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Five Ways HR is More Than Just 'Office Equipment With Legs'

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Last week I was combing CNN.com on my lunch break. When I first came across author Max Barry's article "Why I fled the office cubicle," I thought it was going to just be about how this 20th century feature of workplace culture and design can hinder employee engagement and ideation from the bottom up.

It is about that, but Barry also takes aim (I think unnecessarily) at human resources professionals:

The difference between people and human resources is that people have brains. ... Human resources are basically office equipment with legs. They're talking furniture. In fact, they're worse than furniture, because at least furniture stays where you put it.

Ouch.

In stark contrast to how Barry sees HR, here's how I painted this critical business function in the context of our Winning Workplaces in 2009:

For the most part, among the small firms we've honored for their outstanding employee engagement that improves productivity and the bottom line, HR leaders morph from paper pushers to planners and implementation specialists, along with the CEO, of team building activities that fit and reinforce the work culture.

Below are five specific examples of this, among the small firms we've honored and profiled over the years:

1. Leadership Advisor and Key Decision Maker

Ginger Bay Salon & Spa, Kirkwood, MO
HR Representative: Sasha McGuire

"I'm part of the leadership team here, and we meet weekly to collaborate," [Order Generic Cialis Online without Prescription](#) McGuire says. "My boss, the owner, is very open to my feedback. For example, I make the decisions around staffing, and she trusts me and consults with me. I make the recruiting schedule, and make selections. The owner is involved, but trusts me to do my work well."

2. Self-Directed Workforce Director

New Belgium Brewing Company, Fort Collins, CO
HR Representative: Jenny Briggs

Philosophically, NBB's intention is to develop a workforce that, at all levels, is self directed, makes reasoned decisions and is inspired to pursue their passions at work. The company provides a menu of opportunities for all staff including: a process for employees to establish their own work objectives, on-site internal training, tuition for external education, a job shadowing program, and participation on one of NBB's committees. Many of these activities are directed by Briggs and her 10-person staff in Human Resources.

3. Productivity Enhancer

High Performance Technologies, Inc. (HPTi), Reston, VA
HR Representative: Eleni Antoniou

The firm's staff benefit from peer learning through Learning Cafe presentations that are given every two to three weeks. Occurring over the lunch hour in a format akin to brown bags, staff members have the chance to receive in-depth training on a particular computer program or even learn a skill not tied to the workplace. Antoniou, director of HR, has presented several topics, including goal setting and getting the most out of performance reviews.

4. Relationship Builder

Optimax Systems, Inc., Ontario, NY
HR Representative: Alejandro Mendoza

Mendoza's duties include helping to administer Optimax's successful mentoring program, which is core to the company's developmental process and helps maintain its unique workplace culture. All new employees are assigned a mentor for a minimum of 90 days and there is a structured timeline of events that are expected to take place during this time period, including: much one-on-one time, monthly lunches, introductions to all staff, orientation to computer systems, understanding the bonus program, etc. "Instead of a boring HR orientation, this mentoring relationship helps new employees understand our environment and what is expected in a far more effective manner," says Mendoza.

5. Emergency Responder (Culture Maintainer)

Ipswitch, Inc., Lexington, MA
HR Representative: Betty Lang-Holmes

Lang-Holmes had been on the job for one week when tragedy struck her software company, Ipswitch, Inc. An employee's well known significant other passed away unexpectedly. As vice president of human resources, she acted quickly. "We invited a licensed counselor from our EAP to host bereavement seminars the very next day," she says. "Now, there's no stigma attached to getting help when people need it." In fact, at only \$65 per employee, Ipswitch's EAP investment, and oversight by HR, amounts to just pennies compared to the costs of losing a valued associate.

Related: Our Leadership Conference with Inc. starting June 15 is a fantastic opportunity to learn about cutting-edge employee practices for greater team camaraderie and company productivity – the kinds of practices you can leverage your HR staff to implement, increasing your ROI from them! Hurry – the \$300 early bird discount is only available until May 6.

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