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AUTHOR'S NOTE. THE ORIGINAL PAGE WAS ENTIRELY COVERED WITH A PICTURE OF A NUN BUT THIS HAS BEEN OMITTED IN ORDER TO KEEP THE FILE SIZE DOWN.

Great work places and how they got that way

It's just common sense that good work gets done in a good place to work, but only a few companies know how to put common sense into practice. Here are six of them

By Daniel Stoffman

SNC Group : challenges and promotion from within are what count

Her friends warned Ethel Orthenberg 14 years ago not to leave a cozy job with her husband's business to take one with SNC Group of Montreal, one of the world's largest engineering firms. They warned her that she would have no freedom working for a large company, that she would become low woman on a bureaucratic totem pole. Her friends, she says happily, were totally wrong. Of course, it's natural that she should feel that way. Orthenberg, an executive secretary, is now one of SNC's owners.

That SNC is 100% employee-owned, and that none of the owners has a majority of the shares, may help explain the happy, informal atmosphere around the open and airy headquarters in downtown Montreal. But unlike many companies that encourage stock ownership by employees, not every employee can own SNC stock. Shareholders

are chosen by a committee, following recommendations by bosses and peers. The decision is based on past and potential contributions to the company, loyalty and dedication; shareholders also must have aboveaverage expertise in their areas.

SNC wants its shareholders to come from every level of the company: managers, technicians and secretaries are among the 450 shareholders chosen from 4,200 employees. If necessary, the company will arrange a bank loan at a favorable rate for the share purchase. At the age of 55, shareholders must sell one-third of their holdings back to the company, another third at age 60 and the rest upon retirement at 65 or upon leaving SNC.

What her friends didn't understand says Ortenberg, is that "this company has an entirely different relationship with its employees than most big companies. There is a rapport between the different levels of personnel. I've never felt I was merely an employee. I always felt my domain was my domain, that they took it for granted that whatever I was supposed to do, I'd do."

SNC, founded in 1911 by Arthur Surveyer, has a staff whose background is as international as the sites of the company's projects. At last count, SNC had undertaken work in 100 countries. So far this year, the company has begun work on the first phase of a dam project in India, signed a contract for another in Thailand, finished the first stage of an irrigation project in the Dominican Republic and begun studies on a catalytic cracking unit for Petro-Canada in Montreal.

SNC challenges its employees and promotes from within. Such was the case for Chairman Camille Dagenais, who joined as a project engineer in 1953. Another employee, Feroz Ashraf, a native of Pakistan, went from junior to senior engineer in five years, proof, he says, that hard work is recognized at SNC.

"There's no class structure here," says Jean-Guy Hamel, who came aboard in 1946, at age 16, as an office boy. Now he's a project co-ordinator. "I've never lacked a moment's work since I began," he says. And the resources are readily available to get the work done. When Hamel decided a project team needed a personal computer on-site, he had it within days.

Turkish-born Ted Papucciyan, vice-of the project operations group, says management at SNC has been able to instill pride in all employees. However, he said: "SNC is not one of Canada's best companies. It is the best company."