

Employee Attraction and Retention in Small Municipalities

An AMCTO Research Paper prepared for the Municipal Management Diploma Program
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Employee Attraction and Retention in Small Municipalities

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Summary:

Across Ontario, as baby boomers are retiring and transitioning to reduced work schedules, Small Municipalities are struggling to attract, and especially to retain, qualified staff. Municipalities that may have had little or no staff turnover for many years are suddenly facing multiple job vacancies consecutively. While positions are vacant, the corresponding workload is either distributed between remaining staff, or tasks are left uncompleted, to be addressed when a new person takes the desk. With increasing productivity pressures, such as ever increasing Provincial reporting requirements, service initiatives and budgetary constrictions, it can be difficult to keep the ship afloat without a full staff compliment.

Many municipal managers have gone through the process of a job posting, interview and probation cycle, only to have the freshly trained employee leave to accept a position with a mid sized Municipality within a year or two of being hired. Every week the job vacancies lists are emailed to Municipal employees across Ontario, and a better opportunity is always just around the corner.

Small municipalities have become training grounds, at their budgetary expense, for Mid Sized Municipalities that due to their larger tax and user fee bases, can offer greater compensation for lighter workloads and more succinct job descriptions. Without being able to compete on the remuneration level, Small Municipalities need to up their game in order to retain quality staff. Many Small Municipal Managers are asking the same question, "How do we Attract and Retain Dedicated and Capable Staff?"

Scope:

This paper will explore various methods that Small Municipalities can implement to increase staff attraction and retention, in order to achieve a full compliment of talented staff, lowering staff turnover, which will in turn optimize levels of service.

Tools that will be researched are building a workplace culture, offering flexible work schedules, facilitating job sharing, participating in internship programs, offering no and low cost value added perks for employees and offering market value, gender equitable pay grids.

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Attraction vs Retention:

Staff Attraction is the ability to receive quality applications for vacant job postings. Quality meaning qualified, with relevant education and / or work experience. Candidates who are results driven with attention to detail, who truly want to perform effectively in their roles.

“Attracting qualified staff is often limited to the information in a job posting: title, employer, required qualifications and occasionally salary range. Often there is no mention to the benefits aside from “competitive or comprehensive benefits package provided.” So attracting staff is based on job title, employer location, qualifications and possibly salary.” (10)-M Sullivan, Sources Page 17

In some instances, a vacant job posting does not result in any qualified applicants. If a Small Municipality is not able to attract the right applicants based on the usual job posting, perhaps personalizing the ad to include some of the staff retention initiatives will sweeten the pot and entice additional applicants who are not sure if they are looking for a job changes, but may be tempted by a culture change.

Staff Retention is the ability to keep those quality employees from leaving their current positions for openings with other organizations.

“Money is not normally one of the causes for employees leaving a municipality. Office culture, lack of advancement opportunity and politics, in some combination are the primary reasons for leaving. Concrete, or hard factors such as job descriptions, which note responsibilities, possibly salary range, qualifications and possibly reporting structure, attracts candidates to municipal openings. Softer factors, like office culture, management support for courses / conferences /training, advancement opportunities and possibly health benefits retain employees” (13) John Garth, Sources Page 17

Workplace Culture

What is Workplace Culture?

Workplace Culture is the personality, character, atmosphere or flavour of the environment of your organization. It is what makes your organization unique and is the result of the values, traditions, beliefs, interactions, behaviours, and attitudes of the workplace, as endorsed and observed by its leadership.

Although market value and gender equitable salary grids are important, studies show that employees do not simply value wages as the primary measure of job satisfaction. It is important to know some of the best non-monetary ways to increase employee commitment. For many small municipalities, offering above market value salaries is not an option, due to council pressure to keep tax increases low. “Employer culture is more important than the number on a paycheck, and employees often agree that they want a positive, uplifting work environment.” (4) Johnathan Wiersma, Sources Page 17

At the 2017 Municipal Finance Officer's Association (MFOA) annual conference, Francesca Figliuzzi and Erin Scuccimarri, from the Town of Innisfil presented, "Changing Landscapes... Growing Our Culture From the Ground Up", which illustrated how they had used staff engagement to create a Workplace Culture Strategy. They started with employee visioning sessions and by asking all employees to give suggestions via post-it notes of how they felt that the workplace could be improved. The Town's Cross Function Culture Team then met and reviewed all of the suggestions and worked to draft a Culture Plan which is illustrated below in images from their presentation:

IN ALL WE DO

We have the freedom to:

**BE YOUR
BEST SELF**

We follow our passions with humour, harmony, and happiness.

We value authenticity, flexibility, and striking a balance — between independence and collaboration, between hard work and time for zen — with plenty of surprises in between.

BELONG

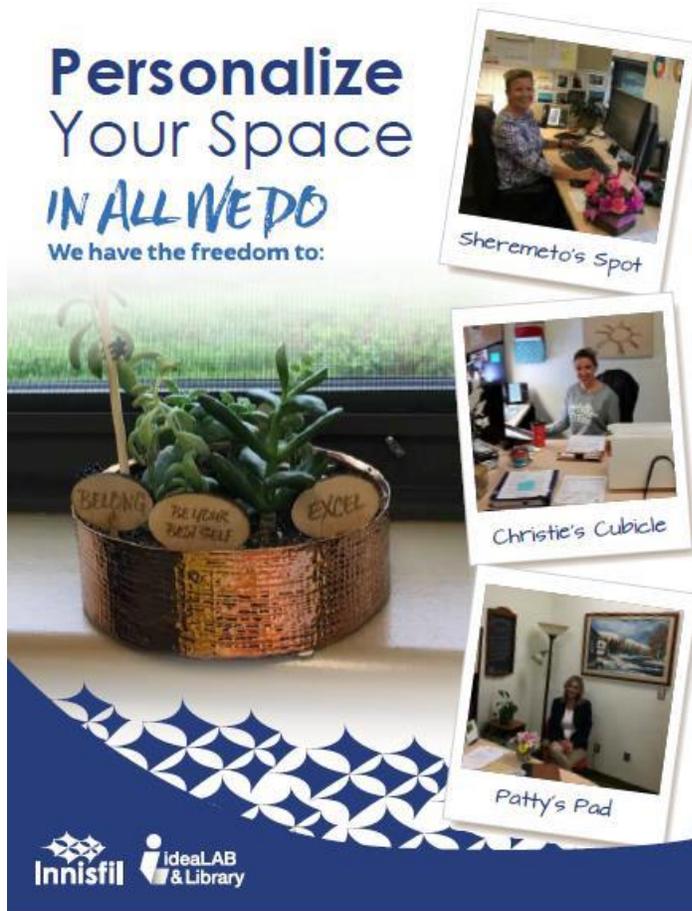
We all belong here.

Unified by compassion, inclusivity, trust and respect, we embrace the diversity that makes us individuals and inspired us to achieve more together.

EXCEL

We have the freedom to succeed
- and the freedom to fail.

Our bold, fearless enthusiasm empowers us to take risks, to innovate, and to grow.



This Town of Innisfil Workplace Culture promotes an environment where all employees feel valued for their individual contributions and are celebrated for their diversity. The goal is to make employees happy every day to come in to work, which in turn motivates them to give their best to their jobs. (1) Francesca Figilluzzi and Erin Scuccimarri, Sources Page 17

Some of the key initiatives that were started from this plan were, monthly lunches, including pot lucks or themed meals, relaxing of dress codes, especially on casual days, and allowing all employees to decorate their offices or work spaces however they chose in order to make it their personal space. Although most of these ideas are at no or very little cost to the Municipality, staff response was extremely positive. It was important that the monthly meals were cross departmental, mixing all employees, that might otherwise not meet in the general course of work.

This Workplace Culture is illustrated on the Town website and is outlined at each job interview, giving potential employees an insight to what the Town of Innisfil offers its staff in terms of work place atmosphere.

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Many other private businesses focus on their workplace culture. Most familiar are Google, Twitter, Facebook and Netflix. Although these companies are able to commit significant dollar investments to building their Workplace Cultures, their ideas can be scaled down and adapted to fit Small Municipalities. Some of the famous key initiatives include, fun activities, staff meals, flexible work schedules outdoor spaces and increased vacation time.

The average Small Municipality probably won't install slides and arcade games, such as those at Google work sites, but low cost activities may include a staff bbq lunch, a staff golf day or staff sight seeing tour. Lunch hour walking groups allow staff to clear their heads and breathe fresh air. Monthly lunch social events could be held with alternating topics, such as crafting lesson, book club, yoga lesson. Staff could give suggestions for topics or themes of upcoming sessions to create a variety that will appeal to various staff members, regardless of sex or age.

“Offer opportunities for staff members to enjoy social activities together, such as picnics, parties, games and other social activities that are available during work hours and after hours.” (4) Johnathan Wiersma, Sources Page 17

When employees feel part of a cohesive team, in a fun and familiar work environment, they are much less likely to leave their positions for a small salary increase. Employees spend more hours each work day at the office, then they do at home and it is very important to people's happiness that they enjoy their jobs. The morning commute to work should be spent looking forward to the day, not dreading arriving at work. The time and resources spent on improving or implementing a Workplace Culture is well worth the return on investment that comes with retaining good staff and the overall atmosphere of the office.

Flexible Work Schedules

Offering flexible work schedules has become much more common place in recent years. This can mean a variety of things to different employees, such as; compressed work weeks, alternate start times, job sharing and scheduled working from home.

“The work environment in Canada, like workplaces globally, is changing rapidly. Employers looking to remain attractive in the eye's of today's workforce need to evolve, align with changing attitudes and offer flexible workplace solutions that work for the business and its employees.” (11) Marc-Etienne Julien, Sources Page 17

Compressed work week is the phrase that refers to the situation where the full time hours typically spread over 5 days are spread over 4. This may involve the offices being closed 1 day per week, as is current practise at some Small Municipalities, or with half of the staff taking Mondays off and the other half taking Fridays off, or a rotation between the 2

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days. Both scenarios have positive impacts on service levels, depending on the demographic of the Municipality. Closing the offices 1 day per week, but extending the hours for the other 4 days offers better customer service if your population is mainly working age people who are not necessarily able to attend the Municipal Offices during regular business hours because they are at their jobs. If your population is mainly retired people, than keeping the office open all 5 days means there is no impact on service levels and allows adequate coverage for customer inquiries. This initiative allows employees to schedule medical, dental and other appointments and errands on their off week days.

Alternate start times allows individual employees to start earlier or later than regular office hours for reasons that often relate to family obligations, such as putting children on the school bus before work, dropping children off at day care or caring on an elderly relative in the morning. Similarly, some employees may prefer to start and finish their work days earlier, allowing them to get a child off of the school bus, picked up at daycare or caring for a sick or elderly relative. This accommodation costs nothing to a Municipality, but may be a deciding factor for an employee to stay in their current position or workplace. The benefits to the employee are not only monetary, in the reduction of costs for additional daycare or health care provisions, but equally important, lower the stress level of the employee because they are not worried that the family member is being cared for while they are at work. This leads to increased job satisfaction and productivity.

“It’s time we gave Canadians the flexibility they need to balance their busy lives at home and at work. Our plan will do just that” (12) MaryAnn Mihychuk, Sources Page 17 This statement is in reference to a study conducted in May and June of 2016, involving a survey of working Canadians, asking if they are satisfied with their work-life balance and, if not, how it could be improved. The results, published in September 2017, revealed that Canadians feel that they are struggling to maintain that balance.

Job Sharing:

Job sharing is another concept that is becoming very popular. This involves a full time position or a full time and a casual or part time position being reorganized into two part time positions. This will involve redrafting the appropriate job descriptions but can be offered at no additional cost the Municipality. This accommodation facilitates retention of staff who may not want to work full time after a maternity or parental leave or who want to ease into retirement. This scenario will also attract employees who are re-entering the work force after an extending parenting leave or after a retirement from another Municipality who does not offer part time positions. Many people who bring a quality Municipal skill set are attracted to these positions. And, by retaining these qualified employees while they are only choosing to work part time, may lead to them later working full time if their personal circumstances change in the future.

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Interns:

When a vacant job posting does not result in any qualified applicants, meaning a Small Municipality is not able to attract the right applicants based on the criteria listed in a usual job posting, a viable option is an Internship. For entry and mid level positions, many colleges and universities offer interns that will be placed with your Municipality at little or significantly reduced cost. A placement will allow, without long term commitment, a trial period to really get to know a candidate, their qualifications, their skill sets and their values and work ethic.

If an Intern is a person who is really a quality employee, it is well worth the cost of paying for the necessary Municipal courses to give the person the Municipal based knowledge needed to successfully fulfil a role within the Small Municipality. Often Interns are very eager and as they are just finishing post secondary education, they are still in the learning mode which enables them to absorb the Municipal courses. Another upside is that unlike some seasoned Municipal Employees that come from other Municipalities with the prerequisite experience, new to Municipal Government Interns do not already have any of the 'bad habits' that can be transferred from workplace to workplace.

Although Interns who become Employees will require additional supervision and mentoring, in excess of what would be required for a new employee with Municipal experience, often the investment of a manager's time up front pays off in the longer term.

According to the HR Insights Blog, the top 5 reasons Employers Hire Interns are;

”5- Test potential employees before hiring them – Hiring interns instead of entry level full-time hires gives the employer, the ability to see capabilities and evaluate skills for potential full-time hire. For employers that are looking to hire in new entry-level talent, an internship program is a great way to “try before you buy”

4- Increase exposure at local colleges and universities – The level of collaboration varies with some employers choosing to post jobs to a college's career center website and reach out to directly to faculty in specific departments to help recruit students with skills set specific to their department

3- Obtain affordable workforce support – Interns can provide valuable support to existing employees and freeing those employees up to work on higher level tasks. Although they may not have much practical experience in the workforce, many employers have found that the students they have hired as interns bring with them a fresh, up-to-date academic background that when paired with the right industry can be valuable to both the employer and the intern.

2-Assist with special project work - Every organization has certain projects that they would love to tackle, but just can't seem to find the time to do with their existing workforce.

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Interns can be a perfect way to help jumpstart these projects. Not only can they provide the workforce Support described above, but interns are also uniquely positioned to bring these projects to completion. Unlike your typical employee who has competing projects, various other obligations, interns can be placed on just a couple of special projects and work almost exclusively on them over the course of their internship. Of course, ideally these projects would be coupled with opportunities for additional training, mentorship and other learning focused opportunities, but at least they aren't going to be bogged down with the day-to-day distractions of too many emails and committee meetings.

1- Develop a talent pipeline - "Internships," they wrote, "help us fill the pipeline for entry level staff and also make the process easier, we don't need to retrain and we know they are already a fit for our organization." For this particular organization, as well as for many others, interns receive training and development opportunities much like any other employee would at their organization. Although this requires some upfront investment, the hope is that the intern will transition more easily into a full-time position and hit the ground running effectively and efficiently. In addition, the intern turned employee costs less to recruit, has already been trained (presumably at a lower salary than they would be hired in at as an entry level employee), and both intern and employer know that this is a good fit for the organization. Particularly as employers and employees alike place more emphasis on "cultural fit", grooming interns for future employment can also help reduce turnover."(14)ERC HR Blog [Sources](#), Page 17

For all of these reasons, when faced with a seemingly unfillable job posting, an Intern may be the best answer to successfully filling the vacancy and recruiting a valuable employee.

Value Added Perks:

There are many perks that can be offered to employees that can cost little or no money for municipalities, but are of great value to employees. Some examples include allowing

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staff to take advantage of municipal purchasing promotions, in house massage therapy, yoga lessons or wellness classes or walking, crafting and other themed groups .

Due to the recent Ontario Provincial pricing contract with BELL for cellular service, Municipalities are able to secure well priced unlimited cell phone plans. Some Municipalities have chosen to extend this pricing to their employees and their immediate families. This program is at no cost to the Municipality, the cost of the plans is borne by the employee, but the employees are realizing a significant cost reduction from their existing phone plans. Similarly, Municipalities often secure bulk pricing for computers, laptops, office furniture, supplies, and tools.

Most Employee health plans include massage therapy and physiotherapists. Facilitating a health professional in house, on a weekly or monthly basis, allows employees to use their meal or break periods to receive an in house treatment, increasing their wellness and lowering their stress levels. There is no additional cost to the employer other than providing a suitable space, which could easily be a meeting room.

Yoga and other wellness classes could also be offered in house. Although they are not paid by the Employee health plan, the minimal cost of having an instructor on site one hour per week for eight or twelve weeks would easily fit in the budget of even a Small Municipality. Alternatively, if it were a permanent occurrence, the Municipality could pay half and the Employees could split the other half of the cost.

Another benefit which can be offered to employees, at no cost to the Small Municipality, is free entry passes to Municipal owned and operated venues. These could include museums, parks, theatres, concerts, campgrounds, swimming pools and boat launches.

Staff could also be afforded a discount rental rate for non prime hours at arena, golf courses, ball fields, soccer pitches and other recreational facilities. As these time slots are underutilized, a reduced rate for the employees is still more revenue than an empty facility is generating.

Many employees enjoy a Municipal branded clothing item, such as a golf shirt, sweatshirt, jacket baseball hats or key lanyards. These props are relatively low cost and give a sense of pride and for the employee who wears them.

“Anything you can do to stretch your employee’s paychecks will be thoroughly appreciated by your workforce. A combination of financial advice and well-positioned employee discounts is the best approach to helping them save money, whether that is helping them budget or easing some of their out-of-pocket expenses. Astonishing shopping discounts (like we offer via our SmartSpending product), subsidized gym memberships, tuition reimbursement and employee-matched savings are just a few possibilities.” (15) – Megan Gough, Sources Page 17

A SmartSpending product is a rewarding program which provides employees of enrolled organizations to receive coupons and discounts for purchases at a variety of retailers, the

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value of which is linked to the employer company's purchasing volumes. This program can be accessed via the employees email or through a downloadable cell phone app.

All of these perks offer additional value to an employee, passing on cost savings, or improving quality of life, with little or no monetary investment. These feel good offerings promote good will with staff who appreciate the benefits that they receive.

Staff Training

Staff Training and Development are crucial tools for Small Municipalities. Staff need up to date training in order to effectively and efficiently perform their job tasks. Newer staff will require extensive training, depending on their range of tasks. The amount of money spent on quality staff training has an excellent return on investment for the employer.

Courses offered through Association of Municipal Clerks and Treasurers (AMCTO), Municipal Finance Officers (MFOA) as well as the many other department specific municipally focused training will help to prepare new or inter department transferred staff to adapt to their new focus.

Software training, including Municipal software, word, excel, power point, internet and any other application will increase confidence and efficiency on a daily basis. Staff who are well trained are more confident and therefore less stress while performing their roles. They feel more supported in their roles and that their managers want them to have the tools and training that they need to succeed.

"Training has many benefits for your staff:

- they acquire new skills, increasing their contribution to the business and building their self-esteem
 - the training they do can take them into other positions within the organisation – positions with better prospects and/or better pay
 - they're upskilled to do new and different tasks, which keeps them motivated and fresh because they're being trained on your time, they see that you value them enough to invest in them. A good company is seen as one that retrains rather than churns." (16)
- Sources Page 17

Cross Training refers to the training of a staff member to give the knowledge and experience to perform another employee's job duties. In a Small Municipality there is little or no job duplication or overlap. Each employee has a specific set of job duties and tasks that they perform in accordance with their job description. In the event that a staff member is off on a leave period, it is invaluable to have another employee who can fulfill at the very least the mandatory duties of the absent employee during their leave. This is even relevant for short periods of absence, such as vacations or sick days. If a department

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has 4 employees then it is easiest to pair them so that the 2 pairs of staff are trained on the basic aspects of their partner's job duties. Although this will not address every issue, it will lead to smoother provision of services. This may also lead to succession planning in the event of an employee retiring or leaving to pursue another opportunity. The exiting staff member's partner may choose to apply for that vacant position and then there is coverage and opportunity for training for the incumbent by the job transferring staff member.

Training and cross training may also provide opportunities for reorganization or realignment of job descriptions or staff compliments. During training it may become apparent that 2 employees could trade a couple of job duties, not altering the level of work load, but better aligning based on skills, education or simply personal likes and dislikes. Showing flexibility to your staff that you are willing to take their suggestions on how to improve their work experience is appreciated by staff and can lead to efficiencies. Who would better know which tasks would blend better with other tasks than the people who routinely performing the duties?

“Flexibility” has become one of the biggest business buzzwords of the 21st century – and for good reason. Cross training offers flexibility by giving your employees the abilities they need to “fill in” roles outside their primary job responsibilities.

- Reduce costs by leveraging internal talent. When you focus on teaching new skills to employees, your organization can reduce the costs of recruiting new candidates from outside the organization. The “onboarding” process is significantly shortened or even eliminated, since learning a new skill within the company fits together with learning how your organization needs that skill to be used.
- Groom employees for promotions, management, and additional responsibilities. Employees become management material by knowing their team's work inside and out. When you cross-train employees within a department, you give them the technical know-how they need to manage a team, allowing you to focus on other top managerial skills – like communication, vision, and conflict resolution – when choosing whom to promote.
- Save productivity even when employees are absent. The occasional illness, injury, or family emergency simply can't be avoided. But when one employee is absent for a day or two, staff can more easily “cover” for that absence if they're already familiar with the employee's key tasks. For short-term absences, cross-training can smooth out any potential dips in productivity without requiring the organization to consider temp help.
- Boost motivation by investing in employees' career growth. Sometimes, the best motivators are non-monetary rewards. By offering cross-training, a company demonstrates that it is genuinely interested in the career growth and learning opportunities available for its workers. It also allows the most motivated and passionate workers to “self-select” into cross-training opportunities, identifying your company's “rising stars” with less effort.

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- Staff more strategically. By cross-training, you expand the skill sets available in your organization, helping you avoid dips in productivity due to “skills gaps” that open up when experienced employees retire or leave. Cross-training also helps an organization staff more strategically. When you know what your staff can do, you also know what they can’t do – which allows you to coordinate with your staffing partner to tailor your next search for external talent.
- Use temporary help more effectively. Temporary staff can be an excellent choice when your organization faces a special project, a temporary increase in workflow, or a significant skills gap that cross-training cannot fill. Develop a better sense of when you need to bring in temp staff – with the investment in onboarding that it entails – and when you can trust your current staff to handle a change in circumstances by offering cross-training.” (17) *The Right Staff* – [Sources](#) Page 17

Market Value, Gender Equitable Pay Grids

Regardless of the time spent on all of the previously discussed initiatives, a Small Municipality that is not compliant with pay equity regulations, or is not offering an average market value salary grid will not receive applications for job vacancies, nor will they retain quality employees.

If an employee can do the same job at a neighbouring municipality for a significantly higher salary, they will likely move to the better opportunity despite the most wonderful work place environment, unless they are already financially independent to the point that salary is not at all a factor.

“It’s a well-known fact that to attract and retain valuable employees, cities and towns must offer competitive wages and salaries. Depending on location, a municipality may be drawing from the same applicant pool as state agencies, counties, hospitals and private corporations. The online tool allows officials to ensure their city’s compensation scale is competitive with other municipalities with comparable populations and budgets.” (18) – Municipal Association of South Carolina, [Sources](#) Page 17

If a female employee is doing the same or a more complex job than her male co-worker and is being paid significantly less, she will likely move to a better opportunity because this situation is demoralizing and frankly is not acceptable in this millennium.

“Internal equity is the relative value of an employee’s job compared to others in the organization. Internal equity is based on a number of factors, including required education and experience, physical demands of the work, responsibility for materials, equipment or the safety of others, supervisory or management responsibilities, customer contact and working conditions. Work analysis and job design are used to determine the internal

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equity of jobs. Employees tend to compare their pay with that of their coworkers. According to compensation consultants Romanoff, Boehm and Benson, employees perceive a lack of fairness when others in their organization are paid more for doing the same or similar work.” (19) – Diane Chinn, Sources Page 17

Conclusion:

All of the tactics described in this paper have proven successful in one or more Small Municipalities and in Private Businesses. Recently, the Regional Municipality of Halton was recognized as one of Toronto’s top employers. Some highlights of Halton’s culture include; healthy meals provided in a cafeteria, subsidized access to fitness facility, yoga and bootcamp classes, internship programs and parental leave top up for new parents. (20) Richard Yerema and Kristina Leung, Sources Page 17

Although every solution may not work for every Small Municipality, I believe that a mixture of some of these methods will definitely improve the staff attraction and retention odds for every Small Ontario Municipality as we navigate through the next five years of retirements. Every Small Municipality’s Management Team wish for a full staff compliment of satisfied, productive employee, because the employees are the front line of service providers of the Municipality.

Not only will these initiatives improve staff attraction and retention for Small Municipalities, it will make the work environment happier and healthier for all employees. The positive impact that trying these methods will have on the workplace will be enjoyed by staff and management and don’t we all want our work day to be a little brighter? After all, if you don’t laugh, you cry...

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