



What Makes A Workplace GREAT?

GREAT PLACES TO WORK CAN OUTPERFORM COMPETITORS, BUT ACHIEVING SUCCESS IS NOT EASY

BY SAMUEL GREENGARD



Cn a list of things that are important in life, a great place to work can rank high. The ability to make a difference and feel good about a job are often at the center of happiness and self-worth. What is more, when people and companies do great things, the impact on society can be remarkable. In the engineering industry, happy and satisfied workers often lead to improved productivity, greater innovation, higher-quality projects and better bottom line results.



7 Essential Habits of a Great Employer

- 1 A CULTURE OF RESPECT.** The organization treats employees like adults, it allows them to make important decisions, women and minorities are valued and there is an emphasis on communication and collaboration—particularly across generations.
- 2 A COMMON SENSE OF PURPOSE.** Employees feel they are collectively and individually doing important work and making a difference in the world.
- 3 A SENSE OF CAMARADERIE.** People enjoy working together. They support one another and cover each other's backs.
- 4 WORKERS FEEL APPRECIATED.** Employees feel recognized and rewarded adequately for their efforts. This may take the form of recognition dinners, social events, awards and a culture where "thank you" is often said.
- 5 STAFF FEEL SUPPORTED.** Innovation is encouraged. Mistakes are allowed. Employees feel they can take a vacation without worry about their job or the work they manage.
- 6 ALLEVIATING STRESS.** Excellent benefits—health insurance, retirement benefits, education reimbursement, professional development opportunities—allow employees to eliminate stress and focus on doing great work.
- 7 WORK IS FUN.** It is really simple: When an organization meets all of the above criteria and people engage in work they like with people they like, they have fun. The result is a net gain for everyone involved.

Yet, becoming a best place to work is no simple task. "There are numerous factors that contribute to a company becoming a great employer," says Deb Phillips, president of WFD Consulting, a firm that specializes in helping companies align their values with business and human resources practices. "Culture, benefits and the programs an organization has in place all contribute to the framework and outlook of the people who work there. They determine whether people are truly satisfied and happy."

What does it take to be a best employer? What are the challenges and the benefits? And what does it really mean for a firm to be recognized as a special place to work?

Although the recipe is different for every organization, it is clear that great employers share certain essential qualities and provide programs and benefits that distinguish them from the rest of the pack. The result, says Melissa Wood, chief administrative officer for Burns & McDonnell, is an "atmosphere that produces benefits and gains for everyone."

COMPETITIVE GAINS

The idea of creating a great place to work is appealing on several levels. For one thing, it is reasonable to assume that happy employees perform better than unhappy employees. When people feel appreciated and are fully engaged, they are more likely to deliver maximum effort. Additionally, firms that stand out as best employers often gain an advantage in recruiting and retaining talent. Finally, there is the idea that it contributes to a more positive and fun place to work.

"When people care about each other and they pull together for each other, you breed a culture of success," says Dan Williams, president and CEO of Garver, which ranked No. 1 in Zweig Group's "2018 Best Firms to Work For" list.

In fact, studies support the notion that best employers outperform competitors. The study "Are the Great Places to Work Also Great Performers?," conducted by Eric C. Romero, a business professor at the University of Texas, found the additional cost of supporting programs and initiatives to create a great place to work provided "a unique and sustainable competitive advantage for companies." What is more, after sifting through data from *Fortune's* "100 Best Companies to Work for in America," Romero found that stocks and overall financial returns of best employers significantly outperformed others. "The time and money spent to create and support positive employee relations are a worthwhile investment," he concluded.

"There are both financial benefits and intangible benefits that do not necessarily show up on a profit and loss statement," says Wood, whose firm, Burns & McDonnell, ranked No. 8 in *Fortune's* 2017 Consulting and Professional Services category



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DAN WILLIAMS
GARVER

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and No. 50 in the publication's "Top 100 Best Companies to Work For" list. "Spending money on benefits such as wellness and health care and focusing on a culture that performs well pays dividends many times over."

"You attract the best talent, and they become ambassadors for your company and help make the firm more appealing to clients," adds Williams.

DOLLARS AND SENSE

Top-tier employers differentiate themselves in a number of ways. One of the most important is through benefits and programs. These may take the form of health care benefits, wellness, retirement plans, leave policies and personal time off (PTO), flextime, educational opportunities and a variety of special programs and perks. "An organization does not have to be a 10 in every category to stand out as a best employer, but they do need to differentiate the organization in some way and appeal to the things employees desire," says Phillips.

At Garver, which has about 500 employees spread across 25 offices in 11 states, an employee support program is built around work, health and overall employee wellness. The firm has on-site exercise facilities and flexible work arrangements. It also focuses on issues such as stress management, conflict and dispute resolution, addiction, grief support, suicide prevention, premarital counseling, marriage support, bereavement support and more. Williams says the framework is built on a belief that



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MELISSA WOOD
BURNS & MCDONNELL

Garver is at its best when employees are equipped with the essential resources to thrive. "We consistently hear from employees that they greatly appreciate these benefits and view them extremely favorably," he says.

Traffic Planning and Design, Inc. (TPD), also offers a wide range of benefits. These include 401(k) matching, education reimbursements and rewards based on company success. What is more, a flextime program allows employees to set their own schedules. "If people want to attend their child's soccer game or they have a dentist appointment or parent they need to tend to, there are no questions asked. The focus is on accountability

and keeping everyone informed," says Elyse Conti, marketing manager for TPD. Salaried employees can also bank comp time for time worked over 40 hours each week, which can be used for vacations and PTO. The company employee focuses on disconnecting and recharging while away from the office. "We encourage people to avoid contacting someone on vacation unless it is an emergency. This helps our staff to be present with their families while away versus focusing on what is going on at the office in their absence."

A focus on work-life balance is also at the center of thinking at Burns & McDonnell, which has around 6,000 employees across 50 office locations. For example, an employee who exhausts PTO can receive an advance of up to 40 hours, the company offers liberal family and medical leave, and it provides generous health and medical benefits, including a wellness program that offers financial rewards when employees meet certain criteria. The firm also has on-site exercise facilities, child care, a coffee bar and a pharmacy at its headquarters. Finally, as an employee-owned company, Burns & McDonnell contributes to the employee stock ownership plan, which is then disbursed to eligible employee owners. "There are no shortcuts to becoming a best place to work. Everything is connected," says Wood.

"Stellar benefits translate directly into content and productive employees," says Jill Capelli, a vice president at Kimley-Horn, ranked No. 1 by *Forbes* in 2018 under the Consulting and Professional Services category, and No. 11 in 2017 in the overall



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JILL CAPELLI
KIMLEY-HORN

"Top 100 Best Companies to Work For" list. The employee-owned firm, with more than 3,000 people at 80 U.S. offices, serves up a dizzying array of perks and programs, including zero premium health care for single employees, flextime work, tuition reimbursement, 200 percent matching on the first 4 percent of employee 401(k) contributions and additional profit sharing that equates to about 18 percent of salary. It also offers extensive in-house training, professional development and a program that supports women. Overall, 97 percent of the company's employees think their workplace is great, and 99 percent take pride in their work.

One advantage for best employers is the ability to create an environment where employees feel supported and comfortable sharing their ideas, concerns and questions.

"Creating an inclusive environment, where everyone's voice matters and is valued leads to more diverse viewpoints, leads



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“When people feel appreciated and respected—when they feel as though they work in an inclusive environment—everyone wins.”

DEB PHILLIPS
WFD CONSULTING

to better results, better solutions for clients, better internal programs for our employees and stronger financial outcomes,” says Keri Kocur, chief people officer at VHB, a 1,350-employee civil engineering firm that was ranked No. 23 in Zweig Group’s “2017 Best Firms to Work For” list.

VHB works to distinguish itself by creating an open and honest culture, establishing a sense of inclusion and providing strong benefits. This includes everything from a wellness program and flexible work time and spaces to the VHB Sons and Daughters Scholarship program.

The firm uses industry benchmarking and a focus on core values and creativity to identify and refine benefits and programs. For example, VHB has developed walking maps of its offices and

surrounding grounds so employees can get extra steps in during the day.

Finally, in order to ratchet up engagement, “We partner with our employees to create individual career paths that meet their goals and interests as well as VHB’s business objectives,” says Kocur.

CULTURE COUNTS

Great places to work also fashion a culture where people are happy and engaged. Phillips says this can take many forms at WFD Consulting, from a work environment that is more diverse and inclusive to one that celebrates wins large and small—with a focus on people. Best workplaces also find ways to address generational friction, such as communication styles and technology preferences. “When people feel appreciated and respected—when they feel as though they work in an inclusive environment—everyone wins,” says Phillips.

One way Burns & McDonnell strives to build a stronger culture is by holding town hall style events for all employees and encouraging offices outside the world headquarters to have their own meetings, celebrations and charitable projects. This can range from a barbecue or ice cream social to volunteering at a food pantry together as a team. “It sounds like a cliché, but our philosophy is to work hard and play hard,” says Wood.

Supporting employees emotionally and practically is at the center of developing a strong culture, according to Williams. As a result, Garver gives engineers and other professionals autonomy to make decisions, the management team takes all input and suggestions seriously, it encourages professionals to experiment and make some mistakes and the firm has created a framework that minimizes egos and office politics. Team leaders also are responsible for building their own teams, developing business plans and directing investments. “There is a sense of purpose and empowerment,” says Williams.

In fact, best employers often build support mechanisms into their cultural framework. At Kimley-Horn, employees can generate \$50 on-the-spot bonuses if they believe someone has done something exceptional that revolves around teamwork. “Anyone in the company can give the award to anyone else. It is a great motivator and a great empowerment tool,” says Capelli. Likewise, people can use a “lunch coupon” to meet up with other professionals and discuss everything from projects to career paths. The company also encourages engineers to pursue areas of passion and focus on the types of projects—and even specific clients—they are most interested in. “There is a huge amount of flexibility,” says Capelli.

To be sure, the benefits of becoming a best employer are clear: These firms typically outperform industry benchmarks for recruiting, retention and profits. They create workplaces where people feel appreciated and where clients feel more connected—and see tangible differences in projects.

“If you roll back what it takes to be a great place to work, the common denominator is a place where people feel they are doing something meaningful, a place where they feel appreciated and a place where they can advance their careers,” says Phillips. ■

Samuel Greengard is a technology writer based in West Linn, Oregon.



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