

Victoria's Abebooks fights to retain job-hoppers Firm named one of Top 100 Canadian employers for five consecutive years

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VICTORIA -- Information technology companies are not only having to dangle more incentives to recruit workers but face even bigger challenges in holding on to the staff they attract, says one of the world's largest on-line book brokers.

Judy Hamza, human resources manager for Victoria-based Abebooks.com, said the trend for the 20- and 30-something generation of workers is to stay two or three years "and then they're off to another job to build their resumes."

She said worker retention is a major issue in high tech and other sectors as baby boomers retire and a wide swath of job opportunities open -- despite the best efforts of companies to offer tantalizing perks aimed at work-life balance in the workplace.

"It's not so much about job satisfaction anymore . . . it's a resume-building issue," says Hamza, who's in charge of 103 staff, mostly software programmers, at Abebooks' Victoria headquarters, and another 30 in offices in Germany and the U.S.

"A lot of them do come back. Still, it's a big issue with many companies today."

Abebooks is the world's largest online marketplace for new, used and rare books and lists more than 110 million titles from thousands of booksellers worldwide on five websites. The company was sold to Amazon.com -- the globe's largest e-retailer -- on Aug. 1 and the sale is expected to close by year end, pending regulatory approvals. Abebooks will remain as a stand-alone company within the Amazon empire with few changes to operations and staff, said Hamza.

Hamza said Abebooks will continue staff programs that have earned the company recognition as one of Mediacorp Canada's Top 100 Canadian Employers for five consecutive years -- and mention this past year as one of British Columbia's Top 50 Employers.

If anything, Hamza said Abebooks will be able to incorporate many of the resources and ideas already in place at Amazon and vice-versa.

Abebooks has long been on the cutting edge of workplace perks and the philosophy of allowing employees to have a hand in how their workplace operates.

But the company is pushing for more benefits to retain its staff. One of the new initiatives includes the extension of benefits for maternity and short-term disability leaves that cover 100 per cent of salaries for the first two weeks and 70 per cent for the following 15 weeks -- the remainder of which is picked up by health-benefit programs.

Abebooks is also looking into starting a daycare program for workers with children, either by itself or in collaboration with other local high-tech firms.

The company has also added a Wii video game console that allows office workers who sit in their chairs most of the day to play the interactive games for exercise.

This goes with pool and Ping-Pong tables that have been available for several years and subsidized gym memberships.

Some of the other perks for employees at Abebooks include:

- Three weeks paid vacation for new employees;
- Share purchase plan for all employees;
- Company matches RRSP contributions;
- Free monthly bus passes;
- Company pays employees \$80 if they do use a parking place;
- Secure bike storage and Bike To Work Week promotions;
- Free fruits, juices and other healthy snacks and regular consultations with a nutritionist;
- Free access to an office specialist to ensure employee work stations are properly fitted;
- Free flu vaccinations;
- Free access to massage chair;
- On-site massage therapy by registered masseuse;
- Flexible work hours with staggered starting times that accommodate doctors' appointments and children's activities;
- Several green initiatives, including onsite composting and recycling;
- Monthly social events to celebrate company "wins" and milestones.

Hamza said Abebooks is playing an active role in the root causes of IT shortages after universities and colleges are showing declines in enrolments in areas such as computer science. As part of an umbrella group of Victoria high-tech companies, Abebooks and other companies are going to high schools and career fairs to encourage students of the benefits of high-tech careers.

The company is also supporting the provincial government's recruiting efforts in Eastern Canada and in Europe and a federal program that will help universities get a framework in place for the changing needs of the informational technology industry.

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