



**LOYALTY FACTOR:** DIRT employees (L to R) Aibert Antioquia, Monica Lomas, Miles Nixon, Janna Pantella, Tori Cnudde, and Brian Cassie say why they are loyal.



# Loyal Because You Love It

» BY CARISSA HALTON

*The relationship between employees and their work is changing.  
Build the momentum*

**T**he DIRT factory is—characteristically—filled with the sounds of drills, saws and nail guns. Today is, in some respects, no different than usual. After all, DIRT Environmental Solutions’ mainstay is the construction of prefab offices, using cutting-edge technology with an eye for environmental sustainability and good design.

But many of the workers on the floor today are not your usual construction specialists. Instead, they are marketing professionals, accountants and software developers. On this day of feverish work, they are racing to fill a huge order: a contract too big for the normal complement of workers on the assembly line to manage. Instead of turning down the order, every able-bodied worker in the company offered to help out. Office assistants, sales people and even DIRT’s CEO joined the assembly line. They are the built-in extra capacity DIRT is known for.

PHOTOS: BRIAN BUCHSDRUEKER



Miles Nixon (L) and Aibert Antioquia

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*“The people I work with and the project I’m working on are most important to me, solidifying my loyalty to DIRTT.” –Aibert Antioquia*

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This kind of team camaraderie and commitment is common practice at DIRTT, according to Julie Pithers, a sales and marketing team member since the beginning, in 2004. “The company has as flat a hierarchy as we can make it: everyone has to be able to row, and not just tell others to row.” At DIRTT, there are no personal offices or job titles (besides the legally necessary CEO and COO). Kitchens are set up at each site and, for \$2 per day, staff get unlimited drinks, snacks and a hot meal. Everyone eats together.

It’s not just Pithers who loves working at DIRTT. Its turnover rate tells a similar story: in an industry with a 16% turnover, DIRTT’s is just 2.8%. “We are team players. You can ask anyone for a favour and they will try hard to make it happen,” Pithers says. “We are really loyal to each other.”

#### **LOYALTY IS A TWO-WAY STREET**

Employee loyalty has declined worldwide, according to Mercer’s *What’s Working* survey. Mark Franklin, President of Career-Cycles, has watched this trend unfold as he’s coached people through major career crises. Just how much has changed became clear to him as he conducted a workshop for young professionals. “I think that the new thing is to spend no more than 18 months at a company before moving on,” one woman said. There was a time when two-year stays would have been deemed unacceptable.

Even more surprising, some employees see loyalty to one company as a potential career liability, “The fear is that staying gives the impression that this person is not ambitious, they’re not creative in managing their own careers nor do they take initiative,” says Franklin.

While employee loyalty is declining, employers have commitment issues too. Internships, freelance and project-based work and other temporary contract relationships are increasingly prevalent. In response to this project-based work culture, many employees are concluding that their loyalty is to their career first, their employer second.

DIRTT has recognized the importance of maintaining a trusting relationship, even in a difficult economy. Some 80% of DIRTT’s clients are in the United States. “When the recession hit, it was like a big red button was pressed and back orders were all stopped,” Pithers says. “There were some people who thought we might need to ‘right size’ [lay people off]. However, because we are a manufacturer in Calgary, it is difficult to compete with the oil and gas industry for employees. We rely significantly on trust in keeping staff.” Rather than laying everyone off, employees were paid to volunteer at Goodwill and the food bank. “We were glad we did, because business turned around quickly and we would have been in big trouble if we had to rehire.”

## THE BENEFITS OF LOYALTY

Loyalty isn't just about staying at a job; it's about people wanting to be in their jobs. Dianne Durkin, President of Loyalty Factor, specializes in building employee, customer and brand loyalty. She says, "It's about people being highly engaged in their jobs: they offer suggestions, take initiative in problem-solving and seek best practices. Loyal employees work as a team, feel committed and have a high level of pride within an organization."

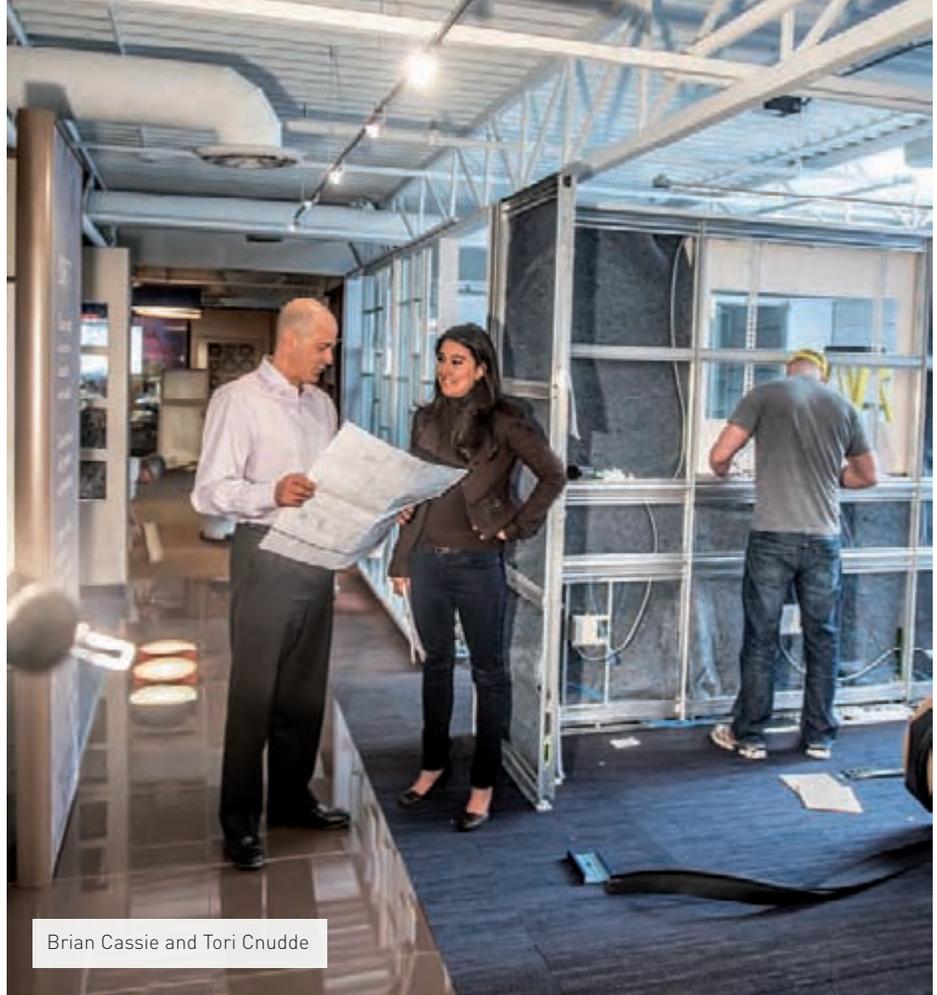
"Change is very difficult and the majority of people don't like it," says Durkin. "If people feel respected, are treated with dignity and feel their efforts are appreciated—they won't want to go elsewhere, even for more money."

Investing in factors that build loyalty has significant benefits for companies. "It costs two to three times an employee's salary to replace them," says Durkin. Besides cost savings, loyal employees are more productive and, like DIRT'T's experience filling their first big contract, they often scale up quickly, confident that they have the in-house knowledge and expertise to do the job right.

Being loyal and staying with an employer has considerable advantages to employees too: there are more opportunities for advancement, training and development, more feedback, better benefits and longer vacation. Franklin says, "Often you get a say in the company's future and can participate in leadership decisions that give people a sense of ownership."

## LOVING YOUR JOB

Loyalty has its perks, but in the end, love plays a role in career decisions. The complex chemistry involved in loving something can seem more like magic than science. Researchers and consultants are trying to isolate the exact factors that create employee engagement, trust and loyalty in the workplace. Franklin says one of the dominant factors is how people feel about who they report to. "Managers make the biggest difference in workers' lives. When an employee chooses to step away, it's not because they don't believe in the company or have a good work environment; it's because they don't like their boss."



Brian Cassie and Tori Cnudde

*"To help create loyalty it's important to always be happy to help others learn. DIRT'T's amazing culture fosters an environment where everyone works together and is loyal to each other, the company and its goals." – Tori Cnudde*

Loyalty can be felt towards an institution, values and mission, but more often loyalty is felt to a person. "We are 70% emotional and 30% rational," says Durkin, "Loyalty is based on feelings—on emotional connections to people. Loyalty is attached to a person's immediate supervisor, and if that person is not competent or empathetic, people will move on."

The decision to stay or go is a difficult one that, sometimes, employees make

too quickly. "People often overestimate how good it will be when they change jobs," says Franklin. "The 'grass is always greener,' but then a change happens and guess what? You are still the same person at the new job, and some of those problems, you bring with you."

Career counselling and coaching can help employees understand their issues with work, as well as strategically outline their options. It can help employees



Monica Lomas and Miles Nixon

feel more meaningfully engaged and help them better express what their needs are. These conversations can lead to stronger work relationships. They can also clarify when it is time to move on.

The shifting nature of loyalty in the workplace is forcing employers to consider what it means to build trust and what is required to build employee engagement. On the other side of the relationship, our changing understanding of workplace loyalty is forcing employees to become more responsible for their career development and advancement. The question both the employer and employee need to ask is, “What do we need for this relationship to work?” That question creates the opportunity for honesty and trust development, which are necessary for any relationship that involves love.

At DIRTT, employees love their jobs. “Clients who tour our facilities regularly comment on how happy our staff are. On tours, any one of the team members—on the factory floor or at head office—can share what she’s doing. Regularly, tours are stopped by employees who want to show

clients their work,” says Pithers. “We are proud of what we do, and it pays off in our customer service.”

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*“When you feel passion and are thrilled in the mornings by what you are going to do during the rest of the day, that produces automatic loyalty.” – Monica Lomas*

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DIRTT has grown from only a handful of employees in 2004 to 750 employees spread across three cities. The company’s commitment to building trust and maintaining an open, team-based work culture has led to employees who are loyal, not because they feel they have to be, but because they love their jobs. **WV**

## Two Sides of the Same Coin

### Employers

- It is necessary to build trust and engagement before employees can feel loyalty
- The direct report relationship is a deciding factor—people consistently leave unpleasant relationships. If someone does not respect or like their immediate superior, the best organization-wide retention efforts will fail
- It is expensive to replace employees; employee loyalty impacts a company’s bottom-line

### Employees

- Younger employees have a different understanding of loyalty and long-term commitment than older generations
- A career plan that details specific options can clarify the level of loyalty an employee feels
- Feeling engaged, respected and challenged are vital to engendering loyalty in the workplace