

Best Places To Work

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Travel Agency workplace thrives on collaboration, collegiality

The Travel Collaborative forms business model that works for staff, clients

BY MARY K. PRATT
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

SOMERVILLE — **The Travel Collaborative Inc.**, with just 40 workers, isn't big enough to sustain a company cafeteria. But the Somerville company has the next best thing: a lunch-making collaborative affectionately dubbed "The Rice Shack." For a couple of bucks, workers get some tasty food — from curried chicken to egg-salad sandwiches to crepes on Bastille Day — and enjoy the company of co-workers.

"This is something no other place would have," said Leanne Locke, one of the independent contractors who operates under The Travel Collaborative umbrella.

In some ways, Locke said, these daily lunches capture the company's collaborative and collegial spirit.

Such traits helped land The Travel Collaborative at the top of the Boston Business Journal's list of Best Places to Work in 2005 among firms with between 20 and 100 employees. The agency has built its success on a unique business model that fosters a work environment characterized not only by cooperation but by respect and enjoyment as well.

"There's a sense of community," said General Manager Betty Cotton.

Lesli Gordon founded the company in June 1985 based on her idea that she could set up a better shop than the traditional travel agency arrangements.

"They paid us badly in those days. I kept thinking that the only way to make money in this industry was to be a manager," she said. "But the very best agents shouldn't be managers. We should just be able to be agents and work with clients. So I thought 'What if all the best agents shared overhead, hired really good managers to handle all the details and we just did our work — wouldn't that be cool?'"

One other travel agent came on as a partner, and Gordon had seven employees when The



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A DECENTRALIZED MODEL has created a greater sense of community among members, says Betty Cotton; general manager, and Roy Palmeri, president, of The Travel Collaborative Inc.

Travel Collaborative opened. Now it has 16 partners, 17 independent agents and seven people who handle administration.

What it doesn't have, said those who work there, is a hierarchy. "Everybody has an equal say," Gordon said.

So, for example, if a free trip to a Four Seasons comes in, names go into a hat to draw the winner.

"We share everything like that. Every single time," Gordon added. "That kind of thing happens here. It doesn't happen at other agencies."

Or, if someone thinks a new software program will help him or her perform better, then that one person speaks up and the group makes the

investment.

Other examples speak more to the company's strategic success.

Workers, faced with the elimination of commissions paid by airlines, worked together to devise a fee-for-service structure. They also work together to promote continuing education and other resources that "enhance the value of using a travel agent instead of using the Internet"

to plan trips, Cotton said.

Collaboration and cooperation aren't just mantras at The Travel Collaborative. The company has a steering committee comprising four elected members and Cotton; workers can vote for members after they've been with the company just a year.

Company officials acknowledged that pay and benefits also help make The Travel Collaborative a top-notch place to work. In addition to competitive pay and several weeks of paid time off annually, the company has flexible work arrangements, allowing workers to tailor their hours to their needs. One woman, for example, left early every Wednesday so she could travel to western Massachusetts to study yoga.

Moreover, workers said, the environment at The Travel Collaborative fosters a cooperative spirit. They can call on one another for information about rail routes in Europe or family-friendly cruise lines or any other issue.

"The atmosphere, whether you're an independent agent or a partner, is all about sharing knowledge," said Linda Doherty, an independent agent who joined the company in 2000. "We're all striving for similar goals. We want to keep our clients happy and make a profit and there's a way to accomplish both and enjoy our work environment too."



Small
Company