

# The Lure of Small

By Emily McMackin

Ever feel second best when you're looking to hire a new employee? Compared to small businesses, large corporations have more money, name recognition and benefits to attract the best and brightest employees. But bigger doesn't always mean better. Disillusioned with the rigid bureaucracy, shaky ethics and uncertain job security of big businesses, many employees are leaving the big corporate world to work for small businesses.

Not only are these corporate refugees finding the fulfillment they've sought all along, they are also growing their careers in ways they never thought possible. And small-business owners smart enough to lure them are finding hires eager to help them build their companies.

Gene Yanku seemed to have it all - a dream job as a design guru at Nike and a compensation package with cushy benefits and stock options. As part of an elite group that explored new product concepts for the billion-dollar global company, Yanku's work was exciting and challenging. He had all the resources he needed, from a generous budget to a design library with in-house marketing research. Anytime he needed a break, he could work out in one of the gyms, swimming pools or nature trails on the Nike campus.

Two years ago, Yanku left it all behind to work for a small business. "I had really gotten to the point in my life where I wanted more control," he says. "At Nike, like most big companies, there were way too many meetings and people making decisions. I spent more time going to meetings than developing products."

Now, as vice president of product development for Highgear, a company that makes digital watches, altimeters and other outdoor navigational tools, Yanku has found his passion again.

"Instead of sitting in meetings 60 to 70 percent of the time, I get to be a hands-on designer-- and that's what I'd been missing."

Another perk? Now, Yanku has an ownership stake in his company as well, something that wouldn't have been possible at Nike.

Yanku's story isn't unusual. Gary Langton, co-founder and CEO of Quadrant Software, hears versions of it all the time from employees who come from Boston-based corporations, such as IBM, Hewlett-Packard and Fidelity, to work at his electronic document distribution company. Langton can't offer the visibility or the health-care and pension plans their former employers could, but that's not what they want.

"Those who have left corporations share an unbelievable desire to be their best," Langton says. "At large corporations, they're not pushed to be their best; they're pushed to be a cog in the machine."

What can you do to attract corporate employees to your small business? Here are lures that are working for other owners:

The chance to make a difference

Frank Oliveras was fresh out of college when he began working as an assistant for top accounting firm KPMG International. Within two years, he had climbed the ranks to senior accountant, but his hard work and long hours barely made a ripple.

"At a big corporation, you're a small fish in a big pond," Oliveras says. "You don't get the satisfaction of feeling like you're making a difference or contributing."

His job was the same every month, every quarter, every year. He didn't have the authority to tackle new projects, and waiting for a promotion to management seemed impossible in an environment where seniority ruled. Oliveras repeated the cycle at two other corporations before taking a job as Quadrant's assistant comptroller, where he finally found his niche managing staff as well as finances.

"Before, I always knew what was coming, but here everything is a surprise," he says. "When a new project comes up, I can pass my responsibilities off to someone else on staff and take it on."

Knowing that senior executives will listen to his recommendations is also satisfying. When the company recently adopted a bookkeeping process that Oliveras suggested, "it made things more efficient and effective--and made me feel like I had really accomplished something."

The freedom to make decisions

Gene Yanku works harder and longer than ever before, but he has never felt more energized. After two years at Highgear's Portland, Ore., office, he had seen 12 of his designs reach the shelves. In his eight years at Nike, only four of his ideas made it into the marketplace. "At Nike, I always felt like I was swimming against the current," he says. "Now I look forward to starting the day."

Instead of focusing on selling his ideas to layers of departments in a corporation, he strategizes about how to manufacture and launch his products. Rather than being regulated to design only, he dabbles in all aspects of the business, from brand management to advertising, and helps steer its direction. "I finally feel the ability to make my own decisions, chart my own way and not get lost in the corporate whirlpool of indecision and company politics," Yanku says.

Highgear President Mike Hosey wants employees to feel empowered and trusted to make decisions, share ideas and give their opinion on everything from job candidates to product colors. That culture has helped him draw employees from places such as UPS and K2 Sports, despite not being able to offer a retirement savings plan.

"It's not just about giving raises and benefits," Hosey says. "Employees want to know that their vote counts and their voice matters."

The sense of teamwork and camaraderie

As a senior vice president of marketing at Digitas, the county's largest independent marketing firm, Ross Dobson had a job most people envied - managing the company's FedEx and Terminix accounts. But Dobson couldn't stop thinking about Stone Ward, a small Little Rock, Ark.-based advertising, marketing and public relations firm that he had worked with on a project for a mutual client.

"The staff there had all of the drive and output of a large agency, but with a greater sense of teamwork and collaboration--and that carried over to their clients and to other agencies they partnered with," he says.

Dobson envied their close bond to each other and to clients. Since his company had gone public, its focus had become more about making money and less about relationships. That was enough to convince Dobson to walk away from his lucrative job to join Stone Ward, even though it meant commuting from his Boston home to Little Rock for part of the week.

Because it's a smaller shop where employees touch multiple pieces of projects, the firm works in a "round-table setting" that breeds camaraderie and encourages constructive criticism, Dobson says. "At the end of the day, the amount of work I'm putting in is the same, but the setting is more intimate, and the sense of community is greater," he says. "Everything we do is about the work and the people."

That sense of solidarity has attracted employees from Fortune 500 companies and established marketing agencies like Ogilvy & Mather and Leo Burnett to Stone Ward, says President Millie Ward, who draws a quarter of her hires from corporations. "They like the family atmosphere here," Ward says, "and the culture built around that."

### The flexibility to balance work and life

With hectic family schedules and bulging social calendars, many corporate employees come to small businesses to find flexibility to balance work and life.

Quadrant employees get a half-day off every Friday during the summer to enjoy the weather and the weekend, as well as a day off to do volunteer work. Other gestures like birthday lunches, Halloween costume parties and Easter egg hunts show employees that they and their families are valued.

"It's good to feel that a company cares about your happiness," Oliveras says.

When Stone Ward employees put in extra time at work, managers reward them with "done goods"--movie tickets or restaurant or bookstore gift certificates. The company also gives employees a week off after Christmas and considers flexible schedules for those adjusting to parenthood or other life changes. Acknowledging that employees have a life outside of work means everything, Dobson says.

"People here never forget a birthday or an anniversary. You might see that in larger shops, but it comes from more of a place of process. Here it is about heart."

Though Nike offered plenty of flex-time policies, working at Highgear "feels more flexible," Yanku says. When he took the morning off recently to handle a family emergency, he didn't feel guilty or rushed to get back to the office like before.

Hosey, Highgear's owner, tries to provide employees with generous time off, and lets them know that "we are a small enough company to bend the rules when necessary." And he recognizes personal sacrifices employees make. When his sales director spent three weeks traveling shortly after his wife gave birth, Hosey gave him \$100 so he could take her out for a nice dinner when he returned home. "I wanted him to know that I appreciated his wife staying at home with a new baby while he was putting in time for the company," Hosey says.

### The room to grow

Small businesses look for ways to invest in employees, give them responsibilities and challenge them to grow - something that some corporations don't necessarily care about.

"We don't pigeonhole people," Quadrant's CEO Langton says. "We give them the freedom to express themselves, try things and become more than they thought they could be."

Since coming to Stone Ward, Dobson has not only experimented with different marketing channels, he has discovered an opportunity to help the company grow and to shape its culture.

"People need to feel ownership in their careers and in the organizations they work for," he says. "They need to feel a part of the solution; they need to feel that they have equity in the outcome."

As Yanku has discovered, small businesses not only offer employees a brighter future, they also provide more fulfillment.

"At Nike, you had the tendency to hide behind the swoosh," Yanku says. "When you launched a product, you never really knew if it was successful because it had merit or because it was a brand that people liked."

"If you have plenty of money and resources, it's no big deal to design something cool. Having less to work with takes your creativity to a whole different level."

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