



## The Edmonton Journal (Edmonton, AB)

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# Top employers — premium perks

Six Edmonton-area companies made Mediacorp Canada's list of the top 20 employers in Alberta.

We asked them about their strategies for attracting and keeping quality workers

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Ben Sawatzky is spending half a million dollars this fall taking his employees on a private air charter to Cancun.

He's also paying half the freight for spouses, and employees can work extra hours to cover the other half.

The Spruceland Millworks president doesn't in any way consider the annual trip a gift. The more than 200 workers at the company's Acheson and Fort Assiniboine divisions have earned it by consistently hitting production targets.

And it's only one part of an innovative management strategy that makes sure his company stays competitive in a tough lumber industry, and his workers stay loyal in a tight labour market.

He's won a cluster of entrepreneurial awards over the years, but has finally collected the one he always coveted — one of Mediacorp Canada's top 20 employers in Alberta. "I've always strongly believed my job is to recognize people and reward their efforts, and that they go home at night feeling significant," says Sawatzky, whose company produces more than 150 million board feet a year of niche products such as decking, trim work and mouldings.

Some other initiatives that helped the 22-year-old firm make the list:

- ▶ Having daily achievable production targets, and allowing workers to earn more time off by exceeding them.
- ▶ Employees working in teams that can set their own hours within a nine-hour window. If they meet their target in, say, seven hours, they can choose to go home.
- ▶ A \$5,000-a-year achievement bonus spread out over every paycheque.
- ▶ A fully equipped fitness centre and a

cafeteria that serves meals at cost.

As part of a succession plan, Sawatzky has also allowed key employees to buy 20 per cent of the company, further strengthening the connection.

"It's a win for us because we know what production levels are going to be every day, and we can accurately forecast shipping times for just-in-time deliveries.

"And if a machine breaks down we can quickly make up the lost production."

Industrial software leader Matrikon has a lounge, games room and gym, but they also create a relaxed culture by allowing their 350 employees to work their own hours, human resources vice-president Floyd Bjorgan says.

"We don't have to be here at 8 o'clock to serve the public, so we don't have a punch-the-clock environment.

"We try to be as flexible as possible, although as we grow as a public company we are getting more rigid."

Matrikon also gives its people the freedom to be creative and take on new challenges, Bjorgan says.

And the company has revamped its performance review in the past year to make it very specific in the direction staff should take to reach their full potential.

There has also been an added emphasis on leadership and management training, and later this fall the brightest and best from Matrikon's offices worldwide will spend three days in Las Vegas helping the executive group solve problems.

"In the past, these problems would be dealt with by the executive alone, but we feel including the bright young stars will help them develop," Bjorgan says.

CEO Nizar Somji makes sure he meets all new employees, and revisits them after six months to see how they are doing. You'll frequently find him out on the

floor chatting with staff.

"It helps him keep his finger on the pulse of the organization, and lets people know he's not just a faceless name in the corner office," Bjorgan says.

Free breakfast bought in every day, a hairstylist on site and a masseuse who will come to your desk are some of the perks that help video game designer BioWare attract and keep quality staff, says HR director Lesley Menzies.

There's also a 40-seat theatre where employees can bring family and friends for a night at the movies.

Staff also get a paid break between Christmas and New Year's Day, and a week off when a new product is released.

But the creator of such best-selling games as *Jade Empire* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* is aware that a good salary and perks have to be folded into the right work atmosphere, Menzies says.

Hours are flexible enough that staff can start and finish earlier within a core time period. And founders Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk have regular town hall meetings with all 260 staff that allow a good two-way flow of information.

BioWare aggressively recruits through universities and high schools, and has a lengthy and comprehensive interview process.

"We are always looking for talented people, but we have a unique culture and we want to make sure they will do well in that culture," Menzies says.

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Employee ownership has always been the cornerstone of PCL Group, one of the largest construction companies in North America, which will do about \$5 billion in sales in fiscal 2006.

"It's the one thing that separates us from the pack," human resources vice-president Dennis Wiens says.

"Employees not only feel it's their company, but they also get earnings from being shareholders."

More than 80 per cent of the company's 2,300 salaried workers own a piece of PCL. And its size means workers can move to a new project when another one ends, breaking the normal cycle of layoffs and rehires.

PCL also encourages staff to plan their personal and professional development, aided by the company's "college of construction," which offers programs at dedicated learning spaces at all the company's operating centres.

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And next June the new Centennial Learning Centre opens at the Edmonton headquarters as part of the company's 100th anniversary celebrations.

One of the main focuses right now is improving supervisors' skill sets, Wiens says.

Workers often judge a company by the relationship they have with a supervisor, and PCL wants their managers to pay more attention to the careers of those under them, he adds.

Considering its job is providing insurance for more than 1.4 million Alberta workers, the Workers Compensation Board better do a good job of looking after its own employees.

And health and fitness is front and centre, spokesperson Lorraine Lynch-Geisler says.

The 1,500 employees get free membership to a fitness centre that also offers yoga and pilates, and

can also take courses on stress management, first aid and quitting smoking.

"We have an incredible range of benefits, and they are very flexible so they work for each family's situation," Lynch-Geisler says.

Because the majority of the staff are women, the non-profit organization has flexible hours so a mother who has to get children out the door can start later in the morning.

And it has a maternity program that allows staff to have flexible work arrangements when they are back on the job.

"We're not doing any one thing that other companies aren't, but we are doing all of them," Lynch-Geisler says.

And with anonymous surveys showing well over 90 per cent employee satisfaction, WCB is able to attract and keep the quality people they need to deal with injured workers going through a very emotional stage in their lives, she adds.

At Epcor, they believe workers need to have their personal life so they can be effective on the job.

So they can take up to five days off a year in hourly increments to run errands or deal with family emergencies, human resources vice-president Peter Arnold says.

In addition to competitive base salaries, the city-owned utility rewards its 2,600 employees for meeting personal and company goals through a variety of incentive programs, Arnold says.

Epcor also encourages employees to grow within the company through skill-adding courses, and subsidizes tuition for personal growth courses at outside institutions, he says.

And there are opportunities to work at Epcor operations across Canada and in the U.S. Epcor is also a strong community supporter, especially of the arts, and that makes a difference to many potential employees, Arnold says.

"We're a growing, progressive organization that's attractive to work for, and provides the opportunity to build a career."

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# Alberta's Top 20 employers

Here are Alberta's Top 20 Employers as chosen by Mediagroup Canada Inc., publisher of Top 100 Employers.

**Agrium Inc.**, Calgary, is a leading North American producer of nitrogen, phosphate, potash and sulphur fertilizers.

Receive three weeks vacation when you're hired, quickly progressing to four weeks after only two years on the job. Work in a head office building recognized for its architectural design that comes complete with a fitness centre that's open seven days a week — with family memberships available. Develop your skills at an employer that offers generous tuition subsidies (to \$3,000) for courses both related and unrelated to your current position. Encourage your children to pursue higher education through a generous scholarship (to \$1,600) program.

**AltaGas Income Trust**, Calgary, is a diversified energy company that is active in natural gas gathering and processing, extraction, transmission, distribution and energy services, as well as marketing wholesale electricity.

Build your career at a fast-growing employer that added over 90 new positions last year and nearly doubled its revenues. Work for an employer that really offers great vacation allowance — including three weeks in your first year, two paid days off, four extra long weekends in the summer and three more holidays at Christmas. Develop yourself at an employer that offers generous tuition subsidies and paid time off for apprenticeship training. Work for an employer that rewards excellent performance with an all-expense-paid weekend for two in Banff or Lake Louise.

**Banff Centre**, Banff, is one of Canada's most unique post-secondary educational and cultural institutions.

Work and live in one of this country's most spectacular natural settings, Banff National Park — a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Develop yourself at an employer that's also a renowned educa-

tional institution — and get special employee tuition subsidies. Keep in shape at a wonderful on-site fitness facility that offers swimming, an indoor rock climbing wall (real rock climbing is nearby) and a hot tub with views of the surrounding mountains. Get to know your co-workers through this employer's "HIP" social committee that organizes creative social events throughout the year.

**Bayer CropScience Inc.**, Calgary, develops and manufactures products for crop protection and other agricultural applications.

Live a healthy life at this employer, which offers everything from an on-site fitness facility (with personal trainers) to discounted vitamins for employees.

Enjoy more time off with an employer that offers three weeks of paid vacation to start plus two paid personal days off each year — in addition to an informal earned days off program.

Get rewarded for excellent performance by an employer that provides free trips anywhere in North America (for two) in recognition of a job well done. Recognize your co-workers for their excellent work and they will receive the chance to win \$2,000 through a new awards program — and you will receive their thanks.

Work for a forward-thinking employer that is looking beyond its own walls and helping to create better work environments for its smaller customers and their employees.

**BioWare Corp.**, Edmonton, develops computer and console video games.

Build a career with one of the world's leading video game designers — a Canadian success story that is responsible for Xbox mega-hits such as *Jade Empire* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*.

Work at an entertainment-savvy employer with an on-site 40-seat theatre, where employees can enjoy movie nights with family and friends.

Get inspired at an employer that donates computers to a small hospital in

Kenya and provided a two-month leave for an IT employee to set up the network. Get three weeks of paid vacation allowance to start, a paid break between Christmas and New Year's — and an extra week off when you release a new product.

**Canadian Pacific Railway Ltd.**, Calgary, is a transcontinental rail carrier serving major centres across North America.

Take advantage of a well-developed training program that includes in-house and online training programs as well as generous tuition subsidies (to \$10,000). Receive three weeks paid vacation to start and purchase an additional five days of vacation time through the company's flexible benefits plan. Ride the rails across the country or work in a modern head office building complete with on-site fitness facility and market-style cafeteria.

Build your career at one of the country's oldest corporations, which added over 580 new positions last year and recently announced a \$160-million track expansion in Western Canada.

**Critical Mass Inc.**, Calgary, designs interactive websites for large clients.

Build your career at a growing software company with offices in Toronto, Chicago, New York, Austin and Atlanta. Work in a renovated warehouse with a rooftop patio and employee lounge complete with pool table, video games, beanbag chairs and lava lamps. Find a friend a job with this employer and you could receive a \$1,000 referral bonus.

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**Enbridge Inc.**, Calgary, is a leader in natural gas distribution, pipelines and energy-related services.

Customize your health benefits through this employer's flexible health plan — which is also available to part-time employees, families and retirees. Work in a downtown office tower that offers great views of the surrounding city and easy access to the city's enclosed walkway system. Plan your retirement with a traditional pension plan and company contribution to a group RSP. Receive three weeks vacation to start and schedule a paid personal day off a month.

**Epcor Utilities Inc.**, Edmonton, provides electricity, water and gas to customers in Western Canada, Ontario and the U.S.A., as well as metering services to municipalities across Canada.

Build your career at a growing power company that is looking to the future by generating electricity using alternative sources. Improve your skills base at an employer that offers tuition subsidies and innovative apprenticeship training programs with the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology. Take advantage of a unique personal days off program that lets you take up to five paid days off each year in hourly increments to run errands or deal with personal emergencies. Work for an enlightened corporate citizen that donates \$200 to a local charity every time one of its volunteers spends 50 hours there.

**Husky Energy Inc.**, Calgary, is an integrated Canadian petroleum company involved in all facets of the industry, from exploration to retail marketing.

Build your career at a growing energy-sector employer — this company added over 160 new positions last year. Maximize your free time with a three-week paid vacation for new employees, plus an amazing seven paid personal days off each year. Save five per cent each time you fill up at the gas station, thanks to this employer's generous financial benefits. Educate your kids a little easier thanks to this employer's annual scholarship fund that awards \$75,000 a year in scholarships for employees' children.

**Komex International Ltd.**, Calgary, is a consulting engineering firm that specializes in domestic and international environmental projects.

Share in the success of this growing engineering employer that distributes up

to 60 per cent of its profits to employees each year in the form of bonuses and share options. Work for a community-minded employer that provides employee volunteers for local charitable projects and helps a local disability research group secure employment for a partially disabled person. Work for a company that takes care of its employees in their personal lives, from an exceptional health plan to industry-leading family-friendly benefits — and even finds the time to send meals to one employee whose spouse had become seriously ill. Work for an industry leader that offers maternity top-up payments (70 per cent for 15 weeks) and is introducing a phased-in return-to-work program for mothers who are returning to work.

**Matrikon Inc.**, Edmonton, develops plant optimization software and provides related consulting services to industrial customers around the world.

Build your career at a growing software employer that recently acquired a firm in Scotland, creating new international career opportunities. Take part in a performance review that focuses less on technical skills and more on dedication, loyalty, commitment and personal qualities — a rarity in the high-tech field. Enjoy a relaxed work environment, including casual dress and a fully equipped employee lounge and games room. Stay in shape at this employer's on-site fitness facility that offers free memberships for its

employees. Receive discounts on home computer and software purchases, as well as subsidized Internet access.

**Midwest Surveys Inc.**, Calgary, is a professional land surveying firm, providing geomatics services to the oil and gas industry.

Build your career at an established and growing employer that added 45 positions last year. Enjoy working in a new Calgary head office or build your career at one of eight offices across Alberta and Saskatchewan. Customize your (and your family's) health benefits plan with an annual health spending allowance — \$1,500 per person. Take three weeks vacation in your first year and move to four weeks after only five years on the job.

**Nexen Inc.**, Calgary, is one of the largest independent oil and gas exploration and production companies in Canada.

Rise rapidly through the ranks at an employer that keeps track of your skills and talents through an online skills in-

ventory. Give back to the community at an employer that offers two paid days off each year for employees to volunteer at local charities. Work for a vacation leader that offers three weeks of paid vacation to new employees, two personal days off and a paid holiday shutdown in the summer. Get rewarded for excellent work at an employer that offers a wide range

of awards, from \$3,000 cash prizes to an amazing President's Award, which has no maximum value.

**PCL Constructors Inc.**, Edmonton, is one of North America's largest general contractors.

Work for an innovative construction company that has a policy of moving staff from job to job to ensure steady employment. Face off against your co-workers at a competitive hockey tournament — employee teams from across North America compete every year for the prized Schmauch Cup. Work for an industry leader that is celebrating its centennial with the building of a massive new training facility to house its College of Construction. Grow your career at an employer with an active promotion within strategy — all senior managers are long-time employees. Participate in a unique career survey process that helps you plan your long-term personal and professional development goals. Benefit from the fruits of your labour through a popular share purchase plan.

**Rogers Insurance Ltd.**, Calgary, is one of Alberta's largest independent insurance brokerages.

Build your career at a fast-growing insurance brokerage that enjoyed considerable revenue growth last year — leading to the addition of 20 new positions. Participate in a company-wide performance bonus plan that paid bonuses up to 10 per cent of salary last year. Spend four years with this employer and receive the opportunity to become a shareholder. Receive tuition subsidies for courses related (and not related) to your current position.

**Shell Canada Limited**, Calgary, is one of the nation's largest integrated petroleum companies.

Take part in an exceptional financial benefits plan that includes a host of attractive features, from generous pension contributions to a five-per-cent discount on all your gasoline purchases. Work for a community-spirited employer that ranks among the country's leading donors, supporting over 1,000 charita-



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ble initiatives last year. Build your career at an employer that created over 320 new positions and posted record revenues last year. Build your career in Alberta's oilsands — with reserves gaining international attention from international politicians and investors as oil prices reach new heights. Receive free passes for emergency day care or enrol your child full-time at a nearby daycare centre that reserves space for Shell Canada employees. Take care of your family with help from a specialized service that helps you find child care-services, schools and even senior care facilities across Canada.

**Spruceland Millworks Inc.**, Acheson, operates its own sawmill and remanufactures a variety of finished wood products for home construction.

Own a piece of the company — last year 20 per cent of the privately held company was sold to employees. And the

company secured three-quarters of the financing to ensure the purchase option was affordable for all employees. Work for an incredibly creative employer that avoided laying off employees after a devastating fire destroyed its manufacturing facility — it simply hired its employees to assist in the reconstruction of the plant.

Enjoy this employer's annual meeting, which included an all-expenses-paid trip to Mexico last year.

**Suncor Energy Inc.**, Calgary, is a leading Canadian-based integrated energy company.

Get three weeks of paid vacation allowance in your first year at this employer — plus an incredible 12 paid personal days off each year. Build your career at a forward-thinking energy company that's a major investor in Alberta's oilsands as well as large-scale wind power generation projects. Invest in your children's future with an employer that

awards an unlimited number of academic scholarships (to \$1,800 each) each year to employees' children attending college or university. Build your skills with an employer that offers specialized apprenticeship programs as well as generous tuition subsidies (to \$4,500 a year).

**Workers' Compensation Board**, Edmonton, promotes safe work practices and the provision of fair benefits to workers.

Work for a non-profit insurance provider that serves over 1.4 million Albertans and over 106,000 employers. Enjoy a free membership to a fully-equipped fitness centre that also offers yoga and pilates. Enrol in a variety of wellness classes, including smoking cessation, stress management and first aid. Receive maternity top-up payments and take advantage of a variety of flexible work arrangements when you return to work.