How Canva hires and onboards the right people to drive stellar business growth

Chris Low, Head of Vibe, Canva

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Written by **Craig Donaldson** on September 11, 2018

A strong focus on culture, deploying small but empowered teams, strategic talent acquisition and structured onboarding have been three keys to the successful growth of graphic design-as-a-service company Canva, according to its head of HR.

The company, which has doubled in size every year since its inception in 2012, is founded on a unique culture which has helped support the growth and development of the company from its founding days, said Zach Kitschke, head of people for **Canva**.

One of its core values is "being a force for good" in which it brings together a **diversity** of thoughts, perspectives and expression for building the best product for a diverse user base (which currently sits at more than 10 million users across 190 countries).

Another key element of its **culture** revolves around psychological safety, and Kitschke said the company actively fosters an inclusive workplace where people feel safe to be themselves, are able to do the best work of their lives and fulfil their potential.

"There are no dumb ideas – just a group of people working together to solve a problem," he said.

"We're all on an ongoing journey of learning, helping each other grow and becoming the best we can possibly be."

Canva, which was recently valued at $US1 billion ($1.3 billion) following its latest round of funding – earning it the title of Australia's only technology "unicorn" – offers a supportive, diverse and "downright quirky culture", said Kitschke.

"It's always been in our DNA to set crazy big goals and recognise our teams' wins with extraordinary celebrations such as releasing doves, drone racing to smashing plates.

"It's our vision, values, traditions and team spirit that keeps everyone motivated in our shared vision of empowering the world to design."

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To help support employees in this process, Canva recently hired a full-time, internal coach, and Kitschke explained that the role of this coach is to help employees grow and develop personally, with a particular focus on coordinators and leaders in the business.

Canva also employs a 360-review process in assessing performance, to make sure everyone in the company receives feedback from others: "if you work with lots of different people on different teams, it is important to create a real feedback culture," he said.

The 360 process (run through CultureAmp) is a way for employees to obtain constructive feedback from the people they work with closely.

As part of this, new employees also complete a self-review, and this is an important step in helping them identify blind spots and differences between their perception of their strengths and areas of improvement, against the perceptions of their reviewers.

Small, empowered teams

Canva, which has grown to more than 300 employees (from five in 2012), was recently recognised as the number one great place to work in Australia (in the 100-999 employee category) and it also has a 4.8 star-rating on Glassdoor with a 100 per cent CEO approval rating.

While the business has grown and changed significantly since its early days, its culture and team ethos have not, and Kitschke said the company has been structured around the concept of small but empowered teams.

"This really permeates through everything that we do," said Kitschke, who explained that each major project in the business will have a dedicated team working on it.

"We've always found that having a small team with the key skills to achieve the right goals has enabled us to move fast and work very well together; this has flowed through to everything from planning and our structure as well," he said.

Every quarter Canva also convenes its "season-opener" in which each team across the company pitches ideas and runs through their plans and goals for the upcoming season (quarter).

"It's an awesome way to ensure that everyone is actually involved in that planning process," said Kitschke.

"We spend a lot of time hiring and I often say this is the most impactful thing we can spend our time on"

"Everyone in the company has transparency on what everyone else is doing. The teams get to celebrate their successes. The focus on teams has been really important to us.

"We've also set up systems and structures in a way that enables team members to move really quickly and hit our goals," he said.

Another important element in this has been the concept of "minimum viable structure", and Kitschke explained that this is about avoiding unnecessary hierarchy or layers and simply focusing on the best way to organise the company to achieve its goals and deliver as much value to users as possible.

Hiring for success
In order to maintain its culture, Kitschke explained that the company takes a very particular approach to **talent acquisition**.

"We spend a lot of time hiring and I often say this is the most impactful thing we can spend our time on," he said.

"I know that, in a lot of organisations, that can feel like a distraction or it can take a lot of time, but we subscribe to the idea of taking your time to ensure that you hire the right people, because, once you do this a lot of other stuff will take care of itself."

Cavna's HR team works with different teams across the business to help them plan for resourcing every quarter, which helps set expectations for the talent acquisition team in planning out the recruitment process.

This involves coordinators, talent acquisition and HR (otherwise known as "Team Happiness" in Canva), and together teams from each area complete a hiring strategy and assess challenges (those that relate to specific roles in question and which can be completed either in-house or as a take-home task) which are used to assess candidates.

Canva puts a strong emphasis on seeing potential team member in action before hiring, and its recruitment process aims to put candidates through similar sorts of problems or projects that they would work on or solve in the business.

"There have been a lot of things that have changed in the company from a systems and technology perspective as we've grown, but we always need really talented problem solvers, people who can spot opportunities, as well as a very strong values alignment."

> "We also look for value fit, and this is critical to us bringing the right people on board if we're going to continue to scale at the rate that we have"

Candidates are put through challenges related to their functional area of expertise, and existing employees from the relevant teams are also involved in the interview process to assist with the process of assessment.

"Throughout this process we also look for value fit, and this is critical to us bringing the right people on board if we're going to continue to scale at the rate that we have," said Kitschke.

"We've gone from five to 300-plus people in five years, and so if we're going to hire thousands of people over the coming years, we need to make sure that the people that we're bringing in are amazingly talented and can help us lead and grow out their own teams in time, too."

Successful onboarding

Canva takes a highly structured approach to onboarding as well, to help ensure the successful transition of new employees into the business.

"Grounding new starters in our company culture is just as important to us as making them feel welcome and empowered to do their best work on day one – and for the rest of their tenure with us," said Christina Lai, HR specialist in Canva.

"This means having a plan – letting them know what to expect, introducing them to the right people, and showing them where to go."

Canva's onboarding plan provides every new starter with overall clarity on their team, including information such as who they will be working with, their initial goals, key contacts, systems and tools they'll need, Slack channels and even a list of all social clubs, including a wine club, board games club and music club.

New hires are provided with an onboarding document which provides an introduction to both the company, and Lai also said that it is important to leverage the right tools when onboarding many people.

Before their start date, Canva sends out an email drip campaign using a tool called Enboarder, and this sequence of emails welcomes them, provides links to company videos about culture, shows them what to expect, and allows Canva to ask more about the candidates.

New starters are also assigned with a set of tasks to complete before their start date using Canva's HR system (BambooHR) and Lai said this means they can hit the ground running from day one and get administrative tasks out of the way.

A few days before the employee's first day, they receive an email with practical information on what to expect, such as details on when to arrive (10am in Sydney), what they might want to wear (jeans and a T-shirt, or whatever they feel most comfortable in), and who to ask for.

New employees are given an office tour on arrival followed by orientation (in which they are shown what it is like to work at Canva, how teams are structured, important systems and tools to set up, and who to reach out to for further questions) as well as a starter pack in which they are provided with a MacBook, keyboard, mouse, notebook and pens as well as "swag" (Canva stickers, a box of chocolates and a helium balloon tied to their seats).

During their first two weeks at Canva, new starters are put through several onboarding workshops across design, product, growth, engineering, people, culture, public relations, finance and legal, and Lai said these presentations give newbies visibility and context on how decision-making is distributed throughout the team and company, and how each group works.

"Hearing from every team also reinforces Canva's belief that onboarding is a company-wide responsibility," said Lai.

"We are showing our newbies how each team works to achieve their goals, and how this fits with the overall Canva vision."

Each new employee is also invited to meet with Canva's three co-founders, who walk them through the company's history, current goals, product roadmap, and future business goals.

An important part of the process is pairing new starters up with mentors, who are expected to spend 20-30 per cent of their time on duties including acting as a safety net and providing new starts with moral support, introducing them to the project they will be working on and helping them navigate through any specific challenges, as well as setting up regular check-ins (daily in the first week, and then weekly).

"According to research it's more likely for new starters to actively search for a new job within their first six months when they have a poor onboarding experience and companies with an engaging onboarding program are able to retain almost all of their first-year workers," said Lai.

"At Canva, we want to make sure our retention rate is 100 per cent and that's why we know that onboarding takes time and is an ongoing effort.

"It is important for us to make our employees feel constantly valued, supported, and challenged – even after their first two weeks."