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## The cooler the better

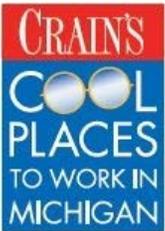
How employee-friendly features can improve the bottom line

By [Chad Halcom](#)

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Having the cool-kid rep doesn't just give a company extra cachet with millennials or a narrative for the marketing department — experts say it can pay dividends in turnover, recruitment and even in growing the customer base.



JEFF JOHNSTON/CDB

Several standout businesses in [Crain's Cool Places to Work in Michigan 2012](#) awards program found that even intangible workplace assets like a weight-loss program, video game lounge or office tailgate party can help attract talent — and win customers.

"The cool label implies you are fun to work with, and people want to be a part of that kind of culture. We talk about this feature sometimes in marketing presentations, and make clients and prospects aware of it. And it does seem to make impressions," said Principal and Managing Director Becky McLaughlan of Troy-based **McGraw Wentworth**, a benefits consultant firm that ranked the coolest of all small to midsize businesses with 15 to 249 employees.

"In our business, we give a lot of seminars, and people on the feedback forms will tell us things like 'You all seem like a fun group of people.' That warms people up to us, because our marketing cycle takes a while, and it's not often a quick turnaround in adding a new customer."



McLaughlan said McGraw Wentworth has been strategic about its culture only in the last handful of years, but the return in workplace development has built steadily over time.

Employee retention was 97 percent in the past year and 95 percent over the past five years among its 72 employees, and year-to-date sales growth is 40 percent ahead of company performance targets, she said.

McLaughlan

Intangible workplace assets can be even more valuable as the economy grows, improving the job market and the number of opportunities for a company's top performers to look elsewhere, said Susan Springer, director of workplace assessments at Harrisburg, Pa.-based **Best Companies Group**, which conducted the Cool Places competition for *Crain's*.

Springer said Best Companies is conducting about 40 studies a year that evaluate the relative appeal of

various companies' workplace environments and morale.

"Culture is a huge piece in attracting talent now, and something C-suite executives really look at," she said. "Particularly since companies often make similar offers on the share of a premium they pay on health care, disability and other benefits, culture is an area that really creates a difference.

"You may think taking away something intangible that's of little consequence to tighten the belt might not be a big deal to employees, but sometimes there's a big sense of the change in value."

Overall coolness isn't necessarily a function of the age or hipness of the workforce, industry segment or even reputation.

Springer said any business can seem cool to a workforce it respects, trains and strives to keep.

Cooldest of all large companies with 250 or more employers was Lansing-based **Accident Fund Insurance Co. of America**, where human resources manager Susan Gisholt said it "absolutely pays" to have a good workplace environment that preserves talent and institutional knowledge among its 610 employees.

"It makes a difference as far as recruiting and getting the best talent," she said. "The industry is bottom line-driven, but there's a clear connection there between having a good workplace and getting the most valuable people."

Farmington Hills-based **Kyyba Inc.**, a staffing, software development and engineering firm, has averaged a turnover rate of just one employee per year among its 24 employees that isn't performance-related, Human Resources Manager Vandana Patil said.

Even simple measures such as trying to obtain membership fee discounts at gyms and health clubs for employees, or assembling a company bowling team, have helped the retention rate.

"Being cool means we are all satisfied with where we work, and as the company grows we also grow as people with it," Patil said. "People often refer their friends and family and business contacts, and staffing employees who go on to get hired by the clients will still refer to us, based on their time here."

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