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Innovative sustainable culture

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Sheridan

GRAND RAPIDS — Instead of rows of cubicles and dim lights with employees silently clicking away on their computers, Richard Sheridan has created an energized workplace with a non-traditional office environment.

Sheridan is co-founder and CEO of Ann Arbor-based **Menlo Innovations**, a software design and development firm located on the third floor of the Kerrytown building in downtown Ann Arbor.

He gives 10-12 presentations a month around the country about his innovative workplace and was a recent presenter at **The Employers Association** annual human resources conference in Grand Rapids.

"If you walk into our space it's a non-traditional office environment. The entire team is in one big open room," Sheridan told *MiBiz*. "There's no offices, no walls. The next thing people notice is that it's a very noisy, high energy environment."

No one has their own table, chair or computer.

Menlo Innovations employs 60 people, mostly project managers, software developers, quality assurance professionals and specialized high-tech anthropologists. Sheridan said there are two people assigned to one computer working on the same task all day long.

"Pairs of people only work together for a week. Then we switch the pairs and tell them who they're going to pair with. It's a very thoughtful activity," Sheridan said, noting the setup results in increased productivity. "The work they are getting done is phenomenally higher quality. It is a better result than any traditional working environment."

Menlo Innovation's work environment results in less fear in the workplace and greater joy. In an industry plagued by 60-hour workweeks, employees only work 40 hours and never on weekends, which is very unusual for the software industry, Sheridan said.

Ellen Levey, director of organizational development at The Employers Association, said Sheridan was invited to speak because employers are looking for ways to boost employee



PHOTO: RYAN PIETZKE

Employees at Menlo Innovations work with a partner, sharing a computer and working on the same task all day long.

morale and keep employees engaged. She said feedback from Sheridan's presentation was very positive and the 70 participants could find applications to their workplaces.

"He's just doing all the right things," Levey said about Sheridan.

Levey took a tour of Menlo Innovations and noted the sense of community and family.

"There were sets of tables built around projects — everything is out in the open," Levey said.

It's an atmosphere of no backstabbing and employees learning to trust each other and work together.

Sheridan, who started the company in 2001, said he has been leading teams using this methodology for 10 years including two years as VP of product development at an Ann Arbor technical company. Sheridan utilizes a very unique interviewing process to find people who can work in this type of environment. A white paper on his interviewing process is available at www.menloinnovations.com.

"First of all we invite about 50 people in for a mass interview, and we pair people during the interview to simulate the work environment," Sheridan said.

Two people competing for the same position are paired and given a task to work on. The two, who don't know each other, work on the common task and then are observed about how they interact.

"We're simply watching to see how good a collaborator you are. Your job is to make your partner look good," Sheridan said.

It's an interesting dynamic because one job candidate has to help the other job candidate get the job.

After 20 minutes, the pairs are switched and the job seekers are given another task for 20 minutes.

"We do that three times in total and then we send you home," Sheridan said.

Afterward, the 25 observers talk about what they saw.

Sheridan said he can teach basic skills like computer science all day long, but what he's really looking for is good kindergarten skills — playing well with others, no hitting and scratching — the type of thing you want to see in kindergarteners.

Many other workplaces have adopted some of Menlo Innovations' practices.

"It often starts with a tour. They hear about us. They read about us and then climb in an airplane and get in a car and come and visit," Sheridan said.

"We give people permission to think differently about how to approach the problems with their team," he said.

The process can be applied to any industry. Sheridan has helped guide life insurance companies, healthcare organizations and he plans to talk to some cancer researchers who are similarly intrigued about the process and methodology.

Menlo Innovations also offers a one-day class and a five-day boot camp in Ann Arbor taught in the same room where the work is going on.

"They don't sense the noise as much as they sense the energy. It's literally an energizing type of environment," Sheridan said. **MiBiz**

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