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# The Human Resources Perspective

## How LEED® can Improve Employee Satisfaction and Engagement

In June 2004, Smith Carter Architects and Engineers Incorporated opened the doors to their innovative and environmentally advanced corporate headquarters. Situated on a five-acre, pie-shaped lot in Winnipeg's south end, the 50,000 square foot building was an opportunity for Smith Carter to tangibly demonstrate how the built environment can be used to increase communication, enhance productivity, improve employee satisfaction, and raise the profile of the company. The building has received critical acclaim, winning a Governor General's Medal for Architecture in 2006 and achieving LEED® Platinum Certification in May 2009.

Designed as an active 'beta site' or hands on laboratory, SC3 has since provided the interdisciplinary team of architects, engineers, landscape architects and interior designers an opportunity to test materials, study data and interpret results of sustainable building practices for internal use as well as application to a client's project.

From the perspective of the Human Resources professional, the new Smith Carter LEED® Platinum certified office building provides a new view on a number of key management challenges, including attraction and retention, employee satisfaction and engagement, project management and professional development training.

According to Linda Doolan, Director of Human Resources with Smith Carter, there are some very interesting answers to the question "What are the benefits to seeking LEED® certification?" From Linda's vantage point, the LEED® Platinum certification has helped to shape the identity of the company, and has provided a tangible means by which to manifest a new attitude and character of Smith Carter as it transitions to a new leadership model and retools to thrive in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

The LEED® Platinum designation is a symbol for both clients and the company itself, about positioning in the marketplace and the broader sustainable community, not only today but where Smith Carter seeks to be in the future.

### **ATTRACTION AND RETENTION**

A key function of the Human Resources Department is staff attraction and retention. Finding competent new staff in the recent period of economic growth was difficult; but the nation-wide problem was further



compounded due to Winnipeg's physical distance from Eastern and Western Canada, geographic areas typically favoured by design professionals. However, the award winning design of the Smith Carter office (SC3), and the new recognition afforded by the LEED® Platinum award, has given Smith Carter an advantage in attracting new employees to the firm. SC3 is a high quality work environment, that from its project inception was recognized by the management team as a tool that could be leveraged to enhance the quality of the work experience for potential new hires.

A LEED® Platinum building offers a tangible demonstration of Smith Carter's commitment to sustainable design, an increasingly important consideration to prospective employees. SC3 helps to foster a culture that draws like minded professionals together in support of a broader and more holistic approach to building design.

#### **SATISFACTION & ENGAGEMENT**

An open office environment was determined early on to be the best arrangement for staff and leadership alike for a number of reasons. Not only does this 'studio' setup foster collaboration and transfer of knowledge, hard walled construction (typically finished with materials detrimental to indoor air quality) is minimized. As new staff are integrated into the Smith Carter workplace, it becomes clear that they are no longer working in a typical office environment.

All staff in the Winnipeg office work in the open office environment, and those who work on client projects are assembled into teams that can be grouped and regrouped in different areas of the studio as required to support the staffing needs of the project. This fluidity helps to demonstrate the business transformation that is taking place at Smith Carter, as the open workplace environment is critical to facilitating new ways of working that include interdisciplinary teams, remote



“The effort to achieve the LEED® Platinum designation affects the way we do business, the way we serve our clients, the way we represent the building design professions, and the way we present ourselves to the world.”

**Linda Doolan**  
Director, Human Resources

project requirements and fast track project delivery. The open office configuration was also instrumental in achieving the LEED® Platinum designation because of the reduction in drywall construction. Based on the success of the open office model, Smith Carter locations in Atlanta and Ottawa have utilized a similar planning approach.

The open office environment has considerable advantages over the typical office building which is carved into small offices, or is

subdivided into a maze of cubicles. Because of unique design features such as under-floor heating/cooling, portable computer access points and operable windows, Smith Carter employees are able to customize the temperature, airflow and light at their workspace. The ability to tailor the workspace to individual preferences has long been documented to improve staff health, productivity and morale<sup>1</sup>. Employees in traditional office environments often have no way of controlling the temperature or air flow in their work area and

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have been shown to have a higher number of sick days, greater amounts of absenteeism, and lower productivity. Conservatively, in a building where there is little control over environmental conditions, a company with 100 employees can be impacted as much as \$150,000/ year due to loss of productive time.

Employee satisfaction is an important human resource issue, and while there was a period of adaptation required when staff moved into the new office building, most acknowledge that the change to a healthy office environment, featuring abundant natural light and fresh air, is a significant improvement over previous conditions. Post occupancy survey results show a 75% increase in employee satisfaction with the new building, ultimately supporting staff attraction and retention.

The quality of the indoor environment is a key consideration in the LEED® Platinum designation, and it is clear that a healthy workplace has a significant effect on employee morale, productivity and the ability to thrive as professionals.

#### PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Project team building can be easily accommodated in the new building. Teams can be formed quickly, and re-assembled in different parts of the office without any loss of long-term connectivity to phone or data ports. The time it takes to move an employee from one area of the building to another is less than two hours, resulting in reduced downtime and overhead cost savings. In an office like Smith Carter, where close collaboration between professionals is required, having the ability to move staff together can be a major advantage in achieving project efficiency. In the new SC3 building, project managers are encouraged to move staff around to fill their project needs, even for a short duration, maximizing efficiency as often as possible.

A substantial amount of Smith Carter's work is done internationally. With projects in Mexico, India, the United Kingdom and Kyrgyzstan, travel time can be significant for some staff members and team dynamics and staff motivation can be challenging for project managers. A sustainable building, however, has had a transformative effect on the way people work in the office, and has informed a business shift that seeks to mitigate the amount of business travel required.

In particular, the information technology management system designed to accommodate the plug-and-play work environment also supports video-conferencing. Modelled after the Winnipeg infrastructure, similar technology has also been installed in the Atlanta and Ottawa offices. The ability to liaise with staff members in other cities has reduced travel fatigue, and also has the beneficial effect of reducing overhead lost to travel hours. The ability to rely on technology, however, has also inspired the development of a sustainable transportation policy, which encourages project managers to seek alternatives, where possible, to travel. The results have been a human resource success story, as communica-



tion between Smith Carter offices, (as well as video conference equipped clients) is now improved, while the amount of travel and the impact on the employee's family is reduced.

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT/ TRAINING

From the Human Resources Department perspective, the new Smith Carter building has had a significant impact on how the company supports LEED® training and professional development. For the dedicated knowledge worker, the opportunity for professional growth is viewed as a significant benefit. For the Human Resources Department, these opportunities can be viewed as a component of the total benefit package for an employee.

Smith Carter took the unique approach of detailed LEED® documentation for every credit attempted, utilizing the full services of its in-house designers across multiple disciplines to develop a high-level of functional knowledge and awareness of the LEED® process and a detailed resource library for use by all employees. The results of this approach to LEED® documentation are now available to clients in the form of lessons learned and provide a unique point of view, from both owner and consultant.

This approach has had an obvious educational benefit to those staff who participated directly in the documentation process, but has also spilled over to other staff as well. The interest generated in the office created a supportive environment that inspired another 10 staff members to achieve their LEED® Accredited Professional designations. The excitement also provided the catalyst for the successful start-up of a grass-roots organization committed to greening Smith Carter's operational practices. Subsequently, there has been renewed corporate attention directed to the original business transformation goals that were planned for Smith Carter in conjunction with the move into the new building. In this case, the benefits that accrued to the staff with this type of



documentation rigour has had the unanticipated benefit of revitalizing the sustainable business transformation effort.

### CONCLUSION

For Smith Carter, the success of achieving LEED® Platinum certification has, with certainty, driven improvements in management areas that are typically the purview of the human resources professional. Whether focusing on the human resource management issues of attraction and retention, staff attitude/morale, project management, or professional development/training, the new SC3 office building has been a means for ongoing change and improvement. Attraction of new staff has been enhanced, projects are easier to staff, team building is faster and more effective, there is less downtime at project start-up and the LEED® documentation process has motivated improvements in professional development. Smith Carter is proud to be able to concretely demonstrate that significant benefits will accrue to the company who designs and/or occupies a LEED® certified building.

### NOTES

**1. A Literature Review of the Effects of Natural Light on Building Occupants.** Edwards and Torcellini, July 2002.

National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

<http://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy02osti/30769.pdf>

**2. Smith Carter estimates that if 100 employees spend 1 hour of productive time/ week trying to adjust ambient conditions, they could lose up to \$150,000/ year.**