fact and are proactive in their approach.