

If we move them ... will they come?

Relocation,
relocation,
relocation.

Is that your company's mantra now that the janitor's closet has been commandeered for badly needed office space? Or perhaps it's because the lease is up and the landlord won't even spring for a can of paint.

Moving the office, whether from the suburbs to downtown, or just around the block, can be fraught with difficulties. New technology, new cubicles and new commute times can turn even the most level-headed employees into virtual toddlers crying about everything being "different," and moaning about the traffic.

With all the headaches and hassles, it's enough to make anyone want to just click their heels and magically be transported to their new cubicle - like it was all just a dream.

Not so fast, says Ann Peters, president of BearCat Consulting Ltd. in Vancouver, who has helped companies with as many as 5,000 employees move. Relocation should not be viewed as a temporary inconvenience - it needs to be handled strategically.



Julie Ellis, left, chats with Melissa Madden at Mabel's Labels much roomier quarters in Hamilton. GLENN LOWSON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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NO CHOICE

A 2006 survey conducted by moving company Atlas World Group Inc. showed that more than half of respondents indicated growth as the primary reason for moving.

That's the reason why Mabel's Labels Inc. moved from a 1,500-square-foot office in downtown Hamilton to its present 5,000-square-foot quarters eight blocks away last year. The company, which makes labels that can be affixed to children's belongings, started with one employee five years ago, but now employs 20 – or 30 during the busy back-to-school season.

"In those last few months at the old location, there were points when partners were sitting on the floor with their laptops in the corner," says Julie Ellis, the company's vice-president. She anticipates having to move again soon to keep up with growth in the kids' label business.

Checklist

Here's a simple checklist to make sure nothing gets left behind or overlooked when moving:

- » Desk empty?
- » Supply and filing cabinets cleared?
- » File drawers locked?
- » Wall items taken down?
- » Breakable items properly packed?
- » Computers and other machines disconnected?
- » "Do Not Move" tags placed?
- » Liquids drained from equipment?
- » Desk pads and chair pads labelled?
- » Make arrangements so that Internet, phone and fax services are ready to go in the new place.
- » Source: www.123movers.com

THE BIG PICTURE

But what if the shaky economy is pointing the company directly into the winds of pink slip hell? Even if things are looking fine at present, it's a good idea to use the move as an impetus for tactical planning, Ms. Peters says.

"You have to be brutally honest about how much you're going to shrink. Because there's no use getting space that is going to sit empty when you know in nine months you are going to be laying off staff," she says.

Sometimes, a company will move in order to create a message about itself. Is an organization trying to increase brand awareness or decrease costs? Build a hip space to show how groovy its team, and by extension, its product, is?

"For an organization that wants to be better known in a city, if you've just moved to the burbs, what have you just done to your brand? You've weakened it," Ms. Peters says.

ON THE ROAD ... AGAIN

Of course, deciding on a location isn't merely an issue of branding. For most employers, the first question they should be asking is: If we build it, will they come? As in: Will my employees revolt when they discover they'll have a longer commute?

That was certainly on the mind of the executives when LoyaltyOne Inc. moved from its northern Toronto digs to the downtown core last year. The relocation team spent weeks mapping out where employees lived and how their commute would be affected.

"If there was an element for which there was a lot of angst, it was the commute," says Bryan Pearson, president and chief executive officer. "It was less about if the amenities would be exciting, and more about: 'What's this going to do to my life? Is it going to add an hour to my day?'"

To compensate for the longer commute that many of its

1,000 employees faced, the company launched a much more aggressive flextime program. Instead of an hour of wiggle-room on their arrival and departure time, employees now have to be at work for the core hours of 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Beyond that, it's up to them to plan their workday.

The company originally projected that 10 per cent of employees would quit because of the move. Less than 1 per cent actually did.

Not all new locations are a bad choice for commuters – indeed, they can be a selling point for recruitment.

When 1-800-GOT-JUNK? moved from its Granville Island area of Vancouver to downtown two years ago, many employees were thrilled that the new workplace was right on a major transit route.

"We were able to attract people from other areas of Vancouver that we couldn't in the past," says Brian Scudamore, the firm's founder and CEO.