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**Human Resources Case Study:  
An Overview of the WE Organization  
(WE Charity and ME to WE Social Enterprise)**

**Produced by  
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## WE HUMAN RESOURCES CASE STUDY – By Dr. David Baum

### Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of the WE (WE Charity and ME to WE Social Enterprises) from a human resources standpoint, looking at the challenges and successes of WE as it's grown from a grassroots operation founded by 12 middle school volunteers, to an international organization with over 1000 employees operating on four continents.

The report was developed following hundreds of hours of interviews with the organization's leadership and frontline staff over several years, the review of financial and internal planning documents, and based on my own familiarity after having worked with many similar organizations over the past 30 years.

As one would expect in an organization that has scaled so quickly, the WE organization has faced workplace and HR challenges; but it is worth noting that these challenges are not unique and they closely mirror other non-profits and start-ups I've observed.

Start-ups in general are complex organizations, often driven by a small group of highly dedicated staff trying to overcome difficult roadblocks in simply trying to exist. They are known for fast-paced, high-pressure work environments with late nights and weekend hours being the norm. Combining this with the unique realities of being a non-profit or social impact organization only exacerbates these characteristics. Non-profits are among the most difficult organizations to grow and scale. They typically operate on the scarcest of funding and most meagre infrastructure. They are also normally staffed by enthusiastic and dedicated activists who, by their very makeup, can be impatient when trying to affect change and action. The reason they are good at what they do is because they are generally not shy about speaking up, or speaking out when they are not happy.

Then there are issues of demographics. WE's staff, like most social impact organizations, is young. Over 75 percent of WE's North American staff are millennials (those born between 1980 and 1996<sup>i</sup>). In my opinion, working with this group can be complex. The characteristics of millennial employees are often lampooned in the media and are generally oversimplified. But there are well-documented traits of this generation that can make them challenging for employers to retain and manage. Millennials have a strong tendency to "job hop". According to one study, they average close to three jobs in their first five years after graduation.<sup>ii</sup> By comparison, millennials' predecessors, Generation X, averaged two jobs in their first ten years after college. They also have big ambitions for promotions and salary, with 40 percent of millennials expecting a promotion or a pay raise every year.<sup>iii</sup> Those are daunting statistics for an employer.

Finally, there is the matter of organizational size. Not only is WE a big organization with over 1000 current employees, and 1400 alumni from its 20 year history, it is spread out across multiple countries (Canada, the U.S., England, Kenya, Equador and others). With that many employees in so many different places, it should not be surprising that some prove to be better fits at the organization than others.

In the 15 years I've been involved in working with the WE organization, I have observed many different stages of growth and progressive evolution. Five to ten years ago, staff investments and undertakings were limited and more modest. But the leadership realized around that time that it was essential to invest in and support WE staff to continue the upward trajectory of the organization. Now, ten years later we see an organization with multiple awards recognizing their culture, in-office gyms, global travel opportunities for staff, and much more. Most importantly, there is a desire among WE leadership to constantly improve, a constant striving to reach the next level of success and become a world-class employer.

In my professional opinion, WE and its leadership have handled the constant change, complexity and multitude of demands as well as any non-profit or social purpose organization of its size that I've worked with. Could they have done things better from day one? Certainly, but they have done far better than most, and that is plainly evident when looking at the size of the organization, its rapid growth, and the scale of its impact.

A huge part of WE's success comes directly from the founders. Their compelling vision, and ability to leverage it into their people who genuinely believe they are changing the world, is deeply impressive. Having spent hundreds of hours in conversation with WE's leaders and staff, it is clear that Marc Kielburger's and Craig Kielburger's dedication to a strong mission and better organization over more than two decades has earned them the respect and admiration of their employees.

This does not mean WE has been completely immune to making mistakes; any start-up has many learning moments and occasionally flat out fails, but their mission driven approach and dedicated leadership have allowed them to consistently adapt and respond as they constantly strive to improve themselves and their organization. As I understand, their goal has always been to leverage their people and passion to change the world.

The report is divided into sections that discuss key elements of WE's HR landscape:

## **Employee Experience**

Any organization that grows so quickly will be challenged to develop, maintain, and continually improve its employee experience. With social impact organizations in particular, there is a constant need to keep administrative costs low to maximize the amount of funding that goes directly to the mission. This can make it difficult to properly invest in needed operational infrastructure and staff. In these areas, WE's experiences have been quite typical.

As the organization grew, WE faced challenges in onboarding new employees with professional specialization (writers, graphic designers, IT experts). While adding capacity was logical and necessary, particularly after launching the social enterprise (ME to WE) in 2009, hiring was done more based on resumes and less on what motivated the people behind them.

This has been further compounded by with the millennial generation entering the workforce in large numbers in recent years. Millennials are more prone to look for short term job experiences.<sup>iv</sup> This "job hopping" phenomenon is far different from twenty to thirty years ago

when graduates expected to stay in a job for many years, perhaps even their entire careers. That fundamental difference in perspective understandably can create tensions in the workplace.

With these issues mounting, between 2010-2015, leadership realized it needed a strong commitment to maturing its people practices into a more professional operation. Staff needed better support and more structure to adapt to the ever-growing organization. As the business model expanded, the human capital needs shifted.

Annual third-party conducted anonymous employee engagement surveys began in 2015. These were necessary in order to measure and evaluate the employee experience, policies, and overall workplace culture, and identity areas most valued by employees for improvement.

The most recent survey measured engagement, employment culture and experience. The survey results were extrapolated from the responses of anonymous employees. Key findings included:

- 87 percent are personally engaged by the work they do
- 78 percent of WE employees say “they love their job”
- 98 percent believe they are making a positive change in the through their work
- 91 percent feel personally connected to their work

WE Charity and ME to WE have worked diligently in recent years to shift from a mission first culture, to a mission and people-first organization with proper systems for staff engagement. The results also reflect significant improvements in key engagement areas since 2015 relative to 2018. For instance, employees reported a:

- improvement in work-life balance (2.85x)
- improvement in compensation (5.33x)
- improvement in employee recognition (1.22x)
- improvement in the effectiveness of internal employee communications (1.73x)

In recent years, WE has placed a strong organizational focus on employee wellbeing. As an example, its new headquarters in downtown Toronto provides quiet rooms (for meditation or yoga), an on-site physiotherapist, no-cost coffee bar with Fairtrade coffee and part-time barista, 32 different microclimate work zones, a filtered water system, healthy employee snacks, cutting edge technology and a fully-equipped gym.

This is in addition to free health club memberships for all North American employees; numerous personal wellness workshops offered through the year to staff, extended health benefits (prescription drugs and dental) and an Employee Assistance Program, all of which are designed to continually better the employee experience.

## **Senior Leadership**

I have worked with many founder-led companies and non-profits. In my professional opinion, Marc Kielburger and Craig Kielburger are deeply dedicated to staff well-being.

Their leadership style can best be described as ‘mission leadership’, which I define as a leadership philosophy in which the main goal of the leader is to consistently allow their

employees to live their personal purpose through their work and to do good in the world while earning a living.

They are dedicated to learning and improving as leaders. They constantly review data on the organization, ask questions, seek out other leaders and mentors to learn from and hold regular employee Town Hall meetings to listen, inform and interact.

A significant part of their own time is dedicated to providing resources, support and infrastructure to team members and the organization. A key example is the time spent as volunteers fundraising for the creation of WE's new global headquarters for staff workstations. The co-founders personally contacted fitness CEOs to gain free health-club memberships for all staff. As a result, every employee in north America has a full-time gym membership. And both Marc and Craig regularly volunteer to raise funds for the organization itself, which allows for its continued growth (current forecasts project a 28 percent increase in staff over the next three years). Those are not easily achieved benefits, but they demonstrate the founders' dedication to improving the organization and providing support for staff.

I have had the unique opportunity to spend hundreds of hours over the years in conversation with staff. I have also come to learn about the things Marc Kielburger and Craig Kielburger do as leaders behind the scenes to show how deeply they care about their employees. They hand-write birthday cards and congratulatory notes, attend staff weddings and family funerals, visit employees in the hospital, without any contrived fanfare. In that sense, it is very much a family environment. That is something that cannot be taught. It is genuine, and rare to see in senior leaders of a large organization. They are among the most dedicated, caring and loyal leaders I have encountered in my three decades of experience in human resources.

Mirroring the overall composition of the organization, the rest of WE's leadership complement is a mix of old and new, comprising staff who have been with WE since day one, and more recently-hired industry professionals brought onboard for their specific expertise.

It is remarkable that so many of WE's leaders have successfully transitioned from volunteering with the original organization to taking on some of its most senior leadership positions today. Much of their success, beyond each individual's talent and personal dedication, has come as the result of the organization investing in them in terms of coaching, leadership and managerial training and beyond.

Among the original team that remain are: ME to WE CEO Roxanne Joyal; ME to WE Executive Director, Russ McLeod; WE Charity's (Incoming) Executive Director, Dalal Al-Waheidi; Head, Global Program Innovation & Development, Erin Blanding; Director of WE Villages, Scott Baker; Chief Development Officer, Erin Barton – all of whom have been with the organization for over 15 years.

The newer leadership cohort includes Chief People Officer, Victoria MacDonald, who joined WE in 2017, Carrie Patterson, Chief Operations Director of WE Schools (2016), Kelvin Kang, Chief Technology Officer (2016), Heather Harkness, Head of Strategic Planning and Operations (2016) and Nathalie Burri, Chief Operations Director of WE Day (2017).

The hiring of these specialized leaders reflects the organizations deep commitment to improvement through professionalization and further reflects the decision by the co-founders to improve the executive team's bench strength and hand off key parts of the organization to specialists that can grow their own teams relative to organizational need.

## **Employee Retention**

Key priorities for any successful organization include attracting and retaining quality employees. This is particularly important for non-profits which typically attract younger, less experienced workers, most of whom fall into the 'millennial' demographic.<sup>v</sup>

Millennials have big ambitions for promotions and salary, with 40 percent saying they expect a promotion or a pay raise every year.<sup>vi</sup> Those statistics can be daunting for an employer.

And that's especially true for WE, which has 75 percent of its North American staff are millennials. WE's attrition rate for coordinators in their first two years of employment hovers around 30 percent, which is in fact better than average tenure of first-time employees in the non-profit sector.<sup>vii</sup>

## **Human Resources Function**

Victoria MacDonald joined WE in 2017 as its Chief People Officer. She is a seasoned HR professional who has worked with technology and pharmaceutical companies during her career.

Shortly after her arrival, Victoria assembled WE's People Operations and Culture team, essentially a front-line HR team looking at improving several elements of the HR function at WE. The People Operations and Culture team comprises seasoned HR professionals with five decades of combined experience in the HR sector.

The review of the HR team and its practices revealed a highly professional culture with strong procedures and processes – it is truly among the most professionally managed HR units I've seen.

There are dedicated policies on:

- Workplace Harassment
- Employee Code of Conduct
- Employee Termination
- Whistleblowing and Reporting

There are clear guidelines for reporting issues in the workplace and strict procedures for investigating and responding to such concerns.

Building on this solid HR foundation, WE also has a team dedicated to employee learning and development. It offers courses on a variety of topics including an intensive training course for

new employees, time management skills development, personal health and wellness training, and many others.

Third-party reviews of the HR team and its operations conclude that it is a highly professional unit with complete policies and procedures for managing all aspects of the employee experience. Beyond exceeding that standard, it also features a suite of training and growth programs for retaining employees and fostering their development within the organization.

In 2018, the HR firm Lee Hecht Harrison Knightsbridge was engaged by WE to prepare a report for WE in order to better understand the employee experience and identify strengths and opportunities for improvement. A random but representative sample of approximately 10 percent of key organizational groups was selected to participate in a series of focus groups on WE's workplace culture.

The report concluded: *“WE has a vibrant, purpose-driven culture that continues to attract top talent. The types of cultural tensions expressed by focus group participants were, in our opinion, typical of a maturing organization experiencing significant growth. Further, there is typically a natural tension in cause-based organizations between the vision of ‘doing good’ and the practical reality of running a viable and sustainable business that calls for more sophisticated leadership skills as the organization matures. The initiatives laid out in (WE’s HR Plan) demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement in the employee experience.”*<sup>viii</sup>

WE also recently conducted a complete audit of the organization's HR policies to ensure full compliance with applicable legislation (e.g. the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, and the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*). The organization then contracted outside, independent legal counsel to conduct its own review to confirm that WE is fully compliant with all applicable rules and legislation.

The firm, Singh Lamarche LLP, responded that *“not only were the Policies under review compliant with the relevant legislation, they represent the ‘gold standard’ in terms of demonstrating a commitment by WE to ensure the protection and accommodation of their employees. The Policies were clear, comprehensive and thorough.”*<sup>ix</sup>

## **Physical Workspace**

In 2017, WE opened its new Global Learning Center (GLC). The WE GLC is fully updated and modern facility housed in a heritage-certified building in downtown Toronto.

The WE GLC also offers a number of health and wellness benefits for staff. It has a fully equipped gym, provides yoga, meditation, aerobics and other classes/training, and offers access to physiotherapy (on-site). It has several meal preparation areas and numerous collaboration and socialization zones for staff.

## Conclusion

The WE organization is very different that it was just 5 years, let alone when compared to its “start-up” days. With improving employee engagement feedback, being recognized multiple times as a Top Employer for Young People and included among Canada’s Top 10 Most Admired Corporate Cultures, I believe that WE has become one of the best and most effective organizations in its sector, with a robust HR infrastructure.

In its current state, I see WE as an organization that is continuously seeking to improve in all aspects in order to create greater and greater impact. It is becoming a people-first organization because the leadership understands that the people drive the mission and create the impact.

### ***About the Author:***

*Dr. David Baum holds a doctorate in Organizational Psychology, and a second in Divinity. For over thirty years he has consulted around the world for both profit and not for profit organizations, and has written about and taught the subjects of organizational change, leadership and coaching. His client list includes the Jane Goodall Institute, Women for Women International, Conde Nast, the Philadelphia Flyers, Barclays, GE and Fidelity Investments. He has taught at the Ivey Business School. His published works include [“Lightning in a Bottle; Proven Lessons for Leading Change”](#) and [“The Randori Principles; the Path of Effortless Leadership”](#).*



## **WE HUMAN RESOURCES CASE STUDY – By Dr. David Baum**

### **Introduction**

This report provides an overview of WE Charity and ME to WE Social Enterprises (jointly referred to as ‘WE’) from a human resources (HR) standpoint, looking at the challenges and successes of WE as it has grown from a grassroots operation with 12 founding middle school volunteers to an international organization with over 1000 employees on four continents.

The report was developed following hundreds of hours of interviews with the organization’s leadership and frontline staff over several years, the review of financial and internal planning documents, and based on my own 30-plus years of experience in the field.

### **Organizational Overview**

Free The Children was founded by brothers Craig Kielburger and Marc Kielburger in 1995. It was renamed WE Charity in 2016. The purpose of WE Charity is to make ‘Doing Good, Doable’ – namely, to assist youth, families, and institutions to create a positive local and global impact.

WE Charity is governed by a Board of Directors. Its incoming Executive Director is Dalal Al-Waheidi, a long-time leader and executive with WE.

In 2005, the organization added a social enterprise entity to help fund the charity. Originally called Leaders Today, it was also renamed and is now known as ME to WE. Its purpose is to support development work of WE Charity by donating a minimum of 50 percent of its proceeds to WE Charity; however, auditor records show that for the past four years the donations have averaged in excess of 85 percent to WE Charity. The balance of ME to WE’s revenues are re-invested into the social enterprise to further grow its social mission<sup>x</sup>.

ME to WE is also governed by a Board of Directors (separate from WE Charity’s board). ME to WE’s Executive Director is Russell McLeod.

WE is a demographically young organization with 78 percent of its staff under the age of 34.

Overall, WE employs approximately 1000 people in North America, the UK and Kenya, who are focused on driving its domestic and international programming. WE Charity and ME to WE are separate and distinct employers with employees’ job duties, compensation, and benefits aligned to their specific employer.<sup>xi</sup> In rare instances, some staff do occasionally work on both sides of the organization. This amounts to 3.6% of employees that have occasional crossover functions).

Approximately 68 percent of staff work for WE Charity and 32 percent are employed by ME to WE. Each entity has different offices, managerial Heads, reporting structures, payrolls. etc. In rare instances where there is a shared function – for example, a writer might work 80% of their time ME to WE and 20% with WE Charity – it is done to save the charity money. In the writer example, it is far more cost effective to “lend” the ME to WE writer to the charity (and work out the accounting on the person’s pay after the fact) than it would be to hire a writer on a 20% of

full time basis. If there is ever doubt in the accounting process about which entity should pay for staff hours or a purchase, ME to WE always pays.

## **Employee Experience**

The rapid growth of the WE organization created a situation for many years where employees where in a perpetual cycle of expansion and change. Offices originally were in a suburban basement, then scattered through several older buildings and now into a world-class facility. Staff numbers grew from 12, to 100, to 370 and now over 1000.

In its history, approximately 2400 people have worked for WE, and the North American workforce has increased by over 27 percent in just the last three years.

Any organization that grows so quickly will be challenged to develop, maintain, and continually improve its employee experience. With social impact organizations in particular, there is a constant need to keep administrative costs low to maximize the amount of funding that goes directly to the mission. This can make it difficult to properly invest in needed operational infrastructure and staff.

WE also faced challenges in onboarding new employees with professional specialization (writers, graphic designers, IT experts). While adding capacity was logical and necessary, particularly after launching the social enterprise (ME to WE) in 2009, hiring was done more based on resumes and less on what motivated the people behind them.

Tensions emerged between the ‘old guard’ staff who were completely dedicated to their cause and worked long hours, and the new hires who more highly prioritized work-life balance. This is a normal phenomenon in any rapidly growing organization, especially in the social impact sector and one that attracts cause-committed and passionate people.

This is further compounded with the millennial generation entering the workforce in large numbers in recent years. Millennials are more prone to look for short term job experiences, gain what they can from them, and then move on.<sup>xiii</sup> This “job hopping” phenomenon is far different from twenty to thirty years ago when graduates expected to stay in a job for many years, perhaps even their entire careers. That fundamental difference in perspective understandably can create tensions in the workplace.

Between 2010 and 2015, leadership realized it needed a strong commitment to maturing its people practices into a more professional operation. There was also a need to provide better structure for employees in the form of training, leadership, coaching, and career development. As the business model expanded, the human capital needs shifted.

Leadership increased levels of management (including adding the Head level) and instituted a formal annual planning process for the first time. These measures provided for better buy-in from staff because they knew what to expect in the year ahead, and could reach out to their respective Head to clarify or receive guidance to help execute the plan.

Sector Heads closely connected with each of their team members, providing immediate support, guidance and mentorship whenever needed.

The motivation for all these measures was based in striving to be better – better structure and support would mean happier and more productive employees, and that meant bigger and better impact.

Another notable initiative brought in at this time was the implementation of annual third-party conducted anonymous employee engagement surveys in 2015. These were necessary in order to measure and evaluate the employee experience, policies, and overall workplace culture.

The surveys are conducted by reputable third-party employee engagement firms using standard survey and data capture processes.

The most recent survey measured engagement, employment culture and experience. The survey results were extrapolated from the responses of anonymous employees.<sup>xiii</sup> Key findings included:

- 87 percent are personally engaged by their work
- 78 percent of WE employees say “they love their job”
- 98 percent believe they are making a positive change in the through their work
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WE Charity and ME to WE have worked diligently in recent years to shift from a mission first culture, to a mission and people-first organization with proper systems for staff engagement. The results also reflect significant improvements in key engagement areas since 2015 relative to 2018. For instance, employees reported a:

- improvement in work-life balance (2.85x)
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In recent years, WE has placed a strong organizational focus on employee wellbeing. As an example, its state-of-the-art new headquarters in downtown Toronto provides quiet rooms (for meditation and yoga), an on-site physiotherapist, 32 different microclimate work zones, filtered water system, no-cost coffee bar with Fairtrade coffee and part-time barista, healthy employee snacks, cutting edge technology and a fully-equipped gym.

This is in addition to free health club memberships for all North American employees, numerous personal wellness workshops offered through the year to staff, extended health benefits (prescription drugs and dental) and an Employee Assistance Program, all of which are designed to continually better the employee experience.

## Senior Leadership

In my professional opinion, Marc Kielburger and Craig Kielburger operate with a leadership style that can best be described as ‘mission leadership’, which I define as a leadership philosophy in which the main goal of the leader is to consistently allow their employees to live their personal purpose through their work and to do good in the world while earning a living.

Marc Kielburger and Craig Kielburger are dedicated to learning and improving as leaders. They constantly review data on the organization, ask HR-related questions, seek out other leaders and mentors to learn from and hold regular employee Town Hall meetings to listen, inform and interact.

A significant part of their own time is dedicated to providing resources, support and infrastructure to team members and the organization. A key example is the time spent as volunteers fundraising for the creation of WE’s new global headquarters. The WE Global Learning Center (discussed in more detail later in this study) is a state-of-the-art workstation for employees was paid for 100 percent through donations made in response to the co-founders fundraising efforts. The center provides programming for youth and educators and connects them to like-minded peers and mentors around the world. But beyond being a valuable resource for the community, Craig and Marc wanted it to be a world-class facility for staff to work within. With modern, environmentally friendly office space, an on-site gym, with quiet rooms (for yoga or meditation), and a physiotherapist available free to staff, the facility is by far the best I’ve seen for a social impact organization. It is worth noting that WE Charity did not allocate any general donations towards the building because the co-founders were able to engage a small group of targeted donors.

The co-founders seek to support staff wellbeing in various ways. As an example, they approached fitness CEOs to gain free health-club memberships for all staff. As a result, every employee in north America has a full-time gym membership. And the co-founders regularly volunteer to raise funds for the organization itself, which allows for its continued growth (current forecasts project a 28 percent increase in staff over the next three years).

Those are not easily achieved benefits, but they perfectly demonstrate the founders’ dedication to improving the organization and providing support for staff.

In my time spent at WE offices, I took note of the significant amount of time the co-founders spend with their team. They are not interested in boosting their own status as leaders, they only want to increase the impact of the organization. In recent years, that has meant handing off more of the day-to-day operations to other executives, while they focus on fundraising and other means of maximizing WE’s impact and contributions.

The co-founders would likely argue that the employees are WE’s best asset, but without Marc Kielburger’s and Craig Kielburger’s inspiration, guidance, entrepreneurial spirit and dedication, I don’t believe WE would have had anything close to the level of success it’s enjoyed to date. They truly care about their staff and their cause. It is genuine, and inspiring to see in senior

leaders of a large organization. They are among the most dedicated, caring and loyal leaders I have encountered in my three decades of experience.

This is also evident in the fact that they have named Executive Directors for each of the WE Charity and ME to WE. Simply put, Craig Kielburger and Marc Kielburger understand that doing less themselves and trusting their team is the only way the organization will continuously improve and scale.

I have had the unique opportunity to spend hundreds of hours over the years in conversation with staff. I have also come to learn about the things Marc Kielburger and Craig Kielburger do as leaders behind the scenes to show how deeply they value their employees. They hand-write birthday cards and congratulatory notes, attend staff weddings and family funerals, visit employees in the hospital, without any contrived fanfare. In that sense, it is very much a family environment. That is something that cannot be taught and it is genuine and authentic. They are among the most dedicated, caring and loyal leaders I have encountered in my three decades of experience in human resources.

Mirroring the overall composition of the organization, the rest of WE's leadership complement is a mix of old and new, comprising staff who have been with WE since day one, and more recently-hired industry professionals brought onboard for their specific expertise.

It is a strong positive statement that so many of WE's leaders have successfully transitioned from volunteering with the original organization to taking on some of its most senior leadership positions today. Much of their success, beyond each individual's talent and personal dedication, has come as the result of the organization investing in terms of coaching, leadership and managerial training and beyond. WE truly wants its employees at all levels to succeed and expand their careers within the organization.

Among the original team that remain are: ME to WE CEO Roxanne Joyal; ME to WE Executive Director, Russ McLeod; WE Charity's (Incoming) Executive Director, Dalal Al-Waheidi; Head, Global Program Innovation & Development, Erin Blanding; Director of WE Villages, Scott Baker; Chief Development Officer, Erin Barton – all of whom have been with the organization for over 15 years.

The newer leadership cohort includes Chief People Officer Victoria MacDonald, who joined WE in 2017, Carrie Patterson, Chief Operations Director of WE Schools (2016), Kelvin Kang, Chief Technology Officer (2016), Heather Harkness, Head of Strategic Planning and Operations (2016) and Nathalie Burri, Chief Operations Director of WE Day (2017).

The hiring of these specialized leaders reflects the organization's deep commitment to improvement through professionalization and further reflects the decision by the co-founders to improve the team's bench strength and hand off key parts of the organization to specialists that can grow their own teams relative to organizational need. For example, following the hiring of Kelvin as CTO, the number of employees in the technology branch has increased by 200 percent.

Another key part of the ‘stepping back’ process was the introduction the “Head” level in 2015. This provided an important level of leadership across the organization. Heads serve as mentors to Directors and junior managers, and provide personal coaching and training. Each Head has at least 10 years of experience in their field and works to ensure that internal communication between junior staff and high levels of leadership, and vice versa, is more fluid and consistent.

WE’s executive leaders’ willingness to always learn and do better cannot be understated – they strive for improvement, constantly. They are aware of their shortcomings and work tirelessly to overcome them. They undertake hundreds of hours of personal coaching, leadership training and working with mentors to try to constantly improve as leaders and people. They pour over data (e.g. staff retention numbers and employee engagement surveys) to help inform decisions and implement changes for the overall betterment of the organization.

The leadership at all levels of WE is truly impressive with a level of dedication not often seen in the non-profit world, let alone the corporate sector.

## **Employee Retention**

Key priorities for any successful organization include attracting and retaining quality employees. This is particularly important for non-profits which typically attract younger, less experienced workers, most of whom fall into the ‘millennial’ (those born between 1980 and 1996) demographic.<sup>xiv</sup>

In my opinion, working with this group can be complex. The characteristics of millennial employees are often lampooned in the media and often oversimplified. But there are well-documented traits of this generation that can make them challenging for employers to retain and manage. According to one study, new graduates working in the non-profit sector averaged just under three jobs within the first five years after completing university.<sup>xv</sup> By comparison, millennials’ predecessors, Generation X, averaged two jobs in their first ten years after college.

Millennials also have big ambitions for promotions and salary, with 40 percent saying they expect a promotion or a pay raise every year.<sup>xvi</sup> Those statistics can be daunting for an employer. And that’s especially true at WE where 75 percent of its North American staff are millennials. WE’s attrition rate for coordinators in their first two years of employment hovers around 30 percent, which is in fact better than average for first-time employees in the non-profit sector.<sup>xvii</sup>

Forward looking, WE’s senior leadership team has been building its millennial employee base and helping them stay with the organization by identifying career paths and learning programs to help staff identify their next role within the organization.

**New Grads:** The transition for new graduates into the workforce is a challenging prospect that often results in them quickly moving from one job to the next, particularly in the non-profit sector. By using models similar to those employed by the “Peace Corps” and “Teach for America”, WE has been able to build the average tenure of New Grads to just over two years. Along the way, these employees receive coaching and develop skill sets they can use when going back to school or in their next job.

**Career Track:** Many of WE’s senior leaders have been with the organization for over a decade and WE is working retain its next tranche of young employees by providing a path for them to learn on the job, develop new skills and idea long-term career opportunities. The tenure of Career Track employees has so far ranged from 3-10 years.

This innovate two-stream approach appears to be yielding positive results. In the most recent employee engagement survey, 80 percent of WE team members said “they see themselves staying with WE for the foreseeable future”.

Another innovative way WE has adapted to its younger staff is by offering the opportunity for staff to visit WE’s projects overseas. Millennials love to travel, so the organization provides a unique opportunity by offering employees the chance to take staff trips to Kenya, India or Ecuador (on-the-ground costs covered by ME to WE). Staff can also coordinate and travel with a group of young people, other staff or families who are traveling on ME to WE trips (costs are offset by ME to WE). This provides amazing opportunities for staff and helps potential donors see first-hand the impact of WE’s work in the field.

## **Human Resources Function**

Victoria MacDonald joined WE in 2017 as its Chief People Officer. She is a seasoned HR professional who has worked with technology and pharmaceutical companies during her career. Under her leadership, the HR team continues to improve in terms of structure and professionalism.

Shortly after her arrival, Victoria assembled WE’s People Operations and Culture team, essentially a front-line HR team looking at improving several elements of the HR function at WE. The People Operations and Culture team comprises seasoned HR professionals with five decades of combined experience in the HR sector.

The review of the HR team and its practices revealed a highly professional culture with strong procedures and processes – it is truly among the most professionally managed HR units I’ve seen.

There are dedicated policies on:

- Workplace Harassment
- Employee Code of Conduct
- Employee Termination
- Whistleblowing and Reporting

There are clear guidelines for reporting issues in the workplace and strict procedures for investigating and responding to such concerns.

Building on this solid HR foundation, WE also has a team dedicated to employee learning and development. It offers courses on a variety of topics including an intensive training course for

new employees, time management skills development, personal health and wellness training, and many others.

Given the 27 percent increase in its North American employee base over the last three years, WE's organizational structure, job requirements, and employee demographic have, by necessity, evolved. Originally a younger demographic of new graduates in their first job, the organization has shifted in recent years to more professionally skilled and tenured employees with specialized skill sets, looking for career growth. Nevertheless, it is still a young team with three quarters of the workforce under the age of 34.

To support the younger staff in particular, in 2015, the HR team rolled out a new "Growth and Success Plan" program. Its purpose is to clearly define to employees what the organization's expectations are for their work, and to foster regular career discussions with their managers. The feedback from staff on this program has been overwhelmingly positive: in the last employee survey, 83 percent of employees stated they had clear goals and priorities.

Third-party reviews of the HR team and its operations conclude that it is a highly professional unit with complete policies and procedures for managing all aspects of the employee experience. Beyond exceeding that standard, it also features a suite of training and growth programs for retaining employees and fostering their development within the organization.

In 2028, the HR firm Lee Hecht Harrison Knightsbridge was engaged by WE to prepare a report for WE in order to better understand the employee experience and identify strengths and opportunities for improvement. A random but representative sample of approximately 10 percent of key organizational groups was selected to participate in a series of focus groups on WE's workplace culture.

The report concluded: "*WE has a vibrant, purpose-driven culture that continues to attract top talent. The types of cultural tensions expressed by focus group participants were, in our opinion, typical of a maturing organization experiencing significant growth. Further, there is typically a natural tension in cause-based organizations between the vision of 'doing good' and the practical reality of running a viable and sustainable business that calls for more sophisticated leadership skills as the organization matures. The initiatives laid out in (WE's HR Plan) demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement in the employee experience.*"<sup>xviii</sup>

WE also recently conducted a complete audit of the organization's HR policies to ensure full compliance with applicable legislation (e.g. the Occupational Health and Safety Act, and the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act). The organization then contracted outside, independent legal counsel to conduct its own review to confirm that WE is fully compliant with all applicable rules and legislation.

The firm, Singh Lamarche LLP, responded that "*not only were the Policies under review compliant with the relevant legislation, they represent the 'gold standard' in terms of demonstrating a commitment by WE to ensure the protection and accommodation of their employees. The Policies were clear, comprehensive and thorough.*"<sup>xix</sup>



## **Physical Working Conditions/Workspace**

A long-standing concern among employees was the quality and condition of physical workspace, particularly in the Toronto offices that were crammed into several older-era buildings on and around Carleton St., in the Cabbagetown neighbourhood.

Those valid concerns have been more than adequately addressed with the opening of WE's new Global Learning Center (GLC), a fully updated and modern facility housed in a heritage-certified building in downtown Toronto.

The WE GLC also offers a number of health and wellness benefits for staff. It has a fully equipped gym, provides yoga, meditation, aerobics and other classes/training, and offers access to physiotherapy (on-site). It has several meal preparation areas and numerous collaboration and socialization zones for staff.

## **Conclusion**

I am often asked by other in the non-profit sector: *what makes WE so successful?*

There are several "on-paper" answers that would answer the question reasonably. As discussed in this study, WE is made up of many world class attributes. From its industry competitive employee benefits program that focusses on health and wellness, to its new state-of-the art headquarters, training and growth opportunities for staff, and myriad other assets, WE is truly on its way to becoming a world-class organization.

As I've also outlined above, the organization and its leaders, like others that have followed WE's steep climb to success, have made mistakes and encountered issues, some of which were of their own making. When an organization moves from 12 employees to over 1,000, operates for over 20 years and has 1400 alumni on four different continents, there will be instances of missteps and mistakes. This is what learning organizations do. They push their mission, learn, and change. For a non-profit in particular, the inherent tensions of managing scarce resources present so many hard decisions on a daily basis. It goes without saying that not all those decisions will be the right ones.

This is compounded when dealing with a workforce whose make-up is 75 percent millennial. It is a unique demographic that can be challenging for employers to invest in and retain as they tend to move from job to job very quickly.

All organizations I've worked with have largely made the same mistakes and confronted similar challenges. What sets the WE organization apart is that it learns from mistakes, corrects them, and moves forward. It is an organization that tries hard not to repeat its mistakes.

Perhaps most importantly, after having spent hundreds of hours in conversation with WE's leaders and staff, it is clear that its co-founders Marc Kielburger's and Craig Kielburger's dedication over more than two decades has earned them the respect and admiration of their employees. Founder-centric, mission-based organizations play an important and unique role in the world. Among them, WE's founders are among the very best I've seen.

## **Appendix: WE Wellness and Professional Support**

### **Personal Health and Wellness**

- In-house fitness center in Toronto with wellness programs like yoga, and meditation.
- Free staff memberships with Goodlife Fitness (Canada outside of Quebec), Energie Cardio (within Quebec), and 24-Hour Fitness (U.S.)
- Expanded health benefits (prescription drugs, dental, massage therapy, etc.)
- Employee-assistance program to support team members' individual mental health

### **Expanded Holidays**

- Employees get their birthday off, and extra vacation days (they don't count against an employees' yearly allotment) during the holiday shutdown between Christmas and the New Year.

### **Training**

- Team members offered TIGNUM "Sustainable High Performance" training workshops.
- Classes and workshops offered regularly on topics like health, nutrition, meditation, yoga, sleep, exercise and overall personal wellbeing.
- Support from an internal HR team focussed on employee learning and development, which facilitates a variety of courses including an intensive training course for new employees, time management skills development, personal health and wellness training, and many others.
- Growth and Success Plans – helps ensure employees are clear on their work expectations and regular check-ins with their managers regarding their career trajectory.
- Junior team members are matched with senior team members who provide mentoring and personal coaching.

### **Professional Development**

- Professional Development fund, for which all staff can apply after one year of employment, offers \$500 toward outside training.
- Professional and personal growth opportunities allow young staff to "grow up" within the organization.
- New annual planning process begins to set both managers and their teams on the path towards understanding wider organizational goals, and how their work helps it to get there.

### **World Class Facilities**

- Newly opened WE Global Learning Centre in Toronto features dedicated space for community functions, offices for staff, and on-site fitness/wellness centre.
- It features fiber-optic internet access to facilitate staff and visitor communications internally and across the world.
- A coffee bar featuring Fairtrade coffee, and a part-time barista. All available at no cost.
- The building's state-of-the-art film and broadcast studios allow WE to broadcast or webcast live video feeds around the world.

## Unique Opportunities

- Chances to travel to visit WE’s projects overseas: staff trips to Kenya, India or Ecuador (on-the-ground costs covered by ME to WE).
- Opportunities to coordinate and travel with a group of young people, other staff or families who are traveling on ME to WE trips (the costs are offset by ME to WE).
- Chances to meet and interact with WE’s celebrity ambassadors, executives leaders and other notable speakers/leaders.
- Opportunities to attend WE Day events and staff parties.
- Through partnerships, WE staff get restaurant, entertainment and shopping offers/discounts.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236474/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://blog.linkedin.com/2016/04/12/will-this-year\\_s-college-grads-job-hop-more-than-previous-grads](https://blog.linkedin.com/2016/04/12/will-this-year_s-college-grads-job-hop-more-than-previous-grads)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/Pages/Millennials-Raises-Promotions-Generations.aspx>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236474/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236474/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx>

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<sup>vii</sup> [https://blog.linkedin.com/2016/04/12/will-this-year\\_s-college-grads-job-hop-more-than-previous-grads](https://blog.linkedin.com/2016/04/12/will-this-year_s-college-grads-job-hop-more-than-previous-grads)

<sup>viii</sup> November 23, 2018 Letter from HR firm *Lee Hecht Harrison Knightsbridge* to Victoria MacDonald, Chief People Office, WE.

<sup>ix</sup> November 19, 2018, letter titled “Employment Policy Compliance Review” from Singh Lamarche LLP, Workplace Advocates, to Victoria MacDonald, Chief People Officer, WE.

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.metowe.com/about-us/faq>

<sup>xi</sup> To enable better efficiency and effectiveness of both the charity and social enterprise, a few functions support both entities. In these teams, the vast majority of staff are paid by and aligned to the entities separately, i.e., ME to WE staff supporting ME to WE and WE Charity Staff supporting WE Charity.

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236474/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx>

<sup>xiii</sup> Conducted using independent third-party employee engagement survey provider, TemboStatus

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236474/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx>

<sup>xv</sup> [blog.linkedin.com/2016/04/12/will-this-year\\_s-college-grads-job-hop-more-than-previous-grads](https://blog.linkedin.com/2016/04/12/will-this-year_s-college-grads-job-hop-more-than-previous-grads)

<sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/Pages/Millennials-Raises-Promotions-Generations.aspx>

<sup>xvii</sup> [https://blog.linkedin.com/2016/04/12/will-this-year\\_s-college-grads-job-hop-more-than-previous-grads](https://blog.linkedin.com/2016/04/12/will-this-year_s-college-grads-job-hop-more-than-previous-grads)

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