



## Piston Cloud Computing, Inc.

San Francisco, California, US



**For its new headquarters, San Francisco-based software company Piston Cloud Computing, Inc. went beyond the typical perks offered by Silicon Valley start-ups and created an open space where diverse teams of engineers, salespeople, and others can work creatively and have fun together.**

In a town and an industry where catered lunches and office cocktails are cost-of-entry, software company Piston Cloud Computing, Inc., has managed to cultivate a unique culture in its San Francisco headquarters. Its refreshingly novel salvo in Silicon Valley's ongoing my-corporate-culture-is-hipper-than-yours debate is built upon the premise that when you treat people like family, it has a positive impact on your talent acquisition and retention efforts.

"When you're part of a family, you almost always have some sort of thing—a ritual, an inside joke—that you associate with that family," says Christopher MacGown, Piston co-founder and Chief Technical Officer. "For members of my family, it was always

## Case Study



The bookshelves in Piston's lounge house board games, vintage books, plants, a record player, and other elements that add to the homey feel.

important that our family name is never pronounced with three syllables.” For the record, that’s *Mac-Gown*, not *Mac-Gow-An*.

“It’s these weird little identifiers that allow you to trick your brain into saying, ‘All of these people are part of my tribe.’ And so here, we look at our team as one big tribe or family. So a lot of our culture is just that—this is my team, these are my people, I want to do everything I can to support them, and I want them to feel the same way.”

Piston’s family quirks include dressy hats from San Francisco’s famed Goorin Brothers hat shop, which are given to new hires as welcome gifts, and Fancy Fridays (a counterpoint to the Casual Friday cliché), which provide staff with a regular occasion for wearing their Goorin Brothers chapeaus. According to MacGown, the Fancy Fridays idea started in the company’s earliest days—back in 2011—when he and co-founders Joshua McKenty and Gretchen Curtis operated out of the Victorian apartment where MacGown and McKenty then lived.

“Josh, Gretchen, and I were sitting in what was the living room one morning, talking about what kind of company we were going to build, and one of us asked if we should have Casual Fridays,” MacGown recalls. “We all looked at each other—Josh and I were still in our pajamas—and we concluded that if we got any more casual, someone was not going to be wearing pants. So we decided to go in the total opposite direction, and Fancy Fridays were born.”

Other less formal Piston traditions range from 1980s movie nights and employee art shows to an ongoing search for the best (worst?) punster in the office. According to Curtis, Piston’s Chief Marketing Officer, it’s all part of a concerted effort to encourage experimentation and playfulness.

“Creativity is a muscle that you have to work out just like any other,” Curtis says. “If we want employees to think creatively to solve really hard technology problems, we need to create a culture where creativity is celebrated.”

## Case Study

Piston software helps organizations such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Swisscom, Qualcomm, Zulily, and King Digital Entertainment automate the management of private cloud infrastructure in their own data centers. Because the code is so advanced, Piston engineers are constantly troubleshooting, looking for creative ways to solve problems for customers.

With a 2014 move into a 4,000-square-foot space in San Francisco's Union Square District—just one block from its previous headquarters—Piston is doing even more to foster its creative culture. The workspaces are arranged in an open layout. It was a welcome change from the company's previous office, which featured a wall that physically divided the engineering and marketing teams.

"When we moved here it was a huge breath of fresh air," MacGown says. "With the space being so open, people are now more willing to come talk to each other without feeling like they were encroaching on each other's territory."

Another difference is the lack of a formal conference room. This was eliminated in favor of a large, comfortable lounge area. At any time of day, engineers, salespeople, marketers, or other members of Piston's 50-person team can be found using that space for informal meetings or just to socialize. "There's a marvelous cross-pollination of ideas when you have engineers



A bubble lamp designed by George Nelson, former Herman Miller Director of Design, floats above an Eames Table and Shell Chairs in Piston's meeting space.



Inside Piston's headquarters in San Francisco's Union Square District, workspaces are arranged in an open layout that brings together various teams—engineering, marketing, sales, and more—to facilitate communication and interaction.

mingling with salespeople, customer support, marketing, and finance," Curtis says.

Herman Miller was brought onto the project at Curtis' request. Self-described as being "furniture design-obsessed," she bought her first Herman Miller piece—a red Eames® Sofa Compact—when she was 21. For the Piston offices, she and the team went with Aeron® Chairs as the primary work chair, but another Eames classic—Molded Fiberglass Shell Chairs—can also be found throughout the space. "There really wasn't a question of where we'd go (for furniture)," she says.

The Piston formula—treating people like family and giving them a space that supports their creativity—seems to be working. In 2014, the *San Francisco Business Times* and *Silicon Valley Business Journal* named Piston one of the Top 10 places to work in the region.



# Case Study

## Industry

Technology

## Topics

Brand

Ergonomics

Small and Medium Business

## Applications

Collaboration

Open Office

## Project Scope

4,000 square feet

## Herman Miller Products

Canvas Office Landscape®

Aeron Chairs

Eames Molded Fiberglass


Side Chairs

Eames Tables

## Year Completed

2014

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From the moment they launched their software company, Piston Cloud Computing, Inc., Gretchen Curtis, co-founder and CMO, Joshua McKenty, co-founder, and Christopher MacGown, co-founder and CTO, were cognizant of the type of creative corporate culture they wanted to cultivate.