“You have a stronger business when you have employees who are focused on their own health and wellness.”
—TARA ATAYA, PAGE 79

Rules and recommendations for building a future-focused business—from Canadian companies who’ve got it all figured out

by Andrea Yu
How to create pay transparency

The do-gooders at FoodShare implemented a public pay grid, added a salary ratio system and bumped up junior employees’ wages by 25 per cent.

In April 2017, Paul Taylor was appointed executive director of FoodShare, a non-profit in Toronto that hosts community markets, sells affordable produce boxes and organizes school nutrition programs. One day, Taylor asked one of his colleagues what food justice meant to her. “She said, ‘Food justice means having decent work,’” Taylor recalls. The comment stung: At the time, FoodShare’s lowest-earning workers were paid minimum wage. “We were supporting communities that had been made vulnerable,” he says, “but we were doing so on the backs of workers who were vulnerable themselves.”

When Taylor joined the organization, FoodShare had a pay grid, but it was inconsistently applied and not accessible to employees. “It wasn’t clear to me that people were being compensated based on a principle of equal pay for equal work,” Taylor says. He sat down with his senior leadership team, and by July of 2018, they had rolled out some significant changes to their pay schedules.

First, they created a transparent pay grid and increased wages for individuals at the bottom by 25 per cent. “Employees can see what we compensate for various roles at various levels,” Taylor explains. The organization was able to pay for the wage increases by amplifying its fundraising efforts and boosting sales of its produce boxes. It also nixed salary negotiations altogether, sticking with the wages laid out in the grid. “Opaque salary negotiations do a real disservice to racialized folks, especially racialized women,” Taylor says. According to data from the University of Virginia, when Black applicants negotiate for higher salaries, employers often perceive them as pushier than white applicants who made the same requests.

Another change was the introduction of a ratio system, which ensures that the highest-paid worker at FoodShare earns a maximum of three times that of the lowest-paid worker. “We were talking about the effect that growing income inequality has on..."
In Canada, university-educated BIPOC employees earn, on average, 87.4 cents for every dollar earned by their white peers.

“How to Develop a Talent Pipeline

To train its future workforce, IBM Canada is creating courses in AI and quantum computing in partnership with colleges, universities and even high schools—

For artificial intelligence, 2015 was a watershed year: Suddenly machine learning was faster, cheaper, scalable and able to solve more complicated problems. At IBM, the leadership realized they required more software developers who were knowledgeable in AI to keep up. But Steve Astorino, VP of development, data and AI, encountered a shortage of skilled workers in data science and machine learning. Like many new technologies, AI had grown faster than the industry could train a new workforce.

So IBM set out to tackle the problem head-on. First, the company partnered with post-secondary institutions—including Queen’s University, Carleton University and Bow River College—to create curricula and develop training in high-demand skills through a program called Learn@IBM. “Research and innovation is happening jointly between IBM and these programs, students and professors,” Astorino says, which in turn helps drive student interest in the field. Since these academic partnerships started in 2017, more than 2,000 students have received IBM micro-credentials related to analytics reporting and visualization, data prep and machine learning. “The calibre of applications that we...

“People want to work at an organization that reflects their values,” says FoodShare director Paul Taylor.

Taylor argues that pay transparency should extend into the corporate world but believes that most executives and company owners are too preoccupied with profit to take action on their own. Instead, he says, we need government mandates forcing businesses to update their policies. In the meantime, he’s continued to encourage pay transparency in the non-profit ecosystem. In June of 2021, FoodShare sent out an open letter to the non-profit job board Charity Village asking that it make compensation information mandatory for all job listings posted on its website. Since then, more than 90 organizations have signed the letter, including Greenpeace Canada and Doctors Without Borders.

Food insecurity, but we were perpetuating it ourselves. It seemed disingenuous,” Taylor says.

The changes have been hugely effective, he says—there’s less turnover, less need for recruitment and less time and energy spent filling vacant positions. The calibre and quality of job candidates has also improved. “People want to work at an organization that reflects their values,” he says. Since it implemented these policies, FoodShare’s staff has grown from 60 full-time equivalent employees in 2018 to more than 100 in 2021, and its annual revenue has grown from $6.4 million in 2018 to $10.7 million in 2020.

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get coming out of universities is improving,” Astorino says. “And there are a lot more data scientists now than there were three years ago.”

The company has also partnered with the Society of Women Engineers on the Tech Re-Entry Program, designed to help women who have taken a break from their tech careers update their skills. They offer training in digital and collaboration methodologies, as well as data science. Graduates aren’t guaranteed employment at IBM, but many do end up with jobs at the company.

One participant, a former government IT developer, had taken four years off to raise her son. She completed two six-month terms with the Tech Re-Entry program, where she picked up cloud computing and two new programming languages. By January 2021, she was working for IBM full-time as a software developer.

Upskilling is a necessary investment for companies like IBM Canada. “Without this skilled workforce, we would not be able to modernize as quickly as we need to,” Astorino explains. “We’re using AI in everything. Without upskilling, we cannot move at a fast enough pace. The market is too competitive, and it would be a huge hit.”

AI isn’t the only place IBM needs a trained workforce. Next up on Astorino’s radar is quantum computing, which enables computers to perform calculations in the span of minutes instead of weeks. That technology is unfolding at a slower pace than AI, so IBM Canada is engaging teenagers through a two-semester Introduction to Quantum Computing course, offered at select high schools. “We’re reaching out early to get interest from students,” says Astorino. “You’d never have seen a data science high school course before. Now, you just do a search on the internet and you can see how many people are doing AI, quantum computing and cloud computing fresh off graduation. It’s pretty impressive.”
How to modernize employee benefits

Hootsuite revamped its package to offer 100 per cent mental-health coverage, family-planning perks and 10 bonus days off.

In the pre-pandemic days, the social-media-management platform company Hootsuite had a one-size-fits-all benefits package. Its insurer was Sunlife Financial, which offered Hootsuite employees standard coverage for prescription drugs, vision care, dental and accident insurance. Then came COVID. The Hootsuite brass quickly realized they needed to make some radical moves to ensure their benefits optimally supported their 1,100-odd employees, who were working remotely, juggling jobs and childcare and experiencing heightened stress and uncertainty.

The company’s office in Italy was the COVID canary. As early as February 2020, the country was crushed under the weight of soaring case counts, strict lockdowns and packed ICUs. And so, in addition to their five paid sick days, HootSuite offered staff in all of its offices 10 so-called COVID Days, which they could use however they wanted. Tara Ataya, the company’s chief people and diversity officer, reports that employees used COVID Days to spend time with their families, to look after sick loved ones and as mental-health days.

As 2020 progressed, Ataya and her team kept thinking about how to update the company’s benefits package. What would workplace benefits look like in a post-COVID world? They began by surveying staff to better understand how they were coping with the pandemic, how their existing benefits were working and, most importantly, what was missing from the equation. They followed up with focus groups involving staff from different levels of the company.

Hootsuite employees reported that their major concerns surrounded mental health and work-life balance. There were as many different needs and stressors as there were staff, and the one-size-fits-all approach no longer made sense. Employees wanted more mental-health and wellness support, plus some flexibility in how their care was delivered. The leadership team, meanwhile, looked at various providers. In the end, they chose to stick with Sunlife but change up the offerings.

Hootsuite’s updated plan, which rolled out in April 2021, covers 100 per cent of mental-health treatments in North America. To address work-life
Balance, the company introduced half-day Fridays during summer months and an annual company-wide wellness week, when everyone unplugs and takes some (extra) paid time off as a company. Hootsuite even held a contest to incentivize workers to take a break—employees who used up all their vacation days would be eligible to win prizes like trips for two to Bali, Lisbon or Las Vegas. As a result, staff took twice as much time off in 2021 as they did in 2019.

Surveys also indicated that family planning and financial planning were priorities for staff. So Hootsuite created retirement savings programs—401K and RRSP matching—and added coverage of fertility treatment, including egg freezing. To further modernize its plans, the company also began covering gender-affirmation procedures and their associated costs.

Staff can now choose from three benefit plans. All employees have access to certain benefits, like mental-health spending and fertility support, but they can also tailor their plans to their individual needs and preferences: A staffer can choose a plan with higher coverage for dental care, for example, or they can choose a lower dollar amount but more flexibility to spend their funds on things like fitness equipment or transit passes.

In the end, the new perks cost nearly twice what the old ones did: Hootsuite spent $3.3 million on benefits and other employee expenses between January and July 2021, compared to $1.66 million over the same period in 2020.

And it’s worth every penny. For Ataya, funding employee wellness is a no-brainer: Employee-engagement scores have soared from 66 to 81 per cent over the course of the pandemic. When employees are supported, she says, they do their best work. “You’re creating a stronger business by making sure that you have employees who are focused on their own health and wellness and by giving them the resources to do that,” she says.

Health-tech platform Acto created a scorecard system to help their employees separate real work from busy work.

Acto is a platform for pharmaceutical and life-sciences companies to communicate with sales reps, health-care providers and patients, and its business has exploded with the health-tech boom. The company’s revenue swelled by 158 per cent in 2019, and the following year it secured $11.5 million in Series A funding. At the same time, CEO Parth Khanna was looking for a way to create company goals and transparency around productivity.

As part of the company’s approach to performance management, Khanna created a scorecard system, which measures company-wide goals—like revenue targets or customer satisfaction—on both the departmental level and the employee level. Each manager creates goals for their team, weighting them so staff understand how best to spend their time. There’s a scoring scheme—a heat map—that shows an employee’s specific skills, duties and roles. For example, a marketing manager’s scorecard might dictate that she spend 50 per cent of her time managing the team, 25 per cent dealing with the budget and 25 per cent developing new processes and systems. When employees satisfy their goals, they’re rewarded with bonuses.

The scorecards also help separate productivity from busy work. For example, being on Zoom calls all day might not necessarily translate to progress and achievements for the company. “If I’m just going from meeting to meeting, we’re not moving as a team,” Khanna explains. “I can be busy, but the organization is not productive.”

According to Wafa Sayeed-Irtiza, Acto’s VP of marketing, while employees work from home during the pandemic, the scorecards keep people from working in silos. By looking at their scorecards, team members can see how their tasks contribute to their manager’s and director’s goals, which then contribute to company-wide goals. “The scorecard system is to help remind everyone of the company’s why, the department’s why and the person’s why and to reinforce those values and objectives,” she says.