

Workforce Mobility Drives Innovation in Recruitment

By Laurie Blake

Microsoft Canada's urbane VP of human resources blazes the way for flexible work, part-time workers, including new Canadians, and making the workplace fun.

In the 20-plus years I've known my friend Chris, she's probably held at least that same number of jobs. Some she's had to leave, but most times it was her decision to go. As members of the baby boomer generation, all of us in Chris's circle of friends perceived her job-hopping as a rare phenomenon — and not a positive one. And yet while we all but questioned her sanity, she's rarely been out of work longer than a couple of months. In fact, she's always had a choice of offerings when job seeking — and I can't count how many times employers have come to her with offers when she wasn't even looking.

As it turns out, Chris was merely ahead of her time. What was a unique path for boomers has become more the norm for generations X and Y. Members of today's workforce are likely to move frequently, not only from job to job, but from one geographical location to another. In its 2007 Employee Relocation Policy Survey, the Canadian Employee Relocation Council (CERC) found that almost three-quarters of respondents anticipated relocating anywhere from one to 100 employees during the year. Echoing comments from a representative from one moving and relocation company, who notes that international moving is the fastest-growing part of its business, the CERC survey reports that just under half of respondents are planning to relocate employees to international locations in 2008.

So, it was with no small interest that I approached my interview with Sharif Khan, vice president, human resources, for Microsoft Canada Co. Here is a man who not only is a player in setting up policies and practices to attract the best and brightest, but who himself embodies the demographics of today's modern, mobile workforce.

Born and educated in Canada, Khan left home in the mid-1990s to work overseas, primarily in the Middle East, Europe, and the United Kingdom. After working for other organizations, he joined Microsoft Corp. in 1998, as regional human resources manager for the Middle East. Before coming back to Canada in 2005, he moved into the position of senior HR manager on the Microsoft HR Leadership team for Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

"It's an eye-opener, working abroad," Khan says. "There is a deeply embedded sense of workplace culture in Europe, and one that has responded quickly to demands made by the changing workforce demographics, such as the ability to work flexibly."

Over the last three to five years, the U.K. and Europe have awakened to the fact that, to get the best talent, organizations must be innovative in their workplace practices. Depending on the country, up to 25 per cent of the workforce can be made up of part-time workers, says Khan. In a number of European countries, fairly strict labour laws support these part-time workers, and others who work under flexible arrangements.

It's definitely a global workplace as far as Khan is concerned, with growing trends that include not only a mobile workforce, but things such as global project teams. "People these days want to work in a manner and place that suits them," he says.

The pace of change, he warns, has definitely accelerated. It's up to organizations to make themselves attractive employers of choice to a change-hungry generation of talented workers. And, while many employers have implemented branding programs to do just that, Khan laments that we are not yet seeing in Canadian workplaces the changes already embraced by industrialized nations in Europe and the U.K.

"Canadian workplaces seem 'closed up'," he notes. According to the 2007/2008 UN Human Development Report, Canada ranks fourth, behind Iceland, Norway, and Australia, on the list of the most desirable places to live and work. Despite this, Khan has found since his return to Canada "a sense of reluctance to go above and beyond the norm."

While our country boasts a good international reputation and has much to offer to workers and new industry, Canadian business has not been very aggressive in securing either new business opportunities or new sources of talent. "Canada has a 'sitting-on-the-fence' reputation in markets around the world. We are diplomatic but we haven't indicated yet how interested we are in building our business in other markets," says Khan.

Relying on our obvious strengths — great social and health-care systems, cultural openness, a focus-on-children attitude — may not be enough to attract the best in the coming years. Khan notes that while the emerging market countries in Africa, Asia, and, to some extent, the Middle East have some catching up to do, salaries in those countries are increasing by double-digits. Even now, some are paying higher than Canadian, even North American, salaries for top-level talent. Competition is fierce.

Building innovation in work culture

Khan believes that for Canadian organizations to be the employers of choice for talent around the world, the key is creating flexible workplaces that are fun to work in.

How can we, he asks, make sure the woman going off on maternity leave comes back to the workforce in a year? Or, what will convince older workers to remain in the workforce, rather than opt for early retirement or retire fully at age 65? It's high time, Khan maintains, that employers consider flexible work arrangements — not simply through accommodation of part-time workers, either, but through job-sharing and special leaves of absence that allow workers time off to pursue special interests.

"In the U.K., for instance, workers have the right to request flexibility in their workplace," Khan says. To this end, Microsoft Canada has instituted a part-time, job-share policy. Moreover, employees who have worked for the company for two or more years may request three months of unpaid leave. They may also take up to one week of paid leave to do charity work.

The program, called "I Volunteer," allows Microsoft Canada employees to volunteer their time with a charity during work hours for up to five days (or 40 hours) each year. The program also includes an online volunteer exchange resource as well as an online tracking tool to enable employees keep a record of their volunteer commitment. Employees may work in their local community or volunteer anywhere in the world, MS employees have even worked at orphanages in Tanzania and built a school in remote village in India.

Diversity, Khan says, is more than a buzzword at Microsoft — it's a business opportunity. And the company wants to ensure it's getting a significant piece of the talent. For instance, how do they find ways to make work attractive to women with families? They ask the women themselves by hosting a women's conference, offering career-based training, and hosting a woman's group with business speakers.

Microsoft has also partnered with the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) to provide mentoring to new Canadians. The company also hires from within Microsoft offices abroad, as well as from the whole global marketplace.

"We realize that the best talent is not necessarily just Canadian talent," Khan says.

Microsoft also has a diversity advisory council to attract visible minorities in Canada, which helps the company target hard-to-reach groups, not only from the ethnic communities, but from disabled, gay and lesbian, and other innovative sources.

Having fun at work

If you have great work, attractive compensation and benefits, and flexible workplaces, talented workers will come. And Khan believes that if you make the work and the workplaces fun, those workers will not only stay longer, but work better as well. And creating fun can be simple.

Some simple but well-received fun ideas that Khan has implemented include:

- bringing Tim Hortons and Starbucks into work;
- offering dry cleaning pickup and drop-off at work; and
- having fresh fruit in the office.

Khan admits that getting all senior management to buy into some of the concepts he champions has taken a couple a years or so. But innovation in attracting people is just as key as innovation geared to attract new business. Each year, Microsoft holds an exclusive, by-invitation-only, one-day conference on innovation, called CAN>WIN. This thought-leadership event brings together Canada's top minds from the public and private sectors to discuss the key challenges facing the country's economic prosperity. The theme of last year's CAN>WIN summit was "Creating a Skilled Workforce to Drive Economic Prosperity."

"A good employer brand is important to attract good people to work for you," Khan says, "but it's not enough by itself. Companies have to aggressively seek both new markets and new talent and offer what those markets demand."

Laurie Blake is a contributing writer for Workplace Magazine. Workplace is a national bi-monthly magazine that reaches over 10,000 human resources professionals. For over a decade, Workplace has been dedicated to offering readers crucial information through timely in-depth, independent, and objective editorial content, specific to the Canadian workplace.