

Why Isn't Every Workplace Great?

By Rebecca Ryan, Madison Magazine

Ahhh...great places to work. I can't wait to read about them when Madison Magazine rolls out its Best Places to Work issue next March: the flexible scheduling. The family-friendly policies. The dogs at work...

I wonder, why aren't there MORE great places to work? So I sat down with Tony DiRomualdo, who is studying Madison's best workplaces for Madison Magazine, and asked him about it. Our conversation ranged from porn to tennis to food.

Rebecca: What got you interested in studying great places to work?

Tony: My interest emerged after many years of studying how companies create and maintain competitive advantage. I had led numerous research projects on how companies use information technology for competitive advantage, and I concluded that people -- their acceptance of a new system and how they used it -- made all the difference as to whether companies succeeded or failed implementing new IT. It dawned on me that people might be a critical piece of the performance equation. So I began studying how high-performance companies managed their talent and the types of workplace environments they created.

What percentage of U.S. companies fit your definition of a great place to work? My definition of a great place to work is one that inspires the passion and unleashes the talent of its people. It's probably less than five percent of all organizations.

What makes a workplace great, and why aren't more companies applying these systems and practices? A great workplace is a little like pornography -- we know it when we see it -- but the act of creating one is far more art than science. Too many best-places-to-work lists -- like the one prepared by Fortune -- give you the impression that creating a great place to work is all about "perks and quirks" -- how many kinds of benefits and over-the-top rituals you have. For example, the latest Fortune list asserts that Genentech is the best tech place to work because it celebrated introducing three new drugs by throwing a "lavish party for all its employees and their guests with Elton John as the entertainment."

Are you dissin' Elton? Of course not. But this is not the sort of thing that defines a great place to work. SAS is number four on the Fortune list because "The gym at this software company includes a ten-lane pool, billiards, ping-pong tables, volleyball courts, outdoor soccer fields, three tennis courts, and a putting green. Another perk: free restringing for tennis racquets." This totally misses the point. SAS is a great place to work because of their talent management principles and practices that emphasize sustainability of high performance by allowing people to do their best work every day without burning out.

What are those principles and practices? My research shows that great workplaces provide workers with one or more of these things:

- ✓ Enrichment through opportunities to learn, develop and achieve;
- ✓ Appreciation through the ways people are rewarded and recognized;
- ✓ Harmony through opportunities to achieve the right level of work-life balance;
- ✓ Voice by giving everyone a say in their financial and career destinies;
- ✓ Membership through a sense of belonging and connectedness with teammates, leaders and the organization overall; and

- ✓ Meaning through the purpose, mission, values and behaviors of the organization.

Madison is a state capital, which means government workers and nonprofit organizations call it "home." Can these workplaces be great? Absolutely. There is no reason at all why working for a public institution or nonprofit can't be a great experience. Some would argue that it should be easier for them to become great places to work because they don't have the profit pressures that commercial enterprises do.

At some workplaces, managers are trying to create great teams, but their boss or CEO just doesn't get it. But don't despair. You are not alone. Do whatever you need to do to create a work environment that inspires the passion and unleashes the talent of your team. You won't have to invest much money, only lots of time and effort. Things like listening, giving out praise, and being honest about challenges cost nothing but produce enormous amounts of trust and goodwill among staff. The boss will notice the performance results and eventually get behind you.

I know there are some folks reading this thinking "I hate my job!" How can they find a great place to work? Finding a great place to work can seem a little like a search for the Holy Grail. The best way to find one is to network with friends, acquaintances, customers, suppliers, alums, professional organizations, and so on. Ask them how they feel about where they work or what companies they know about that are great places to work.

What is your favorite story of a great workplace? I guess my favorite is St. Luke's, an ad agency in London. They are truly a pathbreaking company. Their office is the most physically interesting, energetic and fun place I've ever visited. It is designed for creativity and you can feel it. It has lots of open and private spaces that are great to work in, whether in groups or

alone. Every one of their more than one hundred employees owns an equal share of the company. Employees are elected to serve on a governing board that's sort of like a condominium committee. They are a great example of workplace democracy. And perhaps the most interesting thing of all is that they have great food. The father of one of the staff prepares home-cooked meals in the company canteen four days a week. Now that's my idea of a great place to work!

Think you've found or created a great place to work? Visit www.madisonmagazine.com/bestplacestowork and nominate your company for our Best Places to Work survey.

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