

Pythian, Algonquin recognized for skilled immigrant retention practices

Buddy system, cultural competency training among award-winning initiatives

BY AMANDA SILLIKER

TWO YEARS AGO, remote database and consulting services company Pythian implemented a buddy program that pairs new hires with employees.

If the new hire is an internationally trained professional (IEP) — which many new employees are — he is paired with a buddy from a similar background, said Heidi Hauver, director of human resources.

“It helps introduce them to our internal and external programs, helps them socially integrate with our team... and when there are questions like, ‘How do I go about getting my first credit card?’ they can support each other on that,” she said. “The buddy system really allows them to have a connection right away and form a bond with one of their peers.”

Native Canadians often take for granted the big checklist involved when someone is new to the country, so a buddy who has been through it all before can be very helpful for the new employee, said Hauver. And everybody gets the opportunity to “pay-it-forward” because the new hire who had a buddy last year will be a buddy this year.

“I like to compare it to having just joined a new school for the first day — you get someone who will take you



Photos courtesy of Hire Immigrants Ottawa

Paul Vallée (left), founder and executive chairman of Pythian, and Denyce Diakun, director of workforce and personal development at Algonquin College, accept the 2012 Employer Excellence Award from Hire Immigrants Ottawa and the Employer Council of Champions.

under their wing, show you where the cool kids sit, show you where the washrooms are, where the best vending machines are. It’s just somebody they can connect with and ask questions that they might not feel comfortable asking somebody else,” she said.

The buddy system is one initiative that led Pythian to receive a 2012 Employer Excellence Award from Hire Immigrants Ottawa and the Employer Council of Champions

in March. The awards recognize employers with outstanding practices in the retention of skilled immigrants.

“It’s important for employers who are not as engaged in these sorts of issues to have models to look at and to help to bring their attention to this,” said Kelly McGahey, senior manager of stakeholder relations at Hire Immigrants Ottawa. “If employers see other employers doing good work around this, they’ll be more

likely to pay attention.”

Pythian has 164 employees globally and about 70 at the head office in Ottawa, with more than 30 per cent of employees there coming from outside of Canada. Diversity has always been a part of the Pythian DNA and hiring IEPs is essential in its goal to hire the top performers in the industry, said Hauver.

“Because we’re hiring the top five per cent, we want the world’s top talent and it doesn’t matter where you get your education or gained work experience, talent is talent,” she said. Pythian doesn’t ask potential candidates whether or not they have Canadian experience and all their personal information is masked when HR is looking over resumés so it can focus solely on the technical credentials, said Hauver.

About three months ago, Pythian hired a woman from Nigeria to work for the company in Toronto, which was her first job in Canada. Although the woman had a great background, wonderful credentials and substantial work experience, she had been turned away from about half-a-dozen interviews once the employers realized she had no Canadian experience, said Hauver. Pythian was the only employer that did not ask that question.

“That’s when I realized, ‘Wow, we’re doing exactly what we need to be doing and this is exactly what other companies need to be doing,’” she said. “It doesn’t matter — you have international credentials and they’re just as important as the credentials you can get here.”

Algonquin College

Algonquin College in Ottawa also received an Employer Excellence Award this year. Its cultural competency training is one of the initiatives

that helped it win, said Denyce Diakun, director of workforce and personal development.

The training aims to increase awareness of the issues that can occur when an employee is dealing with a variety of cultures. For example, plagiarism is a serious issue in Canada but it is looked at very differently in other countries, so staff need to explain the concept clearly to students and not just assume they already know it’s not allowed, said Diakun.

The training helps employees be more sensitive and aware, and work on their communication skills to relate to a variety of differences, she said.

The two-hour training is mandatory for all service individuals at all levels and offered to deans, directors and faculty members as well.

“It opens up people’s awareness that somebody may be behaving in a particular way because they really don’t understand, so it’s really bringing all of that to light in terms of dealing with them from the point of selling them a book in the bookstore to teaching them in a class,” said Diakun.

The HR department at Algonquin, which has 1,200 full-time and 1,600 part-time employees, has made significant strides in ensuring the employee base is reflective of the increasingly diverse student population, said Diakun. It has been working hard to reach out to a broader base of employees by working with the Aboriginal and immigrant communities.

“It’s nice for them to see teaching staff that’s reflective of them and it’s really important that it goes throughout the whole organization,” she said. “It’s really comforting to see someone in a management or teaching position from your own culture, and reassuring and supportive.”



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