

FINANCIAL POST

Wednesday, August 15, 2007

Time to curb staff's cabin fever

Employers And Employees Alike Should Take Advantage Of Downtime To Play Catch Up And Build Skill Level

Emily Mathieu, Financial Post

Corporate Canada's workers are enjoying the dog days of summer before fall crunch time rolls around. But business leaders and human resource professionals say savvy employees and employers should maximize what is left of the summer without completely quashing the season's pleasures.

"If you think of a corporate organization as a team it's all about making sure your people can perform at the highest level," says Colleen Moorehead, president and chief executive of Nexient Learning Inc. She says summer is the best time to squeeze in extra training because people are less stressed and in better moods so their ability to retain information increases. And sending workers to offsite interactive training sessions is an excellent way to curb cabin fever, Ms. Moorehead says.

The added benefit of offsite training is the assurance companies don't get their hat handed to them as Baby Boomers retire in large numbers. Now is the time to find any way possible to step up intellectual investments in front and mid-level managers because that's where the workplace demographic is going to change, Ms. Moorehead says. Looming workplace shortages is not an HR issue, "It's a business issue," as a new demographic is being asked to step up for the first time so coupling retention strategies with skill development is key, she says.



Colleen Moorehead, CEO of Nexient Learning Inc., says workers are less stressed in summer and are able to retain more information.

"How that person's role fits into the company," needs to be the question on every employer's lips, she says.

Whether you can break up your summer team to send them to classes, on or off site, depends on the structure of your organization, Ms. Moorehead says. Some businesses require a certain level of staff regardless of the season, but for general management or sales teams she says it's an excellent time to train. "There are global standards today that Canadian companies have to play at," she adds.

No matter how hard Canadian companies want to play, the reality is things slow down during the summer, says Claude Balthazard, director of HR excellence at the Human Resources Professionals Association of Ontario.

"There is an understanding that you can't run full tilt all the time." Summer is a great time to play catch up on items like filing. On top of getting an intern to sort out company files the balmy months can be used to do some strategic planning, he says. Helping employees get ramped up for the fall is about customizing needs, finding ways to ensure employees can structure their own time in and out of the office, Mr. Balthazard says.

"People don't like to be told when their vacation is going to be," they want options.

Mr. Balthazard suggests employees not take things too easy, though. The summer slowdown tends to make firing and hiring easier on an organization. "You wouldn't do it in your peak time," he says.

According to Noah Blumenthal, executive coach and author, summer is a good time to take advantage of relaxed attitudes to get ahead. "Where as some people may be slowing down their efforts, this is a great time to speed up and show bosses what you're capable of," he says.

The coach, whose clients range from chief executives of smaller companies to managers at the Fortune 500 level, focuses on leadership development and personal effectiveness. Courses are an excellent way to foster development during the summer, he says. But it also is a key time for employees to find ways to advance their careers.

Taking advantage of extended lunches or patio time in the early evening, can be maximized. During heavier work periods, people get entrenched in their own teams and jobs, Mr. Blumenthal says. Summer is a great time to network and develop relationships because people are inclined to take longer lunches and generally have less work on their plate. People tend to underestimate how powerful putting a little extra work into scheduling a relaxed summer lunch can be, he says.

"The more you're liked the more likely you are to have your opinion heard and respected," he adds.