

Build it and they will come:

How fostering a unique corporate culture helps attract and retain top talent

The best companies in the world don't attract top talent only because they offer high starting salaries. They do it by offering workplace environments that motivate, inspire and challenge talented people. It's not just the Zappos and Googles of the world that can build successful businesses by fostering a strong corporate culture, but they have proven how important it is. Today, companies are taking the idea of "culture" more seriously than ever before and for companies striving to attract and retain the very best and brightest, culture is a strategic imperative. This paper explores what employees are looking for, common practices from some of the most sought-after-to-work-for companies, and most importantly, easy-to-implement ideas to foster an organic culture within your organization.

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Culture is more important than you think.

In fact, culture is among the most influential factors in determining where people want to work. Consider this: Universum, an employer branding firm, surveyed 10,306 young professionals (average age, 27) about their thoughts on American employers, including how they choose where to apply for and, ultimately, work. Universum found that the most important factors had more to do with cultural aspects of a potential employer, such as work/life balance, job security, and company values, rather than just money. Interestingly, salary was not even a top deciding factor, evidenced by the fact that Universum's study found the top three companies people would like to work for were non-profits and government agencies. In his book *The Human Capital Edge*, author Bruce Pfau notes that, "Employers far underrate the importance to employees of such things as flexible work schedules or opportunities for advancement in their decision to join or leave a company".

So yes, culture is important when it comes to attracting, and keeping the best employees. But "culture" is also a vague word that encompasses everything from employee perks to building an office filled with fun, like-minded people.

Feeding the mind, body, and soul

Feed the Mind

The world's top companies clearly want the best and the brightest individuals to be working for them. Today, more than ever, these companies are expanding the list of qualities they're looking for in an ideal candidate: Is this person outgoing? Does this person play nicely with others? What are his/her hobbies? And, most importantly, is this person a hard worker who also knows how to have fun? By recruiting personable, well-rounded employees, companies can create an enriching environment where collaboration flourishes and ideas flow freely. Atlantic Media has a very simple strategy, "Hire smart people who aren't jerks." Good advice, but how do you actually go about doing that? One way to find these people is to ask your current employees for referrals.

According to the 2012 HR Practices Report published by Associated Industries of Massachusetts, 43 percent of the companies surveyed provide a monetary bonus for employee referrals.

Candidates hired through referrals tend to be successful for two reasons. One: Referrals tend to know about the company and culture before walking into the interview, so they have a good sense of what it is they're getting themselves into and are apt to hit the ground running quickly and excitedly. Two: knowing that candidates are a reflection of them, employees tend to refer people who they know will be good fits and a high performers. No one wants to risk their internal reputation with a less-than-stellar recommendation. According the 2012 Jobvite Index, referred employees are 20 percent more likely to remain with a company for two or more years compared to people found through job boards. By hiring like-minded people, your culture grows organically, one new hire at a time.

It is also important for a company to foster an environment where employees can grow professionally. Innovative companies continually provide opportunities for employees to develop new skills and further their professional knowledge. Consider buddy programs to help newer employees find mentors among more experienced ones. Explore internal training programs that help team members learn new technologies. Some companies even offer funds for formal education, such as MBA programs. Adam Landsman, Director of the Corporate Division for Seamless.com, regularly leverages industry experts and motivational speakers to help his team hone strengths and develop skills that can help them advance both personally and professionally. Or as he sees it, "I want my employees to know we care about their professional development and their personal growth. There isn't pressure for my team to look for other jobs if I can continually, keep them engaged and help them grow."

Companies like Google and 3M have become famous for demanding that employees dedicate time each day to work on personal projects. This accomplishes two things: it gives the mind the mental break necessary to reboot and be creative, and it empowers employees to think beyond their current role and find inspiration through collaboration.

Feeding the Body

Food is obviously the most common and literal example of feeding the body and it is a powerful one. By all accounts, sharing a meal and breaking bread with others is one of the most basic social experiences. The powers of this ancient (and very necessary) ritual extend well beyond nutrition. Many tech companies, like Google, Facebook, Twitter, FourSquare, Zynga, and others, pay for employee meals. Free food keeps their employees happy and well fed, but more importantly, it keeps them at the office and working. Some companies have become creative with this particular perk and have built a culture around food and fun. SendGrid has a cookie and cupcake party once a week and started an open tab for all employees at the Chipotle downstairs in their building.

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Get creative with food as a perk, and employees will appreciate it. It doesn't have to be free food all the time. The occasional catered meeting, pizza party or sweet treat can bring a smile to everyone's face, while also bringing them together to talk, collaborate and form meaningful relationships.

While employees rarely complain about too much food, they may be upset with the extra pounds they start packing on from their office bites. To that point, many companies see this as another opportunity to provide a valuable perk. For example, Buddy Media has a gym in the office and provides every employee with running shoes. If you lack space for a gym consider offering discounted memberships to a gym around the corner, like Tumblr does for its employees. Even by simply supporting a healthy lifestyle, like Etsy does by making it easy for employees to store their bikes in the office, you can create a culture that is attractive to younger workers.

Feed the Soul

This is probably the most vague, but also most important aspect to building a culture that will attract amazing talent. Culture is not just the sum of fancy perks. Culture is about creating an environment where employees are engaged, empowered and genuinely enthusiastic about the work they're doing.

The ability to work when and how they are most productive is very important in today's workforce. Seventy-nine percent of the top 100 companies on *Fortunes* "Best Companies to Work For" list let their employees telecommute 20 percent of the time. The top ten on the same list have a flexible work-life balance attitude, as reported by employee surveys. These companies understand that the benefits of trusting, nurturing and believing in their employees come back tenfold.

Culture cannot be forced or magically created. It is a reflection of the collective values of a company's employees. Cook and Fox Architecture is known for creating some of the most environmentally friendly buildings in the world. To help accomplish these goals, they hire people who demonstrate deep dedication to environmental issues. Therefore, people who take their commitment to the environment seriously form the basis for the firm's corporate culture. One of the ways that this cultural is practically implemented is by giving every employee a "plant budget" for their desks. It's easy for them to promote an environmentally conscious culture to potential employees and clients, because they practice what they preach. "When employees feel that the company takes their interest to heart, then the employees will take company interests to heart," says Dr. Noelle Nelson, a clinical psychologist and business consultant.

Competition for top talent is increasing every year. It's easy to offer a competitive salary but the ability to offer a vibrant and engaging environment will separate you from the competition.

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