

## When the Watercooler Is a Water Hazard

Office Fun and Games: Employers Keep Productivity Above Par by Relieving Stress



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The golfer carefully lines up his putt, getting just the right angle before taking a slow, even swing. Then he hops off his desk and gets back to work.

At Rockaway, N.J., firm Parette Somjen Architects, similar scenes play out on any given day of the week. And the two-story, 18-hole miniature golf course housed in the company's office is just one of many unconventional forms of stress release.

"It's not unusual to visit the Parette Somjen offices during the day and have someone throwing a Nerf football overhead or barbecuing in back," said principal and co-founder Greg Somjen.

An attitude that gained momentum with cool, youthful perks at Internet startups in the late '90s has developed into an established business plan for certain small companies whose entrepreneurial owners see work/life balance as more than a human-relations slogan.

"They're really figuring out what's going to build that sense of team, the emotional core of loyalty and engagement," said Carol Kinsey Goman, president of Kinsey Consulting Services in Berkeley, Calif., who studies workplace issues. "That is a trend that's here to stay."

Goman said the trend of offbeat activities in the office began during the dotcom boom, when it was believed the fun fostered hard work rather than created a distraction.

"Once the bubble burst, those lessons were lost for a while," she said, adding that her research shows "engaged and loyal employees make the company money. They satisfy customers. All the seemingly soft stuff pays off in that hard-lying bottom line."

Basically, having employees who enjoy being at the office is often just as important as liking the work itself.

## **Drinks at the Turn & Well, It Is the Kitchen**

When Somjen formed his architecture company with partner Marc Parette in 1988, they knew they didn't want a controlling environment like the ones they found stifling at previous jobs.

"I think that we've come to realize that there are things beyond architecture," Somjen said. "It's not just the day-to-day creation of drawings. We talk internally and think about the fact that we have team members, many 10-plus years, and clients, many since day one."

He said no one can do "the corporate culture of sitting at your desk doing something for a long time & whether corporate America wants to realize this or not, no one is working the whole time."

When the firm moved offices a few years ago, the founders took that philosophy a step further by building a permanent stress-buster: an 18-hole miniature golf course, housed over two floors, with one hole going through the concrete to the lower floor. The course concludes at the office kitchen.

Formally, it's used for several tournaments for PSA employees and clients. Employees give tips to the clients, telling them where to bounce the ball off of a filing cabinet to get the best shot. Informally, there are a lot of little, couple-hole games that break out throughout any given day as a breather from the workday grind.

"Not everyone plays golf," Somjen said, "but even those that don't participate in this kind of golf setting."

Employees appreciate the freedom, he said. Long hours are not unusual, but people are in no rush to leave if they are needed.

"[There are] people there at 7 in the morning and at 7 at night," he said. "It's an environment where you work at your pace. Obviously, we have standards that have to be met and bills that have to be paid, but ask any one of my team members if they'll hang out a couple hours to get work done and you'll get a 95 percent response of 'no problem' without having to check their schedules."

## **Foxtrot, Anyone?**

Office sports aren't the only way to engage the work force. Some companies have gotten creative with field trips.

Daniella Koren founded Montvale, N.J.-based DKI Direct, a pharmaceutical marketing firm, in 1997 and serves as its president.

"I really always try and come up with some innovative ways to build teamwork," she said. "We have a very open and collaborative environment."

Koren parlayed her passion for dance and experience as a competitive ballroom dancer into annual off-site outings that she said foster greater understanding and bonding among colleagues. The staff members dance together and get to know one another better, and Koren performs with her dance instructor.

Though she knew some people might be apprehensive about dancing with co-workers, she said, they "understand fun is going to be part of the agenda. It's sort of a mandatory."

Before the event, employees complete anonymous surveys with personal information – what they have for breakfast, how long their commute is, how they start the day at work – to learn more about each other. "It was very enlightening," Koren said. "It really helped build a lot of empathy and understanding between everybody at DKI."

In another exercise, employees used a ball of yarn to wrap around their fingers, interconnecting everyone as they spoke of their personal commitments to co-workers.

It was very touching," Koren said. "People really kept with it for a long time. The feedback I got afterwards was how they liked it. They were happy to see a different side of me."

## **Fun + Communication = Loyalty**

Whether it is fun work diversions or innovative team-building activities, experts say small businesses are in the fortunate position of being able to cater to employees' needs.

Brian Drum, CEO of executive search firm Drum Associates, said the vast majority of businesses still do not host such motivational events, though bringing people together does help foster a successful work environment.

What also helps is that owners are more open about the state of the company, as both Koren and Somjen are with their employees.

"Most small companies are run by entrepreneurs who are more open about their businesses & communicating with them about the sales, about the expenses," Drum said. Such "open-book communication is effective, as employees feel more involved," according to Drum.

Goman agrees. "At the heart at why people engage or are loyal to an organization, it really has a lot to do with how involved they feel in the business, whether it is 'us' or 'them and us,'" she said. "Communication is strong, feeling part of what is going on, included in making plans, it happens more readily in small businesses. With all the research I've done on loyalty, small businesses had consistently more loyalty than large businesses."

## **Values on the Job**

To that end, DKI staffers decide on five core values that change on an annual basis as their business changes. Koren's employees say they value such activities.

"I worked in corporate America for over 20 years and have never attended such informative and hands-on off-sites and team-building experiences such as the ones at DKI," said DKI employee Donna Dorsey. "Everyone participates, and it is the first atmosphere I've experienced where there is no political agenda. The goal is a more successful DKI and everyone works towards it."

Similarly, staffer Laura Lauricella added: "The off-site activities help to continually bond the team together and help us remember that, at the end of the day, we are really passionate about what we do at DKI. It helps to reinforce the fact that we are together working toward a common goal."

Koren said the loyalty is evident to clients. "The biggest compliment to me is that people walk in and say, 'Wow, you have a great team.' I love the work that we do and the clients that we have, but I would say my proudest accomplishment is the team that I've built at DKI."

PSA also has themes that change quarterly, and employees work toward a common goal or need that the office has. The staff also participates in a variety of fundraisers for food banks.

The initiatives have paid off. Last year, NJBiz selected the firm as one of the best mid-sized firms to work for in the Garden State, based on employee surveys.

Executive assistant Karen Semegen said she appreciates the firm allowing her to work flexible hours. "The best part of working here is the work/life balance," Semegen said.

That's music to the ears of Somjen, who said, "What Marc and I were trying to do with the firm was create this forward-thinking, creative environment that is not what other companies and not what other firms are doing. We wanted to be unique, not just for the sake of being unique, but we wanted to be somewhere where people enjoyed what they do as much as Marc and I enjoy what we do."

And employees tell him they love coming to work every day.

"That is the ultimate goal," Somjen said. "The ultimate goal is to create a team that shares in these philosophies, because in return & when the team is well-rested and creative, coming to the table with good problem-solving skills, then the firm benefits. The collective whole reaps the benefits."