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### **What Makes a Best Company ‘Best’?**

A recent article in *HR Magazine* listed the best small (50 – 250 employees) and medium (251 – 999 employees) companies to work for in America. The number one small company was Badger Mining Corporation in Berlin. Other small Wisconsin companies that made the list include Runzheimer International in Rochester and Kahler Slater in Milwaukee. Medium Wisconsin companies on the list were Stark Investments of St. Francis, Acuity in Sheboygan and InPro Corporation in Muskego. We should all be proud that Wisconsin was so well represented!

But what distinguishes these companies? What makes them ‘best’? Clearly there is no one factor or universal approach they all take that makes these companies great places to work. The activities and policies in place range from the obvious, e.g. profit sharing, training opportunities and recognition awards, to the unusual, e.g. fun committees, a gourmet cafeteria or planting a tree for each new employee. A few of the benefits these companies offer can be expensive, such as paying up to \$25,000 for a Master’s degree or employee trips. Others may not cost a dime, such as offering flexible work schedules or encouraging an open-door policy.

However, in looking at what these companies do, a few common themes emerge. First, these companies show appreciation for their employees. Whether in the form of an Employee Appreciation Week with catered breakfasts, contests and prizes; quarterly employee awards for innovative ideas and customer service; or simple “Thank You” lunches, employees know their efforts are valued and appreciated by the company and its leaders.

Second, these companies place a great deal of emphasis on education and continued training. Educational reimbursements are common and are not always for work-related courses. On-going training is offered to keep skills up-to-date and individual mentoring and professional development is provided to help existing employees reach their full potential.

Third, companies utilize the additional education and training employees receive by looking to them for new ideas. The best companies focus on innovation, hold brainstorming sessions and actively solicit employee ideas through “town meetings” or encouraging employees to post suggestions on the company’s intranet. In addition, these companies share the wealth with their employees through shared ownership, profit sharing, stock options, bonuses or other types of monetary rewards.

Stressing a work/life balance, having an accessible executive team, offering in-company services such as a wellness center, developing a team culture, treating employees with respect and making the workplace fun are just a few of the additional perks the best companies offer. Clearly a ‘best’ company does not have to implement all these initiatives to be great. However, if you are experiencing high turnover or low morale that is negatively impacting your company’s productivity and profitability, now may be the time to make your company a better (if not the best) place to work.

*\* Portions of this article are based on the feature “Best Small & Medium Companies to Work for in America” published in the July, 2007 issue of HR Magazine.*

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