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2009
**Best Places
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2009 Best Places to Work

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On the cover: (Top) Dave Regan of Booz Allen Hamilton juggles while Patrick O'Conner, far left, Leslie Doody and Cal Jumper watch. (Bottom) The staff of PMOLink; seated, from left: Tonia Griffin, Geoff Hingle and Blake Powell. Standing, from left: Georgine Berthelot, Peter Burk, Courtney Rive, Ken Buck, Lee Pearson and Tim Butler. (Photos by Frank Aymami)

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Associate Publisher: Lisa Blossman
Managing Editor: Greg LaRose
News Editor: Christian Moises
Associate Editor: Autumn C. Giusti
Art Director: Alex Borges
Photography: Frank Aymami, Shannon Diecidue, Tracie Morris Schaefer
Account Executives: Liz Baldini, Jeanne Farrell-Bindewald, Monique Brignac, Cassie Foreman, Dani Mattek, Coco Judd, Jaclyn Raymond
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CITY BUSINESS
2009 Best Places
to Work

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INTRODUCTION:

Best Places find simple ways to outsmart the economy

By **Autumn C. Giusti**
Associate Editor

As the recession trudges on, employers are finding it harder and harder just to make payroll. So maintaining a healthy level of employee morale is no small task.

The 2009 Best Places to Work honorees continue to meet that challenge.

There were still some honorees that continued to wow their employees with fat salaries, free college tuition, dollar-for-dollar retirement plan matching and fully paid health care plans.

But simplicity also went a long way for this year's Best Places to Work.

Some companies went out of their way to avoid layoffs even as their competitors thinned their ranks. Others offered a few extra vacation days in lieu of raises. And in New Orleans style, businesses built camaraderie by ordering food for staff members or watching Saints games together.

For the past two years, CityBusiness has partnered with the Human Resources Management Association's New Orleans chap-

ter to select the area's top companies. To maintain objectivity, HRMA members whose companies submitted nominations recused themselves from the selection process.

HRMA also helped us fine-tune the scoring system used to help determine which companies make the cut. The system is based on benefits including salary, health care, paid time off and employee programs, coupled with an employee satisfaction survey.

We conducted our employee survey entirely online this year, which allowed us to gauge the morale of more workers from each company.

We also sought out firms offering intangible perks, such as team-building and morale-boosting programs, receptive managers and fun office activities. (Wii Bowling, anyone?)

The outcome was 35 large and 15 small businesses.

Based on the U.S. Small Business Administration's definition, large businesses have 50 or more employees. Companies that are part of larger corporations but have fewer than 50 New Orleans employees fall under the large

businesses category in Best Places to Work.

Leading this year's large companies are: 1. Booz Allen Hamilton, 2. North Oaks Health System and 3. ReadSoft. Leading the small companies are: 1. PMOLink, 2. Heller Draper and 3. Perez.

Adding new faces to the mix, 13 newcomers joined this year's honorees: Pan American Life Insurance Group, Quest Diagnostics, Randa Accessories, Taste Buds Management, The New Orleans Hornets, University of Phoenix Louisiana Campus, Fleur de Lis Financial/MassMutual, Hal Collums Construction/Central City Millworks, Perez, PPOplus, Shell New Orleans Federal Credit Union, The Receivables Exchange, United States Risk Management.

Two companies, West Jefferson Medical Center and Zehnder Communications, have been on the Best Places list since the publication's inception in 2003.

Congratulations to the 2009 Best Places to Work honorees. Their commitment to employees during tough times sends a strong message to their staffs and the New Orleans business community. •

CityBUSINESS

Best Places to Work

Past honorees

2008 HONOREES

Large businesses

1. Harrah's New Orleans Casino & Hotel
2. North Oaks Health System
3. West Jefferson Medical Center
- Adams and Reese
- Booz Allen Hamilton
- Broadpoint
- Coventry Health Care of Louisiana
- Cox New Orleans
- Deutsch, Kerrigan & Stiles
- Diamond Data Systems
- Dickie Brennan & Co.
- Durr Heavy Construction
- Eagan Insurance Agency
- East Jefferson General Hospital
- Gilsbar
- Gregory C. Rigamer & Associates
- Hilton New Orleans Riverside
- Jones Walker
- Louisiana Medical Mutual Insurance Co.
- LaPorte Sehrt Romig Hand
- McGlinchey Stafford
- Ochsner Health System
- Omni Royal Orleans Hotel
- Peoples Health
- Phelps Dunbar
- Planet Beach Franchising
- Pool Corp.
- The Ralph Brennan Restaurant Group
- ReadSoft
- Slidell Memorial Hospital & Medical Center
- St. Tammany Parish Hospital
- Superior Energy Services
- Touro Infirmary
- Tulane University
- Walton Construction Co.

Small businesses

1. PMOLink
2. Wolfe Law Group
3. Chopin, Wagar, Richard & Kutcher
- Creative Engineering Group
- Deveney Communication
- Gauthier, Houghtaling & Williams
- Hartwig Moss Insurance Agency
- Heller Draper Hayden Patrick & Horn
- I-Assure
- Loubat Equipment Co.
- Louisiana Restaurant Association

- Morgan + Company
Rimkus Consulting Group
Schafer Group
Zehnder Communications

2007 HONOREES

Large businesses

1. Deutsch, Kerrigan & Stiles
2. ReadSoft
3. Phelps Dunbar
4. Diamond Data Systems
5. Frilot
6. Superior Energy Services
7. Booz Allen Hamilton
8. Adams and Reese
9. Planet Beach Franchising
10. St. Tammany Parish Hospital
11. DonahueFavret Contractors
12. Coventry Health Care of Louisiana
13. Louisiana Medical Mutual Insurance Co.
14. Broadpoint
15. LaPorte Sehrt Romig Hand
16. Postlethwaite & Netterville
17. Ochsner Health System
18. East Jefferson General Hospital
19. West Jefferson Medical Center
20. Peoples Health
21. Touro Infirmary
22. Walton Construction Co.
23. Tulane Medical Center
24. Hilton New Orleans Riverside
25. Durr Heavy Construction
26. John Ehret High School
27. Benjamin Franklin High School
28. Strategic Employee Benefit Services of Louisiana
29. Dickie Brennan & Co.
30. Ralph Brennan Restaurant Group
31. Harrah's New Orleans Casino & Hotel
32. McGlinchey Stafford
33. Louisiana Public Health Institute
34. Toyota of New Orleans
35. Stewart Enterprises

Small businesses

1. Ellsworth Corp.
2. I-Assure
3. PMOLink
4. Louisiana Restaurant Association

5. Trumpet
6. Morgan + Company
7. Southern United States Trade Association
8. Deveney Communication
9. Zehnder Communications
10. Riverwalk Marketplace
11. Signature Destination Management
12. Hartwig Moss Insurance Agency
13. Johnson Johnson Barrios & Yacoubian
14. Design the Planet
15. Advanced Imaging Solutions

2006 HONOREES

Large businesses

1. Ochsner Health System
2. Adams and Reese
3. West Jefferson Medical Center
4. Gilsbar
5. Omni Bank
6. East Jefferson General Hospital
7. St. Tammany Parish Hospital
8. Deutsch Kerrigan & Stiles
9. Touro Infirmary
10. Harrah's Casino and Hotel
11. Booz Allen Hamilton
12. Phelps Dunbar
13. PetroCom
14. Ralph Brennan Restaurant Group
15. Peoples Health
16. Dickie Brennan and Company
17. Diamond Data Systems
18. Stone Pigman Walther Wittmann
19. Frilot Partridge
20. Cox Communications
21. Hilton New Orleans Riverside
22. Peter A. Mayer Advertising
23. Superior Energy Services
24. Durr Heavy Construction
- 25 (tie). Vinson Guard Services
- 25 (tie). First NBC

Small businesses

1. PMOLink
2. Zehnder Communications
3. Ellsworth Corp.
4. Belladonna Day Spa
5. Trumpet Advertising
6. Chopin, Wagar, Richard & Kutcher
7. River Marine Management

8. Keating Magee
9. Deveney Communication
10. Robert Berning Productions
11. Free Gulliver
12. International House Hotel
13. Loubat Equipment
14. Industrial Products Ltd.
15. Aesthetic Surgical Associates

2005 HONOREES

1. Ochsner Clinic Foundation
2. Adams and Reese
3. Kenner Regional Medical Center
4. West Jefferson Medical Center
5. Zehnder Communications
6. East Jefferson General Hospital
7. Albert-Garaudy and Associates
8. Ralph Brennan Restaurant Group
9. Omni Bank
10. Deveney Communication
11. Deutsch, Kerrigan and Stiles
12. Hibernia National Bank
13. FARA
14. Apogon Technologies
15. St. Tammany Parish Hospital
16. Keating Magee
17. McGlinchey Stafford
18. River Marine Management
19. Landscape Images
20. Free Gulliver

2004 HONOREES

1. Kenner Regional Medical Center
2. Adams and Reese
3. PMOLink
4. Zehnder Communications
5. Landscape Images
6. Salco Management
7. West Jefferson Medical Center
8. Harrah's Casino New Orleans
9. Banner Chevrolet
10. PetroCom
11. Gilsbar
12. Peter A. Mayer Advertising
13. McGlinchey Stafford
14. Ralph Brennan Restaurant Group
15. Cannon Cochran Management Services
16. Free Gulliver

17. Stone Pigman Walther Wittmann
18. Edward Jones Investments
19. Correro Fishman Haygood Phelps Walmsley and Casteix
20. Banner Ford

2003 HONOREES

1. Zehnder Communications
2. Ochsner Clinic Foundation
3. Kenner Regional Medical Center
4. Newtown and Associates
5. West Jefferson Medical Center
6. Diamond Data Systems
7. Peter A. Mayer Advertising
8. Harrah's Casino New Orleans
9. Gilsbar
10. Correro Fishman Haygood Phelps Walmsley and Casteix
11. The Montalbano Group
12. Salco Management
13. PetroCom
14. PMOLink
15. Ralph Brennan Restaurant Group
16. McGlinchey Stafford
17. Franco's Athletic Club
18. American Nursing Services Inc.
19. Ruth's Chris Steak House
20. New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau
21. Vinson Guard Service
22. Lambeth House Continuing Care Retirement Community
23. Harvey Press
24. Omni Bank
25. Hibernia National Bank
26. Natives Landscape Corp.
27. Stone Pigman Walther Wittmann
28. Banner Chevrolet
29. Entergy Corp.
30. Mr. B's Bistro
31. Eustis Engineering Co.
32. Where Y at Magazine
33. Professional Construction Services
34. The Rose Garden
35. Our Lady of Holy Cross College
36. Pel Hughes Printing
37. Gage Telephone Systems of New Orleans



Photo by Frank Aymami

From left: Booz Allen Hamilton employees Patrick O'Conner, Leslie Doody, Cal Jumper and Dave Regan take a bubble break at their Metairie office.

FOUR-TIME HONOREE

Booz Allen Hamilton

Team work isn't just for tackling work projects.

So goes the theory at Booz Allen Hamilton's New Orleans office, said Ed Ferrell, who heads the consulting firm's local branch.

Take, for instance, the Fun Times Committee, which organizes dinners, holiday parties, picnics and other events. Or the Workforce Leadership Council, which coordinates brown bag lunches, arranges professional development training and encourages the staff to submit ideas for after-hours socializing and community service.

"The New Orleans office is very involved with the Ronald McDonald House, where on a monthly basis we bring and serve meals," Ferrell said.

A higher standard of employee benefits is a hallmark of Booz Allen, which has been named as one of the 100 Best Companies to Work For by Fortune magazine and one of the 100 Best Companies for Working Mothers by Working Mother magazine.

For two decades, the firm has contributed an amount equal to 10 percent of each employee's total pay into a retirement plan, regardless of what the employee puts in.

The company also offers \$5,000 a year in tuition assistance to employees continuing their education. In addition, employees who want to become certified in a particular area can receive a \$2,500 allowance.

Ferrell, a senior associate who has been with Booz Allen for nine years, said the company's

Nature of business: strategy and technology consulting

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 24

Average starting salary: \$70,000

Median salary: \$88,000

Average employment time: four years

Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, unmarried partner benefits, paid maternity and paternity leave, 401(k) with 10 percent contribution by employer regardless of employee contribution, continuing education program, day care options, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 21

Web site: www.boozallen.com

training and continuing education programs are among its most outstanding benefits.

"We have a great internal training program and access to classes online that allow you to stay abreast and develop new skill sets and expertise beyond what you get from on-the-job training," Ferrell said.

Leslie Thompson, a senior consultant who works on Base Realignment and Closure projects for the Marine Forces Reserve, said her

position at Booz Allen offers both familiarity and an opportunity for change.

"I have been a military wife ... so this is a very comfortable environment for me to be in," said Thompson, who worked for a construction general contractor before joining Booz Allen less than a year ago. "I love the fact that it's structured, but I also get to meet a lot of new people and learn some interesting things."

Thompson said she enjoys being able to tailor her workday to the Marine Corps' schedule.

"I can work when they're here," she said. "It's not a traditional 9-to-5 job."

Cal Jumper, an associate who has been with Booz Allen for a little more than a year, said training opportunities and dedication to creating a good work-life balance were two major draws for him.

"When you need to work, you work hard but get it done in a reasonable amount of time and take care of other things like family," Jumper said, describing the workplace attitude.

Jumper arrived at Booz Allen after retiring from active duty with the Marine Corps. He works in the area of aviation process improvement for the Marines, primarily for its Reserves division.

"An opportunity came up to continue working with the Marine Corps on (Department of Defense)-related issues, and it was a nice fit," Jumper said. •

— Sonya Stinson



Above: Bruce France, left, and Leslie Doody reign over the Booz Allen office while employees are out in the field. A large number of employees take advantage of flexible work arrangements and telecommuting.



Left: Patrick O'Conner, left, and Leslie Doody share their coffee with a remnant of Carnivals past. The company's Fun Times Committee organizes dinners, holiday parties, picnics and other events throughout the year.

TWO-TIME HONOREE

North Oaks Health System

It's not surprising that many North Oaks Health System employees would tout the level of care the Hammond medical center provides its patients. But Freddy Anthony has many frames of reference to support his opinion.

Anthony began working at North Oaks in 1991 as a radiology transporter but left for three years for a position that allowed him to tour hospitals throughout the country. He has since returned to Hammond as a diagnostics coordinator.

"Obviously, you see where I am today," Anthony said. "I came right back to North Oaks. I honestly don't think anybody does it as well as North Oaks does it, and by 'it,' I mean health care."

That's a sentiment echoed by Debora Jones, a diabetes education coordinator who has worked for North Oaks for nearly three years.

"I've met so many caring people and people who do want to make a difference for their clients, for the patients," she said. "And that's been important to me."

Jones is tasked with training patients on how to live with and prevent complications from diabetes.

"I love what I do," Jones said. "When you have enthusiasm for a job, I think that transfers on to your clients, on to the patients, and they see that you really care about them. I think



Registered nurse Darlene Blades works with patient Rita Kropog in the cardiac rehabilitation unit of North Oaks Health System.

Nature of business: health care/hospital organization
Where based: Hammond
Employees: 2,115
Average starting salary: \$55,390
Median salary: \$50,773
Average employment time: six years
Benefits: health care with 72 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, retirement plan with up to 6 percent match, paid maternity and paternity leave, continuing education, day care options, telecommuting, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program, fitness program, subsidized meals
Wait time for benefits: none
Paid days off: 46
Web site: www.northoaks.org

that's what makes the difference. Then they want to take those steps to hopefully make some changes in their lives."

North Oaks offers an extensive benefits package and thousands of dollars in incentives for employees who refer applicants for full-time positions. But employees say one of the best benefits is North Oaks' generous bank of paid days off — up to 46 a year.

Other perks include tuition assistance and an onsite gym. Judy Brewer, an executive assistant, said one of her favorite benefits is North Oaks' day care center.

"I have an 18-month-old grandson, and I get the benefit of putting him in our day care facility," said Brewer. "He loves going there. He

enjoys playing with all the other kids, and I think it's very exceptional that they allow the grandparents to bring their grandchildren there."

Anthony applauded the steps taken to recognize employees. North Oaks has several ways of honoring workers. Supervisors or co-workers can initiate that recognition.

"I think at the core of all of us, we just want to be recognized," Anthony said. "Everybody wants to be recognized for a job well done. And I think at North Oaks, they do that. You're recognized not only for a job well done, but there's a tremendous opportunity for advancement within the North Oaks family." •

— Ryan Chatelain



Donning dwarf outfits for ReadSoft's Halloween party, Mark Uranza, left, Bob Kay and Joe D'Amico play foosball while Dawn Barnett, dressed as Snow White, watches the game.

ReadSoft

ReadSoft employees aren't shy about getting ahead of the boss.

At least that's the case in their company exercise contest.

"The competition this year is 'Leave Bob Behind in 2009,' with me being Bob," said President Bob Fresneda.

If employees work out more than Fresneda in a three-month period, they receive a \$150 American Express gift card, plus \$50 toward the company's gym equipment fund.

The office's spirit of competitiveness extends from keeping fit to winning Fortune 500 customers, Fresneda said.

"We're a technology company, so we move at a very high pace," he said.

Workplace wellness is serious business at ReadSoft. The company pays 100 percent of employees' health care expenses, meaning workers pay nothing out of pocket.

"I want them to go get wellness checkups," Fresneda said. "I want them to be in the best possible shape. ... The worst thing that can happen is to lose a valuable employee because they're sick."

Sheila Heintz, an accountant who joined ReadSoft in 2005 shortly after Hurricane

Katrina, recalls that during a personal health crisis, her managers and co-workers showed their caring side. When Heintz was confined to seven months of bed rest during a recent pregnancy, she was allowed to work from home. Co-workers set up a laptop and printer for her and dropped off files from the office.

"Having that as a distraction from just sitting was wonderful, but having everybody help was amazing," Heintz says.

Support engineer Jay St. Pierre said all employees benefit from the company's sensitivity to their individual needs.

"They give you the flexibility if something occurs with your family or you need to work different hours," St. Pierre said.

St. Pierre, who does troubleshooting for implementation of a German financial application system, said ReadSoft managers have encouraged him to expand his skills.

"Not only am I allowed to do the support work that I do, but I also do cross training, working on some projects with our consultants and developers," St. Pierre said. "We are able to take any training classes that we need to enhance our skills."

Heinz initially signed on as a temporary

Nature of business: software development

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 520 worldwide, 42 in Metairie

Average starting salary: \$70,000

Median salary: \$88,000

Average employment time: five years

Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, dental and prescription plans, paid maternity and paternity leave, 401(k) with 25 percent match, continuing education, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: 30 days

Paid days off: 35

Web site: www.readsoft.com

worker when her former employer, Ruth's Chris Steak House, moved its New Orleans headquarters to Orlando, Fla. Her position has since expanded from assistant to the controller to providing expertise in sales taxes, financial reporting and other areas.

Play time for ReadSoft employees includes activities such as company-sponsored kayaking trips, family holiday parties and an excursion to the wine country in Napa Valley for those who attended a recent trade show in San Francisco.

Even the twice-a-year company strategy meetings leave room for fun.

"Last year we went camping, and that was a hoot," Heintz said. •

— Sonya Stinson



From left: Legal secretary Sarah Bock Waggenspack and receptionists Lisa Irizarry and Glenda Bartley respectively don a pink hat, wig and Snuggie for the Susan G. Komen Pink Day staff luncheon at Adams and Reese to raise money for breast cancer.

Photo by Frank Aymami

Adams and Reese

Office small talk has taken on new relevance for Linda Soileau.

When the human resources director started at Adams and Reese in 2001, her son was diagnosed with an eye disease. While having a casual conversation with her boss, Soileau told him she needed to buy her son a special machine. Not long after, right around the holidays, Soileau's boss called her into his office and handed her a check for \$1,000 to help with the expenses.

The generous gesture eventually morphed into a program Soileau now manages called Hugs for Us, which helps Adams and Reese employees with anything from money to pay for a surgery to assistance during a financial crisis.

With lives and lots of money at risk, the legal industry is a high-stakes profession where competition is stiff and winning can sometimes come at any cost. But Adams and Reese has built its business on making not only its clients happy, but also its employees.

Paralegal and administrator Jean Stevens has been with the company for 29 years and said the firm's genuine concern for its staff is the main reason she's stayed at Adams and Reese for so long. She said she was deeply moved by how firm officials were understanding when she took time off to care for her sick father in 1996 before he passed away.

"It still touches me. I got a note that said 'Don't work, just take care of your father.' I'll never forget that. They're just good people," said Stevens.

Soileau said the firm offers excellent compensation and benefits packages for all of its employees, not just attorneys. Employees receive salary increases every July 1 and can carry over up to 15 vacation days per year.

"The benefits are fabulous, and we believe in people having money in their paychecks every two weeks. Some companies have recently stopped raises, but we haven't done away with them here," said Soileau.

Nature of business: law firm

Employees: 516 in entire firm, with 196 in New Orleans office
Average starting salary: \$43,000 for staff, \$100,000 for attorneys

Median salary: \$47,500 for staff, \$175,000 for attorneys

Average amount of time employees stay with company: 11 years

Benefits: health care with 75 percent coverage, dental and prescription plans, unmarried partner benefits, paid maternity and paternity leave, 401(k) with a 1 percent match and 7.5 percent for profit sharing, flexible hours, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: one month

Paid days off: 34

Web site: www.adamsandreesee.com

Employees are treated to occasional free lunches and take part in fundraisers, she said. And to help the staff keep up with increased downtown parking costs, the firm added a \$100 monthly parking allowance for all employees.

Kirk Gasperez, partner in charge of the New Orleans office, said the firm takes pride in giving its employees a chance to thrive and succeed.

"We just like to try to create the type of environment where people enjoy what they are doing and are happy here," he said. "It's just the right thing to do."•

— Craig Guillot



From left: Gloria Mitchell, Anne Leche and Lori Hunter of Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell and Berkowitz walk in the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure. The firm takes part in the fundraiser every year.

Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell and Berkowitz

In Gloria Mitchell's first week on the job as legal secretary at Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell and Berkowitz, her father became gravely ill and was hospitalized in Covington.

She frequently commuted back and forth to the North Shore to be with her father. No one complained; instead, everyone in the office pitched in to do Mitchell's work while she was gone.

"We take care of our people in difficult times," said Roy Cheatwood, managing shareholder of Baker Donelson's Louisiana offices.

Cheatwood said the firm believes the relationships among the staff, lawyers and the administration are as important as their clients. So much so that when interviewing potential hires, the firm focuses more on how that person will fit into Baker Donelson's culture as opposed to how much money that person may bring in, he said.

To maintain open communication, employees hold meetings called "The Daily Docket," in which groups get together and talk about that day's office issues. And it's not something the

higher-ups are exempt from, either.

"I have every level in the office attending these meetings," said Anne Leche, office administrator for Baker Donelson's Louisiana offices.

The emphasis on communication extends to all 16 of Baker Donelson's branches worldwide. Leche said the firm's chief executive and chief operating officers visit the New Orleans offices four times a year, walking the halls and talking to employees at every level.

"I feel like I have their attention and they value what I do — little old me from New Orleans," Leche said. "It's about a mindset. The little folks don't feel like they're out of the loop."

One of the staff's favorite perks is the free parking. And to be mindful of the environment, the firm pays for public transportation for any employee who chooses not to drive to work.

Baker Donelson also stresses giving back to the community. The firm is active in Habitat for Humanity and fundraisers such as the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure. Employees donate money to participate in

Nature of business: law firm

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 80

Average starting salary: \$47,351 for staff and \$107,400 for attorneys

Median salary: \$51,938 for staff and \$192,500 for attorneys

Average employment time: three and a half years

Benefits: health care with 90 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, unmarried partner benefits, paid maternity and paternity leave, 401(k) with 3 percent match, continuing education, telecommuting, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: the first of the month after 30 days of employment

Paid days off: 29

Web site: www.bakerdonelson.com

casual Fridays or eat breakfast or lunch at office potlucks, with proceeds going to causes such as juvenile diabetes.

"As hard as they want you to work for the office, they work just as hard to give back to the community," Mitchell said.

The firm also sponsors outings for underprivileged families to Audubon Zoo or Rock 'n' Bowl throughout the year and raises money to buy Christmas presents.

Cheatwood said those efforts benefit the office as well.

"The more active people are in supporting and helping their community, the better employees they are," Cheatwood said. •

— Fritz Esker



Photo by Frank Aymami

From left: Tyrrie Knox, Desiree Tavan and Michelle Sheffie demonstrate three services Cox Communications offers its customers — Internet, phone and cable.

THREE-TIME HONOREE

Cox Communications

Network Engineer Tyrrie Knox and Cox Communications had several years to try each other on for size, but Knox says it didn't take him long to like the fit.

He joined the company full time in 2002 after having been a student intern since 1996.

"I was able to see the atmosphere, how the people work together," Knox said. "There are a lot of good people here, and it's a really welcoming company. So they kind of won me over early on."

Knox said he especially appreciates the employee benefits package — and not just because of the free cable.

Cox gives employees discounts on big-ticket items such as new cars and purchases at Best Buy, plus free Internet and discounted phone services.

Knox also touted the company's celebrations, from costume-wearing days during Carnival season to off-site fried turkey feasts.

Steve Sawyer, Cox's vice president of public affairs, said the family-oriented atmosphere extends from senior management on down.

"That was never more evident than after Katrina, when this company really stepped up for our employees, put everything on the line and said, 'No matter what happens, you've got a job, and we're going to help you through these times,'" he said.

Inside sales supervisor Michelle Sheffie is responsible for developing and motivating a team of 10 sales agents at Cox. She was hired in 2000 as a universal account services representative, a customer service position. She eventually moved up the ranks to become a leader in the technical support division before making yet another transition into sales.

She said she received a lot of mentoring on the job, along with lessons in how to provide that type of support for those she would supervise.

"I have been very privileged to have a lot of great coaches surrounding me from day one here in the organization," she said.

Sheffie describes the culture at Cox as a combination of freedom and interdependence.

"They have allowed the employees to make

Nature of business: telecommunications

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 655

Average starting salary: \$33,000

Median salary: \$50,000

Average employment time: nine years

Benefits: health care with 80 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, unmarried partner benefits, paid maternity leave, 401(k) with 6 percent match, continuing education, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 31

Web site: www.cox.com

decisions," she said. "I feel like I have a voice, (that) I'm a contributor in this environment. When I need guidance ... there is always somebody there to help."

Sawyer has been with the company for 19 years and has more than 35 years of experience in the cable industry. He said Cox is different than other places he's worked, where top executives often were isolated from other employees.

"You can walk into the senior vice president/general manager's office and start a conversation just as easily as you could walk into anybody's office," Sawyer said. "It's such an open environment where everybody is treated equally and fairly." •

— Sonya Stinson



Employees of Durr Heavy Construction try workout equipment in the company's new on-site fitness center. Front row, from left, are: Controller Patricia Champagne, Senior Estimator Bill Johnson, Project Manager Jonathan Brisbi and receptionist Swanika Johnson. Back row, on treadmills, are: President and Chief Operating Officer Freddy Yoder and Systems Administrator Fred Rivette.

FOUR-TIME HONOREE

Durr Heavy Construction

The world of contractors and builders is a competitive one. But the only competition at Durr Heavy Construction is what takes place outside the office doors, employee Chip Donewar said.

"We don't compete with ourselves at Durr," said Donewar, who has been an estimator for more than three years. "When you get a job to bid, you may have a question about what you are doing. I can go down the hall to accounting and ask them what a piece of equipment might be valued at. Across the lobby are the project managers, and I can ask them about similar jobs they have handled in the past.

"The idea is that every door around here is open," Donewar said. "We are all pulling together as a team."

That atmosphere is anything but accidental, said Freddie Yoder, Durr president and chief operating officer.

"From the start, we have wanted to create an environment where everyone was not only

working well together but was also a part of the process where their input was valued and they were not regarded as just an entity," Yoder said.

To emphasize employees' personal needs, the company has a fitness center and chapel inside Durr's newly built headquarters.

"Other people in the business said we couldn't do that," Yoder said. "But we did because it's all part of our culture."

Outside the office, Durr plays an active role in the community. Among its dozens of initiatives in the past year, the company held a toy drive for the children of Lafitte after hurricanes Gustav and Ike and generated 1,200 pounds of food for Second Harvest Food Bank.

Durr also offers flextime for its employees.

"You don't have to work the standard 8 to 5 if you don't want to," said Debbie Champagne, who works in Durr's project management department. "You can maneuver around your family life, and that really helps."

Nature of business: general contractor

Where based: Harahan

Employees: 134

Average starting salary: \$57,500

Median salary: \$66,000

Average employment time: 12 years

Benefits: health care with 75 percent coverage, dental and prescription plans, 401(k) with 6 percent match, continuing education, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, fitness program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: 30 to 90 days

Paid days off: 17

Web site: www.durrhc.com

"I have two children, so that goes over very well with me. But beyond that, just knowing that I can change my schedule if I have to makes me feel that this is a company that cares about me as an individual."

Yoder said Durr's flextime program is just one piece of a larger picture.

"We know that our employees have families, and we try to work with the needs that they have," he said. "But the flextime is also a part of letting our employees have a say in not only how the business is run, but how the business is run in conjunction with their own private lives. And we think that's important." •

— Garry Boulard



Photo by Frank Aymami

From left: Joannettia Price, Robin Casiano and Erika Avila prepare lemonade for their co-workers at East Jefferson General Hospital. Employees take the cart throughout the hospital to give out free lemonade from Raising Cane's.

FIVE-TIME HONOREE

East Jefferson General Hospital

There's always room for growth and a long career at East Jefferson General Hospital, and no one knows better than Joey Grob, director of benefits.

Having been with the hospital for 23 years, she was originally hired as the assistant to the chief financial officer and has since worked through eight different titles.

"I'm just very proud to be a part of East Jefferson," Grob said. "The atmosphere here is just one of unity. Everyone takes pride in their work and has a common goal of quality patient care."

In an industry where turnover is high, employees say longevity at East Jefferson is achieved by competitive compensation, a family-style work environment and a reputation for exceeding patient expectations.

One of the largest employers in the New Orleans area, East Jefferson offers a traditional array of benefits, including a fully paid life insurance plan. But the hospital also offers

harder to find perks such as tuition reimbursement of up to \$1,085 per semester, an onsite gym and a child-care subsidy to help employees pay for day care while they are working.

East Jefferson has also established the Voice Committee structure as a way to implement shared governance of the health care facility. Comprised of representatives from throughout the hospital, six different committees meet once a month and give employees a voice in hospital decisions and policies.

Health finder representative Tina Taylor, who has been with the hospital for about six months, said she was originally attracted to East Jefferson for its reputation. Previously working in a corporate setting, Taylor said she wanted to find a warmer work environment that valued longevity.

"I feel like I can really plant roots here and be a positive factor in patient care," Taylor said. "I've met many people that have been here 20, 25 and even over 30 years."

Nature of business: health care

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 2,418

Average starting salary: \$38,918

Median salary: \$46,093

Average employment time: seven years

Benefits: health care with 73 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 403(b) with 2 percent match, continuing education program, day care options, relocation assistance, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program, fitness program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: one month

Paid days off: 29

Web site: www.ejgh.org

With more than 2,400 employees, positions at East Jefferson run the gamut from cooks and clerks to nurses and surgeons. Usually working independently with their own practices, physicians often have a special set of needs. When Dr. Clayton Mazoue finished his residency in family medicine at the hospital last year, he was offered a contract to start his own clinic at the hospital. He said it was a challenging process to build a clinic from the ground up, but East Jefferson worked with him through every step.

"They've been very accommodating, and they are willing to listen and talk," Mazoue said. "I really enjoy employers who are approachable and who try to meet the needs of their employees." •

— Craig Guillot

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Photo by Frank Aymami

From left: Account executive Mercy Perez and Vice President Brian Cohen cheer while associates Jordan Eagan and Amy Boudreaux Roth take turns playing Wii Bowling in Eagan Insurance Agency's downstairs lunchroom.

Eagan Insurance Agency

Don't be surprised if you find employees at Eagan Insurance Agency playing Wii during their down time — management is perfectly OK with it.

To add some fun to the daily grind, Eagan recently put a large-screen television in the lunchroom and added a Nintendo console.

"We actually have Wii tournaments at lunch," Senior Vice President Dotty Gettys said. "Everyone enjoys it, and it helps build a lot of camaraderie."

Family-style businesses are noted for congeniality and concern among employees, and Eagan can sometimes take things one step further.

When Executive Vice President Chris Trapani started with the company 20 years ago, he was taken aback when Eagan offered him a personal loan to buy an engagement ring for his girlfriend.

"I had only been here a couple of years and was trying to buy an engagement ring, but it was more than I had saved up," Trapani said. "They offered to loan me the money. I knew then

and there they were making an investment in me and making a long-term commitment."

Now marking its 50th year in business, Eagan has built itself up by maintaining a tight-knit staff. The company goes beyond the standard benefits package by offering a few other bonuses that are hard to find in other offices.

One of Eagan's most popular benefits is its Flex Fridays program, in which two rotating groups of the entire staff can take every other Friday off. That adds up to almost a month of extra paid time off throughout the year.

Eagan also offers flex hours for those who need it and works with parents who need to tend to their children and after-school activities.

Insurance Associate Beth Carter-Drury characterizes Eagan's culture as one of "balance and harmony." Having been in the industry for 15 years, she started at Eagan a year ago and said she's noticed a striking difference in her new work atmosphere in terms of cooperation among departments and few internal power struggles for sales and clients.

Nature of business: insurance
Where based: Metairie
Employees: 65
Average starting salary: \$41,000 for staff, \$125,000 for producers
Median salary: \$44,000 for staff, \$159,000 for producers
Average employment time: 10 years
Benefits: medical, dental, vision, prescription, 12 weeks unpaid maternity and paternity leave, 401(k), life insurance, long-term disability
Wait time for benefits: 30 days
Paid days off: up to 58
Web site: www.eaganins.com

"It's a real progressive work environment," she said. "They're very innovative, always open to new ideas and they always accept feedback from employees."

Despite being in a competitive sales-driven industry, Trapani said Eagan doesn't treat its salespeople with the typical "sweatshop-style pressure" of making employees produce at any cost. The freedom the agency has given him, along with solid training and an investment in his career, has allowed him to serve his clients better.

Gettys, who has been with the company for 22 years, said Eagan's competitive compensation along with its family atmosphere helps keep the average employee's tenure at 10 years in a field noted for high turnover. •

— Craig Guillot

Photo by Howard Baker, senior member of the firm, and former chief of staff to the President, Senate majority leader and ambassador to Japan.



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From left: Sheree Nelson, Olga Nunez and Nikeeta Wilson of First NBC Bank/Dryades Savings Bank review plans for community projects.

Photo by Tracie Morris Schaefer

TWO-TIME HONOREE

First NBC Bank/ Dryades Savings Bank

Vicki Chiasson has considered leaving New Orleans, but that would mean leaving the employer she loves.

A commercial banker, she worked in the industry for 26 years before joining First NBC Bank in January 2007 but said she has never known another bank so concerned with employees' health and happiness.

"They have banks on every corner," Chiasson said is her husband's Rick's response when she tells him she can't leave the city. "I've said, 'Rick, you don't understand. They don't have banks like this.'"

Chiasson said she was impressed by the compassion the bank showed when she had to take 15 days off last year because of a back injury.

"Not once was I harassed and asked when I was coming back. I was getting phone calls from other departments who expressed genuine concern," Chiasson said. "Never once did I lay there thinking, 'I've got to get back to work, or I'm going to lose my job.' They made

my recovery time a pleasure."

As a manager, Director of Retail Karan Accardo said she appreciates the bank's employee assistance program, which offers off-site confidential counseling for workers and their families.

"I personally haven't used it myself, but I have, as a manager, recommended some of my associates," Accardo said. "I know that if I have any kind of issue, I've got someplace to go immediately and feel comfortable."

Accardo said she respects the executive management team, particularly bank President Ashton Ryan Jr., with whom she worked previously in the banking industry before coming to First NBC.

"He's a genius," Accardo said, describing Ryan as an effective leader who stays abreast of economic issues and trends and is very involved in the community. "I chose to come here because he was running the bank."

Good leadership is an asset Executive Assistant Kim Berry said she values. Berry was

Nature of business: banking
Where based: New Orleans
Employees: 176
Average starting salary: \$41,000
Median salary: \$48,000
Average employment time: four years
Benefits: health care plan with 80 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, paid maternity leave, 401(k) with 4 percent match, continuing education, day care options, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program
Wait time for benefits: one month
Paid days off: 32.5 days
Web sites: www.firstnbcbank.com, www.dryadesbank.com

a receptionist and administrative assistant to the chairman of the board at Dryades Savings Bank when First NBC Holding Co. acquired the institution last year. She earned a master's degree in business administration in 2007 and said bank leaders have made a point of using her new skills and knowledge.

"The bank's management has a remarkable keenness for scouting talent that can be (developed)," Berry said. "As a result, that keenness led to my hiring."

Berry was promoted to executive administrative assistant to the legal regulatory division and is poised for a position on the administrative team.

"Plainly, every day the company is depositing into my journey a voyage where reciprocity is an excellent recipe for success," she said. •

— Diana Chandler

First NBC

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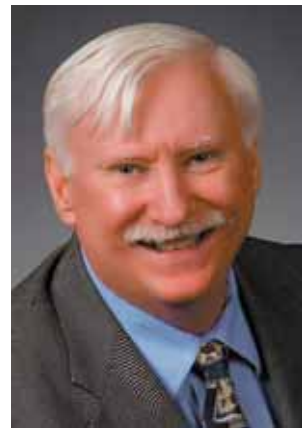
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FIVE-TIME HONOREE *

Geocent

What a difference a day and three and a half years can make, said technical writer Chrys Pope, of her efforts to reunite with former associates after being displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

She describes the information technology community as close-knit, but said the glue that keeps Geocent employees together is its leaders, including President Robert “Bobby” Savoie and Executive Vice President Rick Gremillion.

“I Googled him (Savoie),” Pope said of her efforts to find a job after Katrina. “I knew that if he was back in the area, there would be something going on.”

Pope first worked with Savoie years ago at Science and Engineering Associates, which Pope said was highly rated in the field, largely due to company leadership and innovation.

Formed in 2008, Geocent worked to acquire and integrate several firms specializing in various areas of information technology, including Diamond Data Systems, the company that found the perfect spot for Pope in June, more than three years after she contacted them.

“When I realized that Diamond Data was now under his leadership, there was no hesitation on my part to accept a position on his team,” Pope said of Savoie. “With the union of Diamond Data and Geocent, the same characteristics that existed back then are present again and even better now.”

A commitment to success, good benefits, camaraderie and management’s appreciation of employee opinions convinced Joey Moreland to return to the team after working with Gremillion at Diamond Data in the 1990s the company’s early days.

“They were accessible way back then. I was employee number seven. We did everything together,” Moreland said.

Brett Camet, federal sector director and a 10-year Geocent/Diamond Data veteran, also appreciates the company’s attitude toward its staff.

“The company has a lot of character, cares

Nature of business: information technology and engineering consulting

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 125

Average starting salary: \$69,755

Median salary: \$75,175

Average employment time: two years

Benefits: health care with 90 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 50 percent match of first 6 percent contributed, continuing education program, day care options, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 30 days

Web site: www.geocent.com



Geocent consultant Willie Blaire dips a CD into Accounts Receivable Coordinator Mayra Cabrera’s coffee mug. The IT consulting firm offers its employees a broad range of benefits, including profit sharing options and full tuition assistance.

tremendously about their employees, is always looking to make things better and believes in getting input from its employees about how we can improve, constantly,” Camet said.

When Camet originally signed on, he observed “the leadership was young and aggressive and you could tell that they wanted to succeed not just for themselves, but also for the employees.”

Geocent offers its employees a broad range of benefits, including full tuition assistance and a health savings account contribution of \$1,000 for individuals and \$2,000 for families. The company also offers monetary performance incen-

tives such as quarterly and spot bonuses.

Camet believes his success is heightened by employee phantom profit-sharing options, allowing workers to purchase a bit of the company without the tax obligations inherent in actual company shares.

“When I’m ready to leave the company, whatever the cost of stock is for the company, I still can cash them in,” Camet said. “It still acts the same way.

“My plan is that the company is going to keep growing and that’s going to help financially.” •

— Diana Chandler

*Formerly Diamond Data Systems



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Photo by Shannon Diecidue

From left, wearing medals: Bryan Jenkins, Jason Finnian, Paul Melancon, Julio Fernandez and Buu Phan, the winning team from Gilsbar's 2009 Exercise Challenge, hold up their prize belt. More than 40 five-member teams competed, logging in more than 7,000 fitness hours in eight weeks.

FIVE-TIME HONOREE

Gilsbar

Choosing to spend more time with a newborn can often mean opting out of the work force. But for Gilsbar employee Wendy King, motherhood and working was a win-win game.

Twelve weeks after the birth of now 2-year-old Grey, King took her dilemma to Doug Layman, Gilsbar executive vice president and chief sales and marketing officer, explaining her desire to spend more time at home.

"It was a scary thing to come back in and have that conversation. I was just kind of thinking I might have to leave," King recalled. "It was funny that he even anticipated this would come up. There's still a place for me here, which is incredible."

Gilsbar temporarily gave King a position that required only 32 hours a week. She eventually transferred back to her old job once Grey started preschool. King believes Gilsbar accommodated her because the company appreciates good talent.

It's that kind of consideration that workers say keeps Gilsbar rated as a top employer.

Executive Assistant Monique Jacobs said Gilsbar proved its character just by hiring her after she had been out of the work force for 15 years.

"I feel like they took a chance on me because I had never worked, particularly as an administrative assistant," Jacobs said. "The qualities (Layman) was looking for, he was able to see that I possessed them in a personal interview. They really hire with excellence."

Gilsbar puts a lot of energy into maintaining a healthy work force. Jacobs is a member of the committee that manages the company's wellness program, a benefit that rewards employees with "wellness bucks" as an incentive to live healthy lifestyles. Employees can redeem their wellness bucks in a number of ways, including contributions to their health savings or flexible spending accounts.

The program enabled Executive Underwriter Lynn Trainor to quit smoking after 40 years. Gilsbar allowed Trainor to enroll in a smoking cessation program through St. Tammany

Nature of business: insurance administration

Where based: Covington

Employees: 323

Average starting salary: \$46,184

Median salary: \$36,400

Average employment time: six and a half years

Benefits: health care with 55 percent coverage, 401(k) with 3 percent match, dental, vision, prescriptions, continuing education program, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: 30 days

Paid days off: 23 on average

Web site: www.gilsbar.com

Parish Hospital, paying all costs and providing weekly support meetings on company time.

"This is not something that they needed to do. That's my personal addiction. It has nothing to do with Gilsbar," she said. "It just promotes good employee relations."

Trainor has been a nonsmoker for two years now.

"I quit, which is to me a miracle because I smoked for 40 years," she said.

Trainor earned bonus wellness bucks for her success, as well as kudos from superiors. She plans to redeem her wellness bucks to buy a pair of walking shoes and will enroll in the company-offered Weight Watchers group next year. •

— Diana Chandler



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Mixing some fun into their work day, Hilton New Orleans Riverside employees jump on one of the hotel room beds. From left: Laundry worker Yolanda Cardrice, Desantos Manning of guest services, executive Christian Hernandez, culinary worker Pamela Jackson and front office employee Tangelique Riley.

FOUR-TIME HONOREE

Hilton New Orleans Riverside

Mardi Gras is a massive exercise in abandon for visitors and locals. But for New Orleans hotel staffs, it can be an extraordinary logistical challenge. Just ask Vickie Christen.

"Whenever we have a big event like that, the excitement level could not be higher. And we suddenly find ourselves almost working in a frenzy," said Christen, executive assistant to the area director of human resources at the Hilton New Orleans Riverside.

"Everyone in the hotel during those times works particularly hard," Christen said. "But for our department, it means hiring many new employees, quite a few new people coming in all at once needing ID cards and lockers. Just a bunch of things going on all at the same time."

While not everyone might appreciate such frenzy, Christen said she enjoys the energy and excitement of the annual blowout. It makes her appreciate where she works.

"It really tests us when it comes to our mis-

sion of providing the best service that we can for our guests. And I like that."

Christen, who started at the Hilton Riverside in the late 1980s, said the staff's devotion to customer service still inspires her after all these years.

"There is just a general feeling that we are all working together and trying to make our guests have as good a stay here as possible," she said. "We even, on a regular basis, go out on the floor and mingle with the guests, making sure they are happy. And when they are, I feel good about what we're doing."

Reginald Smith, a shipping and receiving clerk for the hotel, likes the sense of camaraderie inspired at the Hilton from the top down.

"This is a very busy part of the hotel," Smith said. "We always have all kinds of food and alcohol deliveries coming in, as well as our guest packages, all the different truck lines coming through here. But no matter how busy

Nature of business: hotel/hospitality

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 722

Average starting salary: \$22,880 for hourly employees, \$35,000 for salaried workers

Median salary: \$26,000 for hourly employees, \$40,000 for salaried workers

Average employment time: 10 years

Benefits: health care with 70 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, unmarried partner benefits, 401(k) with 5 percent match, continuing education program, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 28

Web site: www.hilton.com

it gets, the people who work with you here are respectful, everyone is on a first-name basis. And that makes a difference."

Robert Reso, who has been with the Hilton for 21 years, credits the hotel for its policy of promoting people from within.

"I'm a good example of that," said Reso, who is assistant director of sales for the Hilton but previously worked as a bar back before holding a variety of positions in the food and beverage divisions as well as convention services.

"You never feel that you are stuck at any one level," Reso said. "And that's something I have always enjoyed. If you want to move up, this is the place to do it."•

— Garry Boulard



Photo by Tracie Morris Schaefer

From left: David Melancon, Lizzi Richard and John Garrett of Irwin Fritchie Urquhart & Moore show their Saints spirit while munching on cupcakes the company bought for the staff.

Irwin Fritchie Urquhart & Moore

Edwina James said driving 40 miles to work every day would be a challenge for some, but she wouldn't have it any other way.

"Once I park my car and sit at my desk, I feel that it is a joy to be here," said James, receptionist for the law firm of Irwin Fritchie Urquhart & Moore. "I really enjoy taking care of the needs of the firm."

James, who has been with the firm for more than nine years, said the partners offer a sense of loyalty she did not feel at other career stops.

"Everyone on every level of the firm gets along like old family," James said. "It is the kind of thing you look for in a good company."

Partner Jim Irwin said that "family-like" atmosphere is a product of how the firm has hired employees.

"When we started the firm 10 years ago, we wanted people who love the profession," Irwin said. "You know who those people are, and you see that here. It is the kind of people who love coming to work every day. Our turnover rate

has been extremely low. Most of the employees who opened with us are still here today."

Irwin said the partners have worked diligently to keep all of the firm's 77 full-time employees happy.

"We understand the needs our employees have," Irwin said.

He said some of the more popular perks include a competitive health care plan, a good salary structure and a strong 401(k) and profit-sharing plan.

"We get a fair amount for a fair day's work," James said. "You can see that the partners care for their employees. They are people of their word."

Lisa Gardner, a paralegal for the firm, said the partners go out of their way to ensure everyone from top to bottom feels as though they are on the same level.

"When we do functions like the annual Christmas party, it's not just for the partners or attorneys," Gardner said. "Everyone comes out to them and mingles with each other. It has

Nature of business: law firm

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 77

Average starting salary: \$42,000 for staff, \$97,500 for attorneys

Median salary: \$54,381 for staff, \$125,770 for attorneys

Average employment time: nine years

Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, paid maternity leave, 401(k) with profit sharing contributions of up to 14 percent, continuing education, flexible hours

Wait time for benefits: one month after start date

Paid days off: up to 40

Web site: www.irwinllc.com

helped us stay close knit."

Gardner said she appreciates the trust that the firm instills in its employees.

"They hired me as a professional, and they trust that I will work as a professional while I am here," Gardner said.

Irwin Fritchie's community efforts include a firm-wide initiative to donate to the United Way Lee Denim Day. Each employee donates \$5 toward breast cancer research to wear denim on the designated day. There is also a Secret Santa program in which the employees sponsor about 10 children per year for holiday gifts.

The firm's attorneys also do pro bono work as part of the Association of Legal Administrators Community Challenge project. •

— Robin Shannon



From left: Johnathan Knofie, Debbie Brockley, David Hymel, Amy Walters, Tommy Freel and Katherine Green of LaPorte Sehart Romig Hand gather in a section of New Orleans City Park the firm helps maintain.

THREE-TIME HONOREE

LaPorte Sehart Romig Hand

When Kayla Lambert started working at LaPorte Sehart Romig Hand in January, she faced the challenge of starting a new job in a new city while dealing with the anxiety of a sick grandmother in the hospital.

"You don't want to be the person who is not at work all the time, especially when you are new," said Lambert, a senior consultant in litigation. "But I never felt stressed out about it. The firm let me work remotely while I took the time to take care of things in the family. Knowing that the company stood behind me was really nice. This kind of thing was never allowed at other places I have worked."

Greg Romig, audit director and a senior manager in the firm, said that commitment to balance between work and family is one of the key foundations of the 63-year-old public accounting firm.

"We are not just a corporation," Romig said. "We approach our employees with an individualistic view. We appreciate the role that everyone has while they are at work."

Romig said LaPorte goes all out to make sure

employees keep up with the firm's progress and setbacks, so expectations are spelled out clearly on a regular basis.

"When we hold our regular staff meetings, lots of information is brought forward so that everyone in the company knows what is going on," Romig said. "We have expectations, but we allow for discussion."

The commitment to making sure everyone is deeply involved even extends to employees who are not officially on the payroll. As an intern working through graduate school at the University of New Orleans, Jack Wiles said LaPorte never hesitated to challenge his skills.

"I didn't want a menial internship where all I did all day was print up copies and answer phones," Wiles said. "During a previous internship at a larger company, I felt like I was just a number among thousands. There was always a more professional relationship here. When the time came for them to offer me a full-time position, it was a no-brainer."

Romig said one of the firm's more unique aspects is that performance is weighed and measured through a 360-degree review that

Nature of business: public accounting firm

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 135

Average starting salary: \$34,000 for administrative, \$46,500 for accountants

Median salary: \$38,000 for administrative, \$80,000 for accountants

Average employment time: six years

Benefits: health care with 75 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 3 percent match, continuing education, telecommuting, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program, fitness program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 34 to 58

Web site: www.laporte.com

involves all employee levels.

"Ten different people evaluate one person's performance," Romig said. "We include everyone from upper management to the lower-level employees to people on the same level."

Some of the company's popular perks include family nights at Zephyr Field and curbside dry cleaning services, in addition to a crawfish boil and Christmas party that involves the entire office. The firm is also active in the Young Leadership Council and initiatives to beautify City Park.

"Coming from someone who did not know too many people upon arrival here, the outside-the-office activities have been an excellent opportunity for me to get to know parts of the city better," Lambert said. "I've gotten the chance to meet more new people outside of the work environment." •

— Robin Shannon

THREE-TIME HONOREE

Louisiana Medical Mutual Insurance Co.

When Shawn Paretti began working as a claims representative for Louisiana Medical Mutual Insurance Co. in 1994, he knew immediately that his supervisor valued him.

"He came to my house and delivered a welcome basket since he had recruited me from out of town to come back and work," he said. "From the beginning, I always felt that they really wanted me here."

Paretti hadn't experienced that sense of value in his previous career working for a stock-based insurance company. Because LAMMICO is a mutual company, the physician policyholders hold the playing cards instead of stockholders.

The focus at his old career was on stock prices, rather than employees' welfare, said Paretti, who now works as the division vice president of insurance operations.

"They even told us, 'We don't care about what you did yesterday. We just want to know what you're going to do for us today and tomorrow,'" Paretti said of his old job. "That was their motto when I left there. That was how bad it had gotten."

At LAMMICO, stories such as Paretti's aren't unique. Other employees, such as payroll administrator Laura Walker, also have stock company backgrounds.

"When you're here, you see the CEO every day. They know you by name," Walker said. "They're very complimentary of your work."

Nature of business: medical liability insurance

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 119

Average starting salary: \$46,259 for staff, \$171,968 for executive management

Median salary: \$60,052 for staff, \$180,136 for executive management

Average employment time: nine years

Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 50 percent match on first 6 percent, paid maternity and paternity leave, continuing education program, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: first of the month after 30 days of employment

Paid days off: up to 86.5

Web site: www.lammico.com



LAMMICO employees gather at the office entrance. Bottom row, from left: Karen Nugent, Denise St. Romain and Linda Favalora. Middle row: Glynis Mulvihill, Dawer Azizi and Lisa Ordoyne. Top row: Fred Kirchgraber, Elkan Weis and Erica Patterson.

In addition to being visible, supervisors also are good at keeping lines of communication open, said Linda Berggren, an agency management specialist who has worked at LAMMICO for 19 years.

"If you go sit down and talk to your manager, they will listen to you, they will work with you," Berggren said. "They will do anything they can to help you with your situation."

The level of human interaction makes for a great balance of work and fun in the office, Walker said. Annual office activities such as Halloween costume competitions, Christmas parties and Carnival celebrations spice things up in company departments.

"You may get that in a large company, but just not in the quality that you would get it here," Walker said. "And everyone participates, from the top man down. It's not just for the worker bees."

Employee appreciation days also leave room for fun around the office, Paretti said.

"We'll have a little part of the day that's like a roast, and employees roast other employees and kind of make fun but not in a mean way," he said. "They'll tease them and make up a funny award, and I've been the butt of jokes in that before. It's always a lot of camaraderie among the employees and staff."

LAMMICO also offers employee perks such as paid training for any employee who wants to use it.

"I've worked on some continuing education for insurance certifications, and they've paid for that," Paretti said. "It doesn't even have to be job-related — if you have a clerical employee who wants to get a degree, LAMMICO will pay for it, even if she's the mail clerk. A lot of companies wouldn't."•

— Jessica Williams



Photo by Frank Aymami

At center, New Orleans Hornets President Hugh Weber, left, owner George Shinn and Executive Officer of the Board Chad Shinn hit the court with employees of the NBA team.

The New Orleans Hornets

Season tickets to NBA home games and the chance to rub elbows with superstars such as Chris Paul are just part of coming to work every day for The New Orleans Hornets.

Employees point to a sense of camaraderie and commitment that they say starts at the top with owner George Shinn.

"Mr. Shinn makes the effort to come to the office and talk with us and knows everyone's name," said Robert Miller, Hornets' group-sales manager. "My friends who work for other sports teams tell me that's very rare for an NBA team owner. He's hands on, cares about us and the community and is fabulous to work for."

Miller also likes Breakfasts with Hugh, held throughout the year by Hornets President Hugh Weber, who invites one person from each department to join him and General Manager/Coach Jeff Bower to discuss where the team is headed.

"You have a chance to ask questions and learn from two outstanding leaders," Miller said.

Devyn Smith, the Hornets' community enrichment coordinator, said there's a sense of purpose that Hornets staffers and players get from the company's involvement in nonprofit activities. The Hornets' community investment

department matches employees with volunteer activities, including the Hornets Believe outreach program focusing on children, senior citizens, schools and refurbishing playgrounds and homes. And the company's bookmobile hands out more than 50,000 books to local children each year.

Smith and her husband Brandon Smith, also a Hornets employee, transferred with the team when it moved back from Oklahoma in 2007 as New Orleans continued to recover from Hurricane Katrina.

The franchise was briefly known as the New Orleans-Oklahoma City Hornets. Devyn Smith said Hornets staffers are excited to participate in the Crescent City's revival and that the company and New Orleans have been good places for young professionals to thrive.

A recent company project was planting trees at Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge in eastern New Orleans, Smith said. On Hornets-United Way Volunteerism Day in October, staffers joined local residents to clean playgrounds and paint fences in St. Roch and other New Orleans neighborhoods.

The company also provides top-of-the-line benefits to employees, such as a health care

Nature of business: professional basketball

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 128, plus 15 players

Average starting salary: \$35,000*

Median salary: \$65,000*

Average employment time: seven years

Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, health, dental, vision, prescription drugs, maternity-paternity, disability, 401(k) with 6 percent match, relocation assistance, flexible hours, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: about one month

Paid days off: 32

Web site: www.hornets.com

* Salary figures exclude players

plan with full coverage for employees and their families, plus a flexible spending account offering up to \$2,500 a year for medical expenses and up to \$5,000 for child care.

"But our staff is fairly young, so it may be awhile — 10 years or so — before everyone takes advantage of them," said Weber, who focuses on business operations.

The company also covers the cost of downtown parking and graduate school tuition and offers fun perks such as discounts on team gear and two season tickets a year.

And one of the advantages of working for the Hornets is the annual Christmas party, "where everyone gets to mix with the players," Weber said. •

— Susan Buchanan



Employees of Pan American Life Insurance group show their Saints spirit outside their downtown office. Standing, from left, are: Bryan Scofield, Stephen Jervay, Brenda Guevera, Ellen Fitte, Linda Gusman, Anita Kerr, Trudy Callia and Elisa Marquez. Kneeling are Johnny Cefalu and Karen Enamorado, and holding a foam finger is Shlonda Idowu.

Photo by Tracie Morris Schaefer

Pan American Life Insurance Group

For a New Orleans-based insurance company, Pan American Life Insurance Group has global aspirations.

Its vision is to build a bridge of financial security between the United States and Latin America.

But keeping employees abreast of the company's direction through training and continuing education is deeply embedded in that vision, said José Suquet, the company's chairman, president and CEO.

"I think we have to do more of the same and just keep advancing our education," he said, adding that education is an ongoing employee benefit. "Nothing substitutes for excellent performance. If you have a strong company, that's the key to helping employees."

Through Pan American's New Employee Development program, employees who have been with the company for at least two years are afforded an opportunity to meet with executive staff members once a month to learn more about the company.

Elisa Márquez, communications manager in the corporate marketing division, has been with the company for two and a half years

and said she's gaining significant support and insight during meetings with executives that expose potential Pan American leaders to the company's various divisions.

Márquez said she's worked in different corporate structures in the past, but none was as supportive as Pan American.

"When I came here, I noticed that employees are encouraged to be creative and to present new ideas," she said.

Ellen Fitte started her career with Pan American as an accounts payable clerk 13 years ago and has held seven positions since. In her current role as a senior human resources generalist, Fitte recruits new employees and shares her Pan American success story with potential recruits as examples of how one can grow with the company.

"I've been given an opportunity to grow, an opportunity to advance my career," said Fitte, who is enrolled in a preparatory class for human resources certification through the company's continuing education opportunities.

Throughout the past year and a half, Pan American has maintained its annual merit-based raises, paid bonuses and 401(k) match-

Nature of business: life and health insurance

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 280 in New Orleans, 424 in Latin America

Average starting salary: \$63,500*

Median salary: \$55,000*

Average employment time: 12.5 years

Benefits: health care with 88 percent coverage, dental and prescription plans, paid maternity leave, 401(k) with 6 percent match, continuing education program, relocation assistance, flexible hours, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: first day of the month following 30 days of employment

Paid days off: 32.5

Web site: www.panamericanlife.com

*Salary figures are from Aug. 1, 2008 through July 31, 2009.

es despite the economic crisis.

Suquet said "open communication with employees about the state of the economy and the business," the competitive nature of Pan American employees and cost management helped maintain operations without massive layoffs.

The company also continues to offer employees a full portfolio of insurance coverage, including long-term care, life and disability.

To balance the corporate focus, Pan American's Ice Cream and King Cake Gras socials are among the additional perks that employees indulge in each year.

"I think the more accessible and human you make a place, the more people feel like they want to belong to it," Suquet said. •

— Nayita Wilson



Photo by Frank Aymami

Administrative assistant Dianne Smith serves turkey to registered nurse Ann Higgins, far right, and network development employee Nadine Hampton-Brown for the Peoples Health Thanksgiving lunch.

FOUR-TIME HONOREE

Peoples Health

Staff members at Peoples Health, a Medicare Advantage-plan administrator for individuals 65 and older, say personal contact with patients and the chance to work on their behalf is the best part of their jobs.

Gabe Vanover, an authorizations assistant at the firm's Metairie headquarters, says he likes "mingling with our plan members at Peoples Health Game Day at Zephyr Field. Thousands of members attend, and we meet and talk with them about the game and how they're feeling."

The company has held the annual event, featuring food and live music, for more than 10 years.

Vanover also appreciates access to discounted and free tickets to New Orleans Saints and Hornets games that come from Peoples corporate sponsorship of the those teams.

"And I feel good when I go to a game at the Superdome and see a big Peoples Health sign," Vanover said.

The company also sponsors the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and Louisiana State University sports and gives employees tickets to those events. And being a health-minded company, Peoples Health offers

a Weight Watchers at Work program and on-site gym for its employees.

"Like other good companies, we have excellent benefits and beautiful facilities at our several locations. But I believe what's really meaningful for our employees is the hands-on, hands-touch work we do with the elderly," said Warren Murrell, chief operating officer.

Health care can be bewildering for any age group, he said, and the older individuals the Peoples staff assists might be underserved otherwise.

"Our staffers do home assessments to see that no hazards are present — like slippery carpets or objects on the floor. And they accompany members to the doctor's office."

More than 500 employees meet quarterly at the Pontchartrain Center in Kenner for a company update, and several plan members are introduced at that event, Murrell said.

In one of many activities involving employees and members, Peoples held a heart-healthy cooking contest last winter, where the winning recipes were healthy jambalaya from an employee and a shrimp and corn stew with brown rice from a plan member. Student

Nature of business: Medicare plans

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 525

Average starting salary: \$49,000

Median salary: \$55,000

Average employment time: eight years

Benefits: health care plan with 85 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 5 percent match, unmarried partner benefits, paid maternity and paternity leave, day care options, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: 30 days

Paid days off: up to 37

Web site: www.peopleshealth.com

chefs at Cafe Reconcile in Central City prepared the dishes.

Elizabeth Vail, a registered nurse at Peoples Health, said she likes the company so much that when she left for another job in mid-2008 after moving from Gretna to the North Shore, she returned to her old position in six weeks.

"Many people didn't realize I'd left and just assumed I was on vacation. But I really missed my colleagues, the members and our friendly office," she said.

"My job is definitely worth the extra commute that I have now," Vail said. "I've worked in a hospital environment before but am much happier here. We have a wonderful CEO, Carol Solomon. We're in the benefits business, and she sees to it that we employees also get the best possible benefits." •

— Susan Buchanan



Photo by Frank Aymami

Clockwise from top left: Management Supervisor Fran McManus, graphic artist Diana Revelo and copywriters Rachel Wilson and Gary Alipio of Peter A. Mayer Advertising Agency give themselves kudos in the form of a Prestigious Paper Plate Award.

THREE-TIME HONOREE

Peter A. Mayer Advertising Inc.

At a time when companies are slashing their 401(k) contributions, employees at Peter A. Mayer Advertising Inc. are sitting pretty.

The company matches dollar for dollar every contribution an employee puts toward his or her 401(k).

It's a benefit President Mark Mayer believes makes the agency stand out, noting it has only fallen short of the goal twice in the past 20 years. The company still managed to provide a full match this year, despite the recession.

The 42-year-old advertising agency was founded by Peter Mayer and run by his sons, Mark and Josh. But the company likes to treat all 140 of its employees like family, Mark Mayer said, even allowing employees to bring their families to work, whether it's their children or pets.

"I put my family above business and I wouldn't expect anybody else to act any other way," he said.

"I feel like the company really runs like a family business," said Butler Burdine, director of business development. "I mean it is a family

business, but it's not just run that way if your last name is Mayer."

"It really is sort of like a family," said Rick Baxter, an interactive designer. "They really listen to you."

Peter Mayer's office, which spans three downtown buildings, is a cross between a typical corporate space and an eclectic, swanky hotel. One office has all the trappings of a typical office, with phones, computers and a copy machine, but also includes beanbag chairs for lounging and a miniature trampoline.

Walls are adorned with murals and past advertising work, and an indoor atrium towers four stories high.

Peter Mayer has local and national clients, including Zatarain's, Entergy, the New Orleans Saints and Whitney National Bank, which has been a client for 40 years.

"That is unheard of in this industry," Burdine said. "The average tenure with a client is two years nationally on average, so the fact they've been with us that long is amazing."

Fun is one of Peter Mayer's six guiding prin-

Nature of business: communications and marketing firm

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 135

Average starting salary: \$28,000

Median salary: \$50,641

Average employment time: 12 years

Benefits: health care with 83 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, unmarried partner benefits, 401(k) with 100 percent match, paid maternity and paternity leave, continuing education, relocation assistance, telecommuting, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: 31 days or less

Paid days off: 31

Web site: www.peteramayer.com

ciples. Josh Mayer, executive creative director and owner, said institutionalized fun is a great way to promote teamwork, which is essential in the advertising world.

"An old motto in advertising is the agency that drinks together like each other," he said.

Josh Mayer said one employee commented on a survey saying one of the best things about working for Peter Mayer was a party every six to eight weeks. Some of those parties include Halloween, Christmas, a spring crawfish boil and a summer baseball game.

Peter Mayer promotes religiously from within and gives its employees many opportunities to shine by coming up with their own ideas and going with it — a policy Josh Mayer said is rare in corporations.

"There is an open-door policy," said Josh. "A lot of our offices literally have no doors." •

— John Adams



Photo by Frank Aymanni

Each December Phelps Dunbar rents out a movie theater for employees and their families to watch a movie. Seated, from left, are: Sarah Vandergriff, Katie Whitman, Will Nielson, Brian Davilla, Ashley Gremillion, Michele Alfred, Catherine Masterson and Abigail Gravois. Standing, from left, are: Curt Rome, Taylor Mouldoux and Robin Gosserand.

FOUR-TIME HONOREE

Phelps Dunbar

Lawyers and staff bring their children and grandchildren to Phelps Dunbar's offices all the time to show off where they work, partner Harry Rosenberg said.

"They bring them to their workplace because they're proud to introduce them to their colleagues as friends," said Rosenberg, regional practice coordinator of the firm's litigation group.

Rosenberg, who started with the firm 31 years ago, said it's the firm's ability to celebrate employees' happy occasions as well as help each other during difficult times that wards off the stodgy atmosphere law offices can have.

It takes more than a friendly atmosphere to keep 140 employees out of a staff of 517 at the company for at least 10 years, and 37 for 25 years and longer.

Debbie Langenhennig, director of human resources, said the firm makes it a priority to cover employees during times of need, whether it's maintaining retirement plan contributions

throughout the recession or adjusting the firm's benefits package based on employee feedback.

Langenhennig said Phelps Dunbar did not have to alter its 401(k) plan when the firm was trying to cut back.

"It would not be the first thing we go looking to to save money, and we didn't," she said.

She said their benefits keep their employees' best interests in mind as well. When the firm renews its existing benefits each year and looks to reduce costs without reducing existing benefits, they also assess the needs of employees.

Langenhennig is part of the team that reviews the benefits package, and each year they look into what additional benefits employees have requested. Last year, two additions were made to the 2009 benefits: a critical illness plan and a short-term disability plan.

Litigation partner Chris Ralston said what's most important to him is that his work is satisfying. He likes the clients he works for and the cases on which he works. Ralston, who coordi-

Nature of business: law firm

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 537 in entire firm with 216 in New Orleans office

Average starting salary: \$44,000 for staff, \$95,000 for attorneys

Median salary: \$46,000 for staff, \$102,000 for attorneys

Average employment time: eight years

Benefits: health care with 93 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, paid maternity and paternity leave, 401(k), continuing education program, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: about one month

Paid days off: 22 to 28 for employees with less than three years tenure

Web site: www.phelpsdunbar.com

nates some of the firm's community service events and initiatives, said he admires the amount of charity work Phelps Dunbar performs.

"This is one of the things that attorneys and staff do together," he said. "The lawyers, by the nature of the work we do, are not going to be in the same setting as the staff" during the workday.

At the Step Out: Walk to Fight Diabetes fundraiser at Audubon Park, the company was able to come together for one cause, Ralston said.

"Secretaries and their kids, associate staff lawyers and partners were all represented at the walk," he said. "And we did it together." •

— Katie Urbaszewski

TWO-TIME HONOREE

Postlethwaite & Netterville

Employees at Postlethwaite & Netterville say the public accounting firm's extensive training and development keeps them well nurtured, and as a result staff members tend to stay for a long time.

Joey Richard, New Orleans office director, says the firm provides study materials for the certified public accountant exam and at least 64 hours of paid learning time during summer months.

"Employees can prepare for the CPA test on us," he said, and staff members who pass the exam receive an immediate 4 percent raise and a \$2,000 bonus.

The company also rewards its employees with annual bonuses based on monetary and professional accomplishments. Workers can also receive a \$3,000 to \$5,000 bonus for referring a new employee to the firm.

Richard said the company's clients are diverse, from privately held and public companies to nonprofits and individuals in the Louisiana-Texas region and beyond. Employees visiting clients have the chance to travel throughout the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and China for audits and tax planning, he said.

The firm also conducts business-process reviews and provides technology consulting and litigation support.

Senior auditor Hayley Morgan said she likes so many things about her job that she barely knows where to begin.

"Our office is friendly, and I've developed many personal relationships here, though we know how to separate them from our professional duties," Morgan said. "I've learned a great deal from our clients about the industries they're in, and am grateful for that exposure."

Morgan said she enjoys participating in the firm's community projects, such as the annual Odyssey Ball silent auction at the New Orleans Museum of Art.

The firm contributes employee volunteers to

Nature of business: accounting and business advisory firm

Where based: Baton Rouge, with second-largest office in Metairie

Employees: 77 in Metairie, 311 companywide

Average starting salary: \$35,000 to \$43,000 for administration, \$46,650 for professionals

Median salary: \$42,500 for administration, \$68,900 for professionals

Average employment time: three years

Benefits: health care with 90 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 25 percent match on first 4 percent contributed, continuing education program, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: about one month

Paid days off: 30 to 40

Web site: www.pncpa.com



From back: Donald Maginnis, Brittany Fallon, Staci Ritchie and Savi Rengakrishan of Postlethwaite & Netterville race chairs through the office. The company held a team-building event earlier this year in which employees competed in contests such as office chair relay races, Wii Bowling and mind gymnastics.

more than 10 major charitable events a year, including a Louisiana Children's Museum fundraiser and a walk for the American Lung Association. It also sponsors food drives and disaster-recovery initiatives.

Staci Ritchie, a senior auditor in Metairie, said she appreciates the firm's sense of teamwork and the ability of colleagues to tackle challenges together.

"We had an Office Olympics this year to see who could make the longest paper-clip chain, throw balled paper in small holes, run a course with a ball on a spoon and pin a tail on a boss," she said. "We watched our co-workers do awkward, funny things here in the office and our directors take cues from the staff. And we got

to know each other even better."

The company has many employees who have stayed 25 to 30 years, marketing manager Rachael Higginbotham said.

The Metairie office, she said, is like the city of New Orleans — a melting pot of nearly 80 employees providing numerous services to varied industries.

One nice perk, she said, is that the office works half days on Friday in the steamy month of July.

"The (company) culture is very welcoming and accommodating. It helps people make the most of their careers," Higginbotham said. "They focus on people's personal goals, and they genuinely care about their employees." •

— Susan Buchanan

A Partnership That Helps Others

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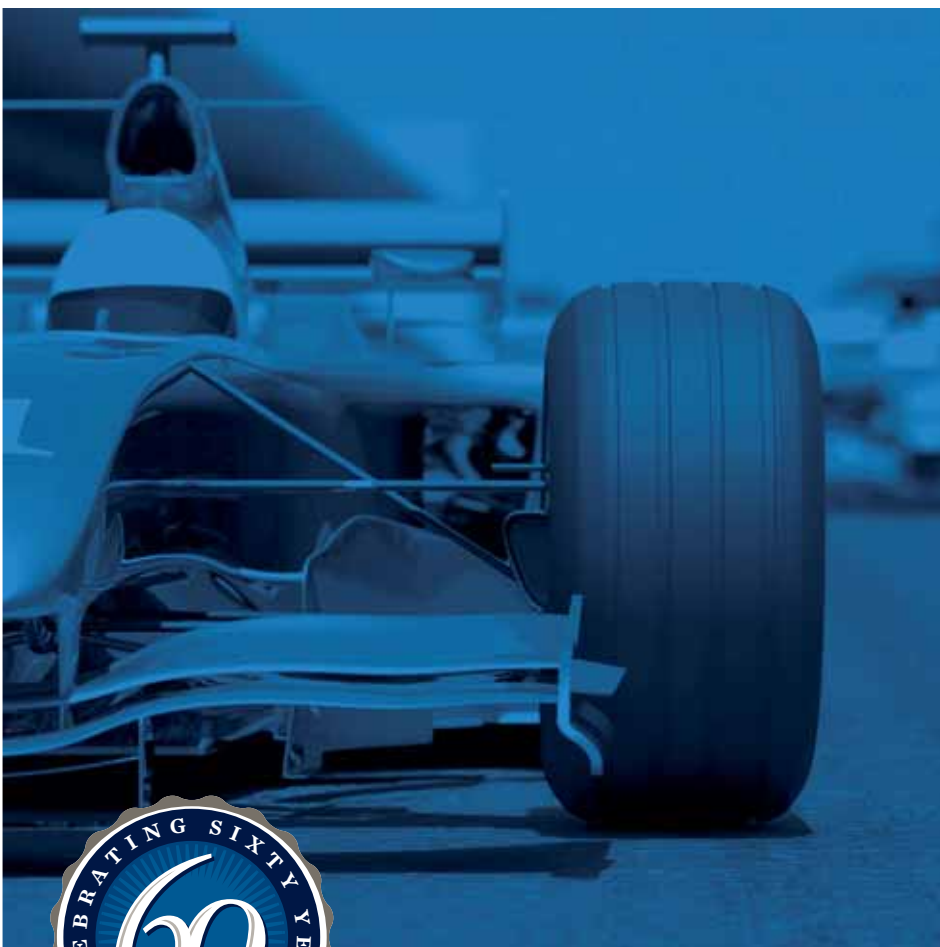
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Quest Diagnostics

Michele Kelly already liked the courier work she did with Quest Diagnostics, delivering blood work and tissue from area hospitals and doctors' offices back to her company's busy clinical lab.

"But I had started a family and felt that I wanted to do more and move up that corporate ladder," Kelly said.

That led to her decision to take advantage of a Quest Diagnostics program that allows employees to train for another job. She studied for more than a year to become a professional phlebotomist.

"I liked that this company was willing to help me in every way that they could to go up to the next step," said Kelly, who began working for Quest Diagnostics in 1993. "That made me feel good about being here."

Such in-house promotions are a part of the way Quest Diagnostics does business, said Sameera Rimawi, a technical manager who started with the company in the spring of 2007.

"They offer online computer training for our frontline employees, and they regularly have leadership training," Rimawi said. "They encourage you to grow. A lot of people start here in one position and end up somewhere else, mainly because they took advantage of all the different education and training that the company provides."

Among the training and education services Quest Diagnostics offers its employees is the IntelliQuest Web site, where employees can view more than 450 class choices. Online options include in-depth training for employees in what are known as "patient-touch" positions such as logistics and phlebotomy. Employees working in positions behind the scenes can

Nature of business: clinical laboratory

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 240

Average starting salary: \$31,761 (\$15.27 per hour) for exempt employees, \$47,528 (\$22.85 per hour) for nonexempt

Median salary: \$34,653 (\$16.66 per hour) for exempt employees, \$62,172 (\$29.89 per hour) for nonexempt

Average employment time: seven and a half years

Benefits: health care with 85 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, unmarried partner benefits, paid maternity leave, 401(k) with 6 percent match, continuing education program, relocation assistance, flexible hours, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: about one month

Paid days off: 33

Web site: www.questdiagnostics.com



Quest Diagnostics employees pile into the company's van. Quest delivers blood work and tissue from New Orleans area hospitals and doctors' offices back to their Metairie lab.

remain up to date with the latest trends in such fields as histotechnology, hematology, chemistry, microbiology and cytotechnology.

"The idea is that the employees are what makes our company succeed," Rimawi said. "They really focus on employee success and reinforcing us in what we are doing."

That reinforcement works in several different ways, Rimawi said.

"We encounter challenges on a daily basis, but you never feel that you are alone here. You always have support from the other staff members as well as higher management to help you through anything."

Bobby Mahl, who works in logistics, said a strong work environment has kept him with Quest Diagnostics for nearly three decades.

"This is a place where you can just tell that people like to come to work," he said.

Doing deliveries inside a wide regional arc that includes metro New Orleans as well as much of southeastern Louisiana, Mahl said he is always happy to return to the Quest Diagnostic lab in Metairie.

"The people here are all working together and helping each other out. It's just a positive place to come back to."•

— Garry Boulard

Photo by Frank Aymanni



Chanh Phan packages ties at the warehouse of Randa Accessories.

Randa Accessories

At Randa Accessories' St. Rose facility, it's not tough to find employees who have been with the company for decades.

"I have three employees at this facility with over 40 years of experience," Senior Vice President Randy Kennedy said. "I have over a half-dozen with over 30 years. We've got a very stable long-term work force."

The company is a world leader in manufacturing, distributing and marketing men's accessories such as neckties, wallets and luggage for partners that include Ecko Unlimited, Liz Claiborne and Perry Ellis Portfolio.

Randa operates in eight countries. It employs 250 people locally and more than 1,000 worldwide.

Employees say there is plenty of room to grow within Randa, which has a large menu of career opportunities, including accounting, computer programming, engineering and serving customers.

During his 25 years with the company, Kennedy worked his way up from sweeping floors to become a top executive.

Charlie Fos, who rose from staff industrial engineering to vice president of distribution in

his 35 years, said he has stuck around because he values the fairness in which Randa treats its employees and enjoys the company of his colleagues.

"For the most part, the entire group gets along pretty well," Fos said. "There's some fairly decent camaraderie. There's a lot of personal pride in getting the jobs done correctly and properly and a little bit of competition between some the departments, a friendly competition."

Randa has a predominantly female work force and is sympathetic to the family obligations of its working mothers, Fos said.

Cindy Dufresne, an executive assistant and single mother, said she is grateful that the company was willing to work around her schedule when she had to tend to some personal issues several years ago.

"I was still able to work with the company and handle the situation without it interfering with my employment," said Dufresne, who has been with Randa for more than five years. "That was a big help. I had only been here a year. A lot of companies might have said, 'Over. Done.' But not here."

Nature of business: men's accessories manufacturer

Where based: St. Rose

Employees: 1,000 worldwide with 240 locally

Average starting salary: \$18,720 for warehouse staff (\$9 an hour, calculated on a 40-hour week), \$40,000 for office staff

Median salary: \$22,880 for warehouse staff (\$11 an hour, calculated on a 40-hour week), \$55,000 a year for office staff

Average employment time: nine years

Benefits: health care with 90 percent coverage, 401(k) with up to 4 percent match, dental and prescription plans, unmarried partner benefits, paid maternity leave, relocation assistance, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: 45 days

Paid days off: 19.5

Web site: www.randa.net

Employees said Randa goes out of its way to build a family atmosphere. The company holds an annual family day at New Orleans City Park, gives workers turkeys just before Thanksgiving and hams before Christmas, and sponsors on-site wellness screenings once a year.

And employees don't take for granted that Randa's six-year-old warehouse is climate-controlled.

"Our entire warehouse is air conditioned, which is not required for our product," Kennedy said. "We do it truly for our employees' comfort, and if you go around Louisiana, it's extremely rare that you'll find any air-conditioned warehouse unless it happens to be a medical supplier."•

— Ryan Chatelain

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Photo by Frank Aymami

From left: Interior designer Jennifer Mitchell, principals/architects Brian Faucheux and Thomas Brown, intern/architect Karl Bernhard and principals/architects Billy Sizeler and Allen Ohlmeyer pretend to direct traffic outside the Department of Transportation and Development's Regional Transportation Management Center. The firm designed the facility.

Sizeler Thompson Brown Architects

As an intern, Karl Bernhard didn't expect to get very much respect or responsibility when he began working at Sizeler Thompson Brown Architects. Soon after stepping into the firm's office three years ago, he was pleasantly surprised to be proven wrong.

"I'm involved with the design process, speaking with clients, going to sites," he said. "Because of the experience, I feel like I'm growing exponentially."

Bernhard said there's a sense of trust and camaraderie at Sizeler that he really appreciates. The architects give him the opportunity to contribute to design and aren't afraid to let him talk to clients on his own.

"A lot of owners (from other architectural firms) seem to be scared of that — 'What are they going to do?' or 'What are they going to say?'"

"We're very team-oriented," Studio Administrator Veronica White said. "It's pleasant to come to work."

White, who has worked at Sizeler for 22 years, said the firm's annual employee retreats encourage team building. When she was going through difficult times of loss, the company provided a lot of moral support and time off.

"They've really stood by me for a lot of trouble I've had," she said. "They were extremely supportive and understanding."

It took a disaster to bring all the employees together in a way they hadn't been before, said Brian Faucheux, principal. After Hurricane Katrina, the company set up a temporary office in Prairieville where employees interacted in a more tight-knit atmosphere than they had before the storm in New Orleans.

"At the end of it all, we interviewed everyone and asked what we should bring back from this," Faucheux said.

One answer that came up repeatedly was to keep regular employee lunches, something the firm still does. Sizeler buys lunch once a month

Nature of business: architecture
Where based: New Orleans
Employees: 50
Average starting salary: \$36,600
Median salary: \$53,000 for staff, \$102,800 for principals/associates
Average employment time: six and a half years
Benefits: health care with 75 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k), continuing education program, day care options, telecommuting, flexible hours
Wait time for benefits: none
Paid days off: 27.5
Web site: www.sizelerthompsonbrown.com

during full staff meetings.

"People really bonded in circumstances that were not typical in the work environment," Faucheux said.

Since then, the company has encouraged a lot of other community-oriented exercises. Every year, the staff has a chance to participate in the company's Art for Art's Sake exhibit in the Warehouse District.

The company gives employees a challenge and some materials and then offers a pre-show screening and a reception with hundreds of guests on the night of the event.

"We're a fairly large architecture firm in New Orleans, but we really have a close-knit, family atmosphere," Faucheux said. •

— Katie Urbaszewski

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www.SlidellMemorial.org

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Radiologic technologist Joey Roby checks on patient Jennifer Bingham before her CT scan. Roby has been an employee at Slidell Memorial Hospital for 30 years.

TWO-TIME HONOREE

Slidell Memorial Hospital

Brenda Carter, an emergency room technician at Slidell Memorial Hospital, was going through a nightmarish time in her life. First, her brother died. Then her son was killed two weeks later. In the most trying time of her life, Carter was amazed at how her bosses and co-workers at Slidell Memorial rallied around her.

"You would have thought I was in my own neighborhood," Carter said.

The neighborhood analogy serves as a microcosm of the hospital as a whole. Now in its 50th year, Slidell Memorial prides itself on being a community hospital above all else.

"The employees here are committed to the concept of a community hospital," CEO Bob Hawley said.

Julia Thomas, director of rehabilitation, said the most rewarding part of her job is to live and work in the same community, which allows her to see tangible benefits of her efforts. She treated a patient with Guillain-Barre syndrome, a rare viral disease that causes paralysis. Once the paralysis wears off, the patient must undergo a long, arduous rehabilitation.

One day, Thomas ran into the patient at a grocery store and was able to see that patient walking and functioning again.

"(The feeling) is better than a paycheck," Thomas said. "You made that person's life productive again."

As part of its drive to serve the community, Slidell Memorial administrators conduct extensive surveys to make sure patients are happy with the care they receive. Hawley said the hospital finished in the 98th percentile in customer satisfaction based on a series of surveys that covered about 1,800 hospitals nationwide.

And the hospital makes sure that if customers are happy, then employees are happy, too, Thomas said. All employees receive a bonus if the customer satisfaction surveys hit a certain number.

"It's putting your money where your mouth is," Thomas said. "If we hit our target, everyone benefits financially. Everyone gets the same bonus, regardless of who you are."

The hospital also gives employees incentives to stay healthy, such as reimbursements

Nature of business: hospital
Where based: Slidell
Employees: 759
Average starting salary: \$28,912
Median salary: \$50,398 for staff, \$326,664 for physicians
Average employment time: seven years
Benefits: health care with 75 percent coverage, dental, vision, prescriptions, 401(k) with 4 percent match, paid maternity leave, continuing education program, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program, subsidized meals
Wait time for benefits: one month after hire
Paid days off: 24
Web site: www.slidellmemorial.org

for health club memberships.

The hospital promotes from within and enables employees to transfer from one department to another if they want a change of pace. Carter has worked in several different positions at Slidell Memorial.

"It's an ongoing learning experience," Carter said. "If you feel burned out on a job, you can take classes to learn another job within the hospital."

The hospital's belief is that healthy and happy employees will better serve the community.

"We're not in this business to make a profit," Hawley said. "We're here to provide a service to the community, and we do a fantastic job of that." •

— Fritz Esker



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Photo by Frank Aymami

From left: Benefit consultant Ana Graci, employee benefit specialist Joe Maniscalco, President Kevin Gardner, Vice President Mike Ford, employee benefit specialist Eddie Cabos and benefit consultant Lisa McCoy partake in some friendly competition at Strategic Employee Benefit Services.

TWO-TIME HONOREE

Strategic Employee Benefit Services of Louisiana

Everyone wants to be appreciated at work. Since people are more productive when they feel appreciated by their bosses, each department at Strategic Employee Benefit Services gets its own appreciation week.

The company treats members of the group to a different appreciation activity each day, including a nice breakfast, a lunch outing, a happy hour after work, sweets and fresh flowers. The leadership team also cuts out headshots of the honored group's members and pastes them onto pictures of rock stars. The week concludes with employees working a half-day before being whisked away to a surprise off-site destination, such as Ship Island in Mississippi.

"They really go all out and take it to a new level," said Alena Vinet, a voluntary internal service representative. "It feels like Christmas morning. ... Normally (at most companies), appreciation is just a lunch."

The company also rewards employees for their performance. SEBS' annual bonus plan

pays employees 10 percent of their salary as a bonus if the company's sales goal and individual sales goals for the year are met.

That dedication to showing staff how much they are appreciated is part of SEBS' core beliefs, beliefs adhered to by everyone from executives to staff members, employees say.

"We've learned one thing — how you treat your employees has a direct correlation to how your employees will treat the clients," SEBS President Kevin Gardner said. "We try to look at our employees as clients and treat them that way."

"They (the leaders in the office) take more of a coaching role than a management role," said Rachel Hamann, a benefits consultant.

"They're there to assist, not micromanage."

The giving, appreciative attitude extends from employee to employee as well. When one branch of the office is busy, other employees pitch in to get the work done, Hamann said.

Even with nonwork matters, employees help

Nature of business: employee benefit consulting

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 69

Average starting salary: \$32,000 for staff, \$55,000 for licensed benefit consultants

Median salary: \$39,500 for staff, \$72,000 for licensed benefit consultants

Average employment time: six years

Benefits: health care with 80 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 3 percent match, continuing education program, flexible hours, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: about one month

Paid days off: 29 on average

Web site: www.neworleans.strategicebs.com

each other out. One SEBS employee teaches self-defense on the side and held a free course for the women in the office.

When Vinet started working for the company a year and a half ago, her division was a startup, and her role was initially unstructured. Her boss was in sales, so she was often out of the office.

At first, Vinet was a little intimidated and had to find her way around the job, but her co-workers immediately set her mind at ease.

"I would have been lost if they hadn't been so helpful," Vinet said.

And that behavior becomes self-perpetuating. "We don't do anything individually," Vinet said.

"Everything is team-based. Everyone enjoys what they do, and it comes off in the work." •

— Fritz Esker



Photo by Frank Aymami

St. Tammany Parish Hospital employees show their “team spirit.” In addition to being avid football fans, employees boost camaraderie through a fundraiser pitting hospital units in a costume competition and an obstacle course gurney race.

FIVE-TIME HONOREE

St. Tammany Parish Hospital

Randy Martinez admits his department gets pretty competitive in the St. Tammany Parish Hospital Foundation’s Gurney Games, a fundraiser pitting hospital units in a costume competition and an obstacle course gurney race.

“We were actually the ‘Wizard of Oz.’ We dressed up the gurney as Dorothy’s house that was falling to the ground,” said Martinez, who was the mayor of Munchkin Land in the annual spring event featuring food, drinks, music and prizes.

Martinez is a licensed physical therapist assistant in the hospital’s rehab services unit, this year’s Fan Favorite and winner of the best overall Dynamic Decor Award.

“Every year we try to focus on costumes and creating the best gurney event ever,” Martinez said. “It really gives us something fun and creative to think about and do outside of work.” Having such fun with co-workers “makes it more enjoyable to work here,” Martinez said.

For Kristin Roy, an inpatient charge nurse, the fun comes in the form of a weekly kickball game implemented this year, and in the gen-

uine care co-workers show for one another.

“When you go to work, everyone cares about personal lives as well,” Roy said. “We’re not just at work; we’re there for each other.”

Roy points to her job interview with the hospital as the first moment she sensed the caring atmosphere after she had searched for a job for six months.

“I actually skipped through the human resources department and called the manager of the particular floor (Amy Wade),” Roy said, recalling a non-intimidating interview with a manager.

“We actually looked alike. She actually called me right away” for the job, Roy said.

Roy said she appreciates the flexibility the hospital allows in scheduling work, an employee pharmacy that beats drugstore prices and the extended illness bank, which gives employees a percentage of their work hours for sick time.

Cherie Fauchaux, the clinical application and implementation manager in information systems, recalls when hospital CEO Patty

Nature of business: hospital
Where based: Covington
Employees: 1,287
Average starting salary: \$55,016
Median salary: \$57,200
Average employment time: six and a half years
Benefits: health care with 96 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, pension with 6 percent paid by company, continuing education program, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, fitness program, subsidized meals
Wait time for benefits: one month
Paid days off: 29.8 to 44.8
Web site: www.stph.org

Ellish visited her team and offered assistance.

“I recall one situation where we were in the middle of a particularly stressful implementation and Ms. Ellish herself stopped by my office, not just to see how it was going but to personally check on me and my staff, (to see) how we were doing and if there was anything we needed,” Fauchaux said. “The respect she showed for what we do was greatly appreciated by our information systems team. She always shows interest in the projects we’re doing.”

Fauchaux said the hospital celebrates employees’ successes and shares the information with the hospital’s entire staff.

“There is a feeling of continued growth and opportunity here at STPH, always striving to find out what they can do to make things better for everyone, including the employee,” she said. •

— Diana Chandler



Employees of Superior Energy Services prepare for the annual YMCA Corporate Cup 5K race. From left are: Jessica Vinturela, Laura Held (tying shoe), Ross Burkenstock, Maria Perdue, Porter Nolan, Julie Castex and Brady Bordelon.

FOUR-TIME HONOREE

Superior Energy Services

If an employee of Superior Energy Services comes face to face with an unforeseen tragedy, there's a system in place to help them.

Superior Energy's Catastrophic Relief Fund gives financial assistance to co-workers and family during a time of need.

"It is set up so that any amount can be donated at any time. And once donations come in, higher management matches donation amounts and makes the contributions even bigger," said Sandy Derise, a general manager for Superior's marine division.

The fund is a unique example of the company's support for its employees, Derise said.

"They stick by you 100 percent in whatever you do," Derise said. "There is an element of respect on all levels. It makes a difference to know that regular employees have unwavering support."

Employees say the company's commitment to career growth is what makes the energy firm such a great place to come to work every day.

"Management allows employees to flourish in what they do," said Greg Rosenstein,

vice president of investor relations. "There are so many opportunities for growth within the company and also among Superior's subsidiary companies.

Human resources employee Aileen Nethery said that element of variety is what makes Superior such an interesting workplace.

"There are 21 different companies under the one umbrella, so you can end up working on any number of things," Nethery said. "There is always an opportunity to do something different or go in a direction you had not previously gone."

Rosenstein said the company takes an active role in career path development through Superior's Leadership Training Program.

"The program provides managers with the skill set needed to assist every employee in taking advantage of every opportunity to reach full potential," Rosenstein said. "An entry-level field employee is given the training and resources to work their way up to an executive level position. Whether the employee begins their career answering

Nature of business: energy services

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 896 in New Orleans, 4,600 worldwide

Average starting salary: \$39,000

Median salary: \$51,000

Average employment time: five years

Benefits: health care with 80 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, paid maternity leave, 401(k) with 50 percent match of up to 5 percent of salary, relocation assistance, employee recognition program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 27

Web site: www.superiorenergy.com

phones or as an oil well firefighter, they could eventually evolve into leadership positions."

Rosenstein said another popular perk is Superior's discounted stock option, which is open to all employee levels.

"It gives them that feel of ownership of the company," he said. "It allows employees to benefit from growth in the company, growth that they have a role in by coming to work every day."

Rosenstein said there is a very low turnover margin at Superior.

"Many of the people that I work with have been here as long as I have," said Rosenstein, who has been with Superior more than 10 years. "There is a lot of loyalty and a lot of camaraderie among employees here."•

— Robin Shannon



Photo by Frank Aymami

The staff of Taste Buds Management dig into some dishes from Zea Rotisserie & Grill outside of their Oak Street headquarters. From left: Vice President of Operations Paul Hutson, Chef/Owner Gary Darling (holding fork), Chef/Owner Hans Limburg, Director of Culinary Operations Kevin Guidroz, Chef/Owner Greg Reggio (holding spoon) Chief Financial Officer Mary Ford, Marketing Director Nancy Jeansonne (dusting) and CEO Chris Rodrigue.

Taste Buds Management

Mina Morales thought she wanted to become a nurse — until she began working at Zea Rotisserie & Grill.

The St. Bernard Parish native started at the restaurant's St. Charles Avenue location as a summer job while attending the University of New Orleans. She stayed on staff and was promoted from server to crew leader to bartender.

Impressed by her professionalism and rapport with Zea's customers as a bartender, General Manager Alan Alvarez asked Morales if she had ever thought about becoming a restaurant manager.

"At that moment in time, I thought about where my direction in life was going, and I was like, 'I really enjoy this company, and I really enjoy the restaurant industry,'" Morales said. "So I started key managing, which is kind of like a manager in training, and I changed my major in school."

Taste Buds Management operates Zea and Semolina restaurants. The New Orleans-based company runs seven restaurants locally and 14 across the South.

Like Morales, Marla Chua also saw her path

in life going in a different direction. While in culinary school, her goal was to work under a well-known chef at a five-star restaurant.

"This is the only corporate restaurant I would ever work for," said Chua, who was recently transferred to manage Zea's Birmingham, Ala., location. "The culture that we live by is amazing. Everybody who works for the company has a main goal in mind."

Morales, who has worked for Zea for five years and is now the St. Charles location's event coordinator, said one of the aspects she enjoys most about Zea is how open her superiors are open to suggestions from employees at all levels.

Taste Buds' mission statement aims to "encourage innovation by having the freedom to make mistakes."

Morales recommended her restaurant begin delivering its food and offering off-site catering. Both suggestions have since been implemented.

"I'm smart enough to know that CEO of the company doesn't really mean a whole lot," Taste Buds chief executive Chris

Nature of business: casual dining

Employees: 632

Average starting salary: \$20,010 for hourly employees (\$9.60 an hour, calculated on a 40-hour week), \$45,000 for management

Median salary: \$20,280 for hourly, \$52,724 for management

Average employment time: one year for hourly employees, 2.8 years for management

Benefits: health care with up to 100 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with up to 4 percent match, tuition assistance, continuing education program, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: 30 to 90 days

Paid days off: up to 18

Web site: www.zearestaurants.com, www.semolina.com

Rodrigue said. "I don't get a whole lot of contact with our guests. The folks that get contact with our guests are our servers, the hostesses, the bartenders, the guys and gals in the back of the kitchen that are cooking the food. It's very important to us that we hear from those people."

Taste Buds also offers health care, vision, dental and 401(k) plans to its employees, rarities in the restaurant industry.

"The primary focus of the organization is the simple belief that you take care of the people who take care of the guests and everything else will take care of itself," Rodrigue said. "We focus on providing a quality work environment for our employees."•

— Ryan Chatelain

FOUR-TIME HONOREE

Touro Infirmary

Although it historically has been one of the city's smaller hospitals, Touro Infirmary has always had a big name in New Orleans.

A family-style work environment and closeness between employees has created an atmosphere that entices some workers to stick around for decades.

Take accounts payable supervisor Sydney Gonsoulin, who has been with Touro for 38 years. Originally starting in the pharmacy department, she moved around the hospital until she eventually found a home in accounts payable.

Gonsoulin has been with Touro so long that she recalls the pre-computer days of keypunch systems.

"I've now been settled in accounts payable for close to 30 years, but it feels like I just got here yesterday," Gonsoulin said. "I've occasionally seen people leave Touro, but they all eventually come back."

In addition to the standard benefits for an employer its size, perks include up to \$4,000 a year in tuition assistance, an on-site gym and long- and short-term disability insurance.

The company also offers employee of the month programs and an employee recognition program, in which employees can recognize co-workers who exemplify Touro's values. As a reward, those employees receive Touro Bucks that can be used in the parking garage, café or gift shop.

The hospital also holds a celebration for the employee of the month, which includes prizes such as \$100, a pair of New Orleans Hornets tickets and a reserved parking space for that month.

"People often spend more time at work than they do with their own families," said Chad Courge, vice president of human resources. "It's important that they have a place and environment where they feel comfortable and happy."

Nature of business: hospital

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 1,370

Average starting salary: \$39,823

Median salary: \$47,840

Average employment time: more than six years

Benefits: health care with 73 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, unmarried partner benefits, paid maternity leave, medical, dental, prescription, unmarried partner benefits, 403(b) with 1 percent match, continuing education program, relocation assistance, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program, fitness program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: up to 90 days

Paid days off: 26 to 39, depending on years of service

Web site: www.touro.com



Photo by Frank Aymami

Holding an old photo of the hospital, Touro Infirmary Archivist Catherine Kahn sits in the wheelchair Brad Pitt used in "The Curious Case of Benjamin Buttons." The chair is among the artifacts kept in the hospital's archives.

Registered nurse Eva Morris, the patient care manager of the emergency department, has been with Touro for three years. Morris was director of a hospital in Ruston for 15 years before moving to New Orleans where her daughter had worked for Touro and recommended she start her job search there.

Morris said her daughter was so impressed with Touro in the initial interview that she "never even bothered to look anywhere else."

Despite being in a new city where she barely knew anyone, she was warmly welcomed by the staff.

"I think they've really invested in instilling those values in us, and it pays off in creating this supportive team atmosphere," Morris said. "It has given us all a new way of looking at things."

Touro also has a strong history of community involvement and participates in more than 100 events per year, partnering with such organizations as the American Heart Association, the American Diabetes Association, the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure and the American Cancer Society. •

— Craig Guillot



Photo by Frank Aymami

Tulane University employees display their real-life musical talents. From left are: assistant grounds supervisor Artis Lewis, piano; accounting clerk Yolanda Jackson, gospel singer; graphic designer Tracey O'Donnell, guitar; senior associate dean for admissions Dr. Marc Kahn, trumpet; clarinet tutor Robyn Jones; pediatrics professor Dr. Russell Van Dyke, banjo; and associate music professor John Joyce, drums.

TWO-TIME HONOREE

Tulane University

When it comes to the college experience, the sense of community and camaraderie that comes with it is something people cherish for the rest of their lives.

For the employees of Tulane University, it's a feeling that extends to their day-to-day work environment.

"It's like being part of a small city within the bigger city of New Orleans," said Yvette Jones, executive vice president for university relations and development. "You've got young people around you all the time, new ideas and innovations. ... It's a vital community that you're a part of."

Even for staff members, education is encouraged; all employees and their immediate family members can receive a free Tulane education.

When Jones began working for Tulane 30 years ago as a secretary to the president, she had not yet received a bachelor's degree. Using Tulane's tuition waiver, she obtained her bachelor's degree and master's in business administration, and her daughter graduated from the university in 2000 at no cost.

Employees say Tulane's administration values everyone's input. Melinda Viles, graphic design manager at Tulane, said President Scott Cowen sits in on focus groups every year in which employees can voice suggestions and concerns.

"He weighs what everyone has to say," Viles said.

When employees reach their fifth anniversary, as Viles recently did, they receive a gift certificate to one of 200 stores of their choice.

Employees say the university encourages them to tend to their families and personal lives.

"Our boss stresses taking time out with the kids," said Shawn Lege, assistant vice president for university construction. On several occasions, Lege has left work to attend his children's sporting events, father/son lunches at his son's school and other family functions.

As long as he finishes his work, he can take the time to be with his family. The hours are flexible, and he can work from home if necessary, he said.

Nature of business: education

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 4,100

Average starting salary: \$30,000

Median starting salary: \$37,000

Average employment time: 11.5 years

Benefits: health care with 60 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, unmarried partner benefits, paid maternity and paternity leave, 401(k), continuing education program, day care options, paid mileage, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 43

Web site: www.tulane.edu

Career advancement is another perk at Tulane, where employees are often promoted from within. Lege started as a project manager then was promoted to director of construction and eventually his current position. Jones started out as a secretary and worked her way up to an executive vice president position.

Jones said one of her favorite aspects of her job is getting to know students during their time at Tulane, especially when they fall in love with the university and want to pursue careers there. Jones estimates that of Tulane's 4,100 full-time employees, more than one-fourth are alumni.

"Students come here and they want to stay," Jones said. •

— Fritz Esker



Photo by Frank Aymami

From left: Enrollment Counselor Catherine Tolliver, Arts and Sciences Campus College Chairwoman Sunny Ryerson and Enrollment Supervisor Eric Williams play graduates at the University of Phoenix, Louisiana Campus.

University of Phoenix, Louisiana Campus

Pietro Della Valentina Jr. is receiving a full-time salary as associate director of student services at the University of Phoenix while earning a master's degree in business administration from the school, tuition free.

On a typical workday, he's in the office from 9 a.m. to 6:15 p.m., goes home for dinner and takes courses online from about 9 p.m. until midnight.

He's on track to receive his advanced degree, with a concentration in human resource management, next November, adding to the bachelor's degree in political science he already holds from Loyola University. His savings of \$29,000 is significant, considering that he's still paying for his Loyola degree.

"That one cost me a pretty penny, all worth it," Valentina said.

Free tuition is one of the favored perks for University of Phoenix employees, who also voice appreciation for career advancement and opportunities to play as hard as they work.

Pamela Calonje, an enrollment counselor, became familiar with the university while living in southern California. Then an executive recruiter, she found the university well respect-

ed among employers and was impressed with the university's opportunities for career growth and continuing education.

"Career advancement is absolutely possible for those who prove themselves and want the opportunity for growth," she said. "The company is growing continually, which opens up many possibilities in many directions for those who are committed to the same goals."

Calonje has been in the same position the five years she has worked for the university but said she's being groomed for a promotion.

"I've been given more and more responsibility," Calonje said. "The opportunity's certainly there."

Mary Steele, also an enrollment counselor, signed on with the university when it was new to Louisiana 14 years ago and has watched the company grow.

"There are ongoing opportunities to enhance your knowledge, aside from the education benefit, and skill sets via training opportunities," Steele said. "The company has a professional development requirement for each employee each year, with various resources

Nature of business: higher education

Where based locally: Metairie

Employees: 126

Average starting salary: \$38,400

Median salary: \$42,747

Average employment time: four and a half years

Benefits: health care with 85 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 30-cent match for every dollar contributed up to 15 percent, continuing education program, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: first of the month after 60 days of employment

Paid days off: up to 35.5

Web site: www.phoenix.edu

available to accomplish this."

Steele has taken courses in organizational management and appreciates online and campus seminars and periodic performance assessments.

"It encourages you to keep improving yourself," she said. "The world does not stop. It encourages you to keep up with the world."

With the hard work comes fun times, such as holiday gatherings, barbecues and community involvement.

On Halloween, employees of the company's four Louisiana campuses gathered at the Lafayette location for a party and costume contest. Calonje created a skit based on the "Deal or No Deal" game show, casting herself as Wanda Whoopee, a contestant dressed as a whoopee cushion, with a bald coworker as host Howie Mandel.

— Diana Chandler



Photo by Frank Aymami

From left: Walton Construction Co. project engineer Kurk Alexander, assistant project manager Steven Stewart, working foreman Brandy Knight and human resources/operations administrative assistant Crystal Hellbach show off drawings at Andrew H. Wilson Elementary School, which Walton has been renovating for more than a year.

THREE-TIME HONOREE

Walton Construction Co.

The bustling theater and in-house library at Walton Construction's Harahan office serve as proof of the company's commitment to developing its employees, said office manager Adele Cantavespri.

It's in these two facilities where employees can find the resources to hone skills that will help them do their jobs better and potentially lead to promotions with the Kansas City, Mo.-based company that expanded to the New Orleans area in 2003.

"This company is very aggressive with wanting you to learn, to take courses," said Cantavespri, who started at Walton as a receptionist in 2005.

One reason Walton embraces continued training of its employees is so it can stay ahead of the curve in an industry that is evolving, especially technologically, said Donald Thurlow, senior vice president of operations and preconstruction services.

"The construction industry has changed and Walton has changed with it, always for the bet-

ter," Thurlow said. "I like the ability to make that change happen and be a part of it. I've worked for other companies that didn't necessarily give me that opportunity. It was just, 'This is the way we've done it forever.'"

Employees say they find working at Walton rewarding because of the types of community projects the company pursues.

Walton is restoring Andrew H. Wilson Elementary School in Broadmoor, rebuilding 16 barracks at Fort Polk and constructing the 19th Judicial Courthouse in Baton Rouge. The company also has built housing in eastern New Orleans and on the campus of Southern University at New Orleans.

"There's never a dull moment with the type of work we're doing," Thurlow said.

Steven Stewart, assistant manager of the Wilson Elementary project, said he appreciates knowing that he's rebuilding a venerable piece of the city that was devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

"We got to put this school back together as it

Nature of business: general contractors

Where based locally: Harahan

Employees: 145 locally, 400 companywide

Average starting salary: \$52,171

Median salary: \$36,286 for labor employees, carpenters and operators; \$68,658 for field employees

Average employment time: four years

Benefits: health care with 90 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with up to 9 percent match, continuing education program, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: six weeks

Paid days off: 24-34

Web site: www.waltonbuilt.com

would have looked brand new 100 years ago when they put it in," Stewart said.

The school, which is also being expanded, is slated for completion by January.

The strongest aspect of working for Walton, Stewart said, is how the company puts its project managers in a position to succeed.

"They'll give you all the tools in your toolbox to allow you to stand out, to give you a certain amount of autonomy, to make decisions and move things forward and let you be creative while working on your job," he said. "It's up to you as an employee to take those tools that they've given you and move forward and make your job successful and your career path successful." •

— Ryan Chatelain



Photo by Frank Aymami

From left: West Jefferson Medical Center employees Courtney Groue, JoAnn Toval, Paul Griffin, Alaina Wertz, Karen Sherman and Maureen Morris play around with hula hoops outside the hospital's fitness center.

SEVEN-TIME HONOREE

West Jefferson Medical Center

At a time when employee-sponsored medical plans are getting harder to come by, West Jefferson Medical Center employees receive 100 percent health insurance coverage.

It's one of the company's prime benefits and what registered nurse and clinician Cheryn Young said is what sets her workplace apart from other jobs in the New Orleans area.

"When they talk about their benefits and health insurance, no one comes close. It's the best in the city," she said. "If we go to West Jeff physicians, we don't have any out-of-pocket expenses."

Young has worked at West Jefferson for 11 years and said she's watched the medical center help a lot of people through crises, especially after Hurricane Katrina.

"There are people who just walk in the clinic — suicidal, nowhere to turn, no where to go — and start a program here," she said. "And in maybe three to six months they've learned coping mechanisms that help them get jobs, help them get family therapy. I actually have letters from people that say if it hadn't been for

us, they might not have made it through the devastation."

Young said it's her co-workers, as well as the work she does, that make her work satisfying.

Maureen Morris, senior director of human resources, agrees. She's been in the work force for 30 years but has worked at WJMC for three.

"People here smile at you, make eye contact, say hello," Morris said. "I felt welcomed as soon as I came here, and I still feel that way."

Morris said she has never seen an organization that is more into fundraising.

"Our employees have devoted a lot of their personal time and resources for these causes, and it's fun too," she said.

West Jeff has been involved with national cancer prevention, heart association fundraisers, community screenings and immunizations. The hospital also has worked with schools and colleges to educate students about health-related careers.

Morris said the center also organizes events to help their employees.

Nature of business: hospital

Where based: Marrero

Employees: 1,548

Average starting salary: \$40,435

Median salary: \$48,020

Average employment time: seven years

Benefits: health care with 76 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 2 percent match, continuing education program, day-care options, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program, fitness program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 28 to 56, depending on years of service

Web site: www.wjmc.org

Several months back, West Jefferson Medical Center created a challenge to encourage employees to lose weight. Employees put up \$10, and whoever lost the most weight during the six-week period won the pool of money.

"Even though I didn't win, I lost 10 pounds," Morris said. "We got really competitive."

Laurie Baye, a licensed practical nurse, said she likes working at the medical center because it's community-oriented.

"It's the smallness of it," Baye said. "You have your big corporations, where with West Jefferson, it's not a maze."

Baye said she has a history here as well, and to her, it's not just a place of work.

"I live here on the West Bank. It's the hospital I came to as a child, that my parents and grandparents go to," she said. •

— Katie Urbaszewski

SIX-TIME HONOREE

1 PMOLink

PMOLink's founders decided from the company's onset that if they were successful, they wouldn't be the corporate executive fat cats driving in fancy cars.

"We wanted to share the wealth. Our top executives were not going to solely profit off the hard work of our employees," said Mark Johnson, chief financial officer and co-founder of PMOLink, along with President and CEO Geoff Hingle.

"Every employee has a vested interest in this company and gets their deserved share of the pool," Johnson said. "All of our profits go back to the salaries and benefits for our employees."

The average salary is often the wow factor at the project and process management professional services company, which began operations in 2001.

The company's average starting salary is \$84,000, while the median is \$108,761. PMOLink reported \$11 million in revenue in 2008.

"It means we're doing well as a company, and most of our employees are certified in the project management solutions they provide to our clients," Johnson said. "We're in the business of attracting a high-quality work force, so our salary and benefits packages have to be competitive."

PMOLink, which also has an office in San Antonio and a subsidiary in PMOLink Government Solutions Inc., serves clients in the United States and Canada, including six Fortune 500 companies.

Because of constant upgrades and complex project management software programs in the industry, Johnson said PMOLink gives employees \$1,500 annually for training, professional certifications and online classes, plus additional assistance upon request. There is a \$1,500 bonus for

Nature of business: project and process management

Where based: Mandeville

Employees: 48

Average starting salary: \$84,000

Median salary: \$108,761

Average employment time: four and a half years

Benefits: health care with full coverage, dental, vision, prescriptions, 401(k) with 4 percent match, continuing education, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 36

Web site: www.pmolink.com

Photo by Frank Aymami



From left: Senior consultants Ken Buck and Peter Burk, President/CEO Geoff Hingle and senior consultant Courtney Rive gather in the PMOLink office.

passing the Project Management Professional exam.

"Every single thing PMOLink does is to invest in their employees and make them better because the better and more qualified they make us, the more we can handle for our clients," said Angela Nelson, who worked her way up from billable consultant to a project manager.

The company also pays employees' annual dues and monthly meeting fees for professional organizations.

Employees can also nominate any of their co-workers for the company's quarterly Golden Link Award for outstanding achievement. The winner receives \$200 and an engraved award.

Events at PMOLink include a monthly movie night the first Thursday of every month with popcorn, pizza and drinks at the corporate office.

PMOLink conducts most of its events at its 2001 Lakeshore Drive headquarters in Mandeville, which is the historic, 187-year-old Justine Plantation overlooking Lake Pontchartrain. The company moved there after Hurricane Katrina destroyed its West End headquarters in New Orleans.

"It's so nice to have a place for events, and it doesn't seem like you're having it at a business," said Georgine Berthelot, director of training and engagement manager.

"We have a lot of people working in various places and telecommuting, and the company does a great job of consciously bringing people together and providing a good time." •

— Tommy Santora

Right: PMOLink employees take a break on the office's front porch overlooking Lake Pontchartrain.

Below: PMOLink employees stand on the staircase of their Mandeville headquarters, which is the historic, 187-year-old Justine Plantation Home.

Photo courtesy PMOLink



Photo courtesy PMOLink



TWO-TIME HONOREE

Heller Draper Hayden Patrick & Horn

There is no revolving door at Heller, Draper, Hayden, Patrick & Horn. Rarely do employees leave the downtown New Orleans law firm, which specializes in bankruptcy and commercial and insurance litigation, to pursue other career opportunities.

"It shows people enjoy working here," said partner Tristan Manthey, who joined the firm as a law clerk in 1996. "It shows that it's a sought-after place to work at."

Since paralegal Roxanne Holden was hired six years ago, only two new employees have joined Heller Draper, which has 36 full-time workers.

"Really and truly, it's hard to even get your foot in the door because there's nothing as far as turnover," Holden said. "I'm going to die here. They're going to have to push me out the door. Other people I know at other firms, they're continuously saying, 'Roxie, let me know if there's an opening.'"

Employees said they enjoy the firm's light, family-like atmosphere and its compassion toward its workers' responsibilities outside the office.

"My first year here working for Heller Draper, everything in the world that could have possibly happened, happened," Holden said. "From the death of my brother to my dad having three or four (heart) attacks to my son

Nature of business: law firm

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 36

Average starting salary: \$28,000 to \$48,000 for staff, \$75,000 for attorneys

Median salary: \$45,000 for staff, \$362,000 for attorneys

Average employment time: 12 years

Benefits: health care with 87 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 5 percent match, paid maternity and paternity leave, day care options, telecommuting, flexible hours, job sharing, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: up to 32 holiday and vacation days, 10 sick days

Web site: www.hellerdraper.com

Photo by Tracie Morris Schaefer



From left: Heller Draper Hayden Patrick & Horn employees Sandy Albert, Bernerd Berins and Lee Ann Wright wrap Christmas presents for needy families.

getting rushed to the hospital. Here I am thinking, 'Any day now they're going to call me and they're going to let me go,' because that's what law firms do.

"Because they were as good as they were to me and were very understanding, it makes you want to do better for them. It makes you want to work harder for them because they are a great bunch of people."

Manthey said he has had opportunities to work for other law firms.

"But I can tell you unequivocally that I'm glad I stayed with Heller Draper because it is a firm that truly cares about its employees," he said.

"Something else that I think is important to note is the amount of people that come back. A lot of times people think the grass is green-

er at another place, and the one or two people who have left through the years have made their way back because they know how special this place is."

One of those employees is legal assistant JoLynn Marino, who began working at Heller Draper in 1983. She left the firm from 1998 to 2000 for a part-time position elsewhere.

"I cried on my last day here because I didn't want to leave," she said.

"If someone is out sick, we will call on the weekend," Marino said. "We will call to check to see how somebody's child is doing or somebody's husband is doing. To me, that's something extra that other places don't have. It's just a closeness." •

— Ryan Chatelain

3 Perez

The Perez headquarters is broken down into four studios: Planet of the Apes, Old Marigny, the Island of Misfit Toys and the corporate office, Afghanistan, which is in the same building but offset from the design studios.

"They're just fun nicknames we applied to each branch of the company. Each studio has its own vice president, and the teams work together to make the company run smoothly," said Darrell Cherry, vice president of business development. "I'm in Afghanistan. It's kind of funny when you see the names around here."

The New Orleans-based architecture and interior design firm has been in business since 1940 and has seven offices nationwide, designing buildings and landscape architecture for a number of industries.

Perez employees also provide pro bono work for organizations and events such as the Construction fundraiser and City-Works, a non-profit dedicated to rebuilding New Orleans post-Katrina and founded by Perez President Angela O'Byrne.

To encourage community work, Perez pays employees' annual dues for a membership of choice if it's job related.

"Our community work is very important to us an organization, and that stems from Angela and her involvement in the community and her trying to help rebuild this city anyway she can after Katrina," Cherry said.

In 2007, Senior Project Manager Rodney Dionisio helped design the 4,400-square-foot Family Center for the New Orleans Mission after the original facility was destroyed in flooding from levee breaches after Hurricane Katrina. The family center is a transitional living facility for single women with up to four children.

Nature of business: architecture, interior design, landscaping services

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 43

Average starting salary: \$44,000

Median salary: \$60,000

Average employment time: two years

Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, dental vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 1 percent match, continuing education program, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours

Wait time for benefits: about one month

Paid days off: 25

Web site: www.e-perez.com



Photo by Frank Aymami

Perez employees splash around in the fountain at Piazza d'Italia. Front row, from left, are: Office Director Penny Marcel, architects Meredith Sugg and Audra Martin and graphic designer Tim Banfell. Back row, from left, are: architects Joe Crowley and Christian Pazos and President and CEO Angela O'Byrne.

"It means a lot to do that kind of work and give back to the community," Dionisio said. "It's important to be part of a widely respected design firm because we are able to get quality work and get interesting projects to work on."

Audra Martin, a licensed interior designer, got to see her work come to fruition when she helped design FireKeepers Casino in Battlecreek, Mich. Perez paid for Martin and her group to visit the casino's opening.

"That was a great experience to see your design plans come to life, especially in another city and state like that," Martin said. "We have a lot of design control here on any project we work on, and I find our opinions are always valued."

Perez pays for full health care coverage for

employees and 100 percent of the premium for a \$25,000 life insurance policy. Employees can receive bonuses every fourth month depending on cash flow. And Perez reimburses employees who obtain certification in programs such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

Every year, for about 20 years now, Perez has paid for employees to attend Jazz Fest as a group and gives \$20 spending money to every employee. Other gatherings include potlucks for holiday parties, an annual catered pool party at the president's house and participation in a weekly volleyball league at Coconut Beach.

"We're not that good, but everybody has a good time," Cherry said. •

— Tommy Santora

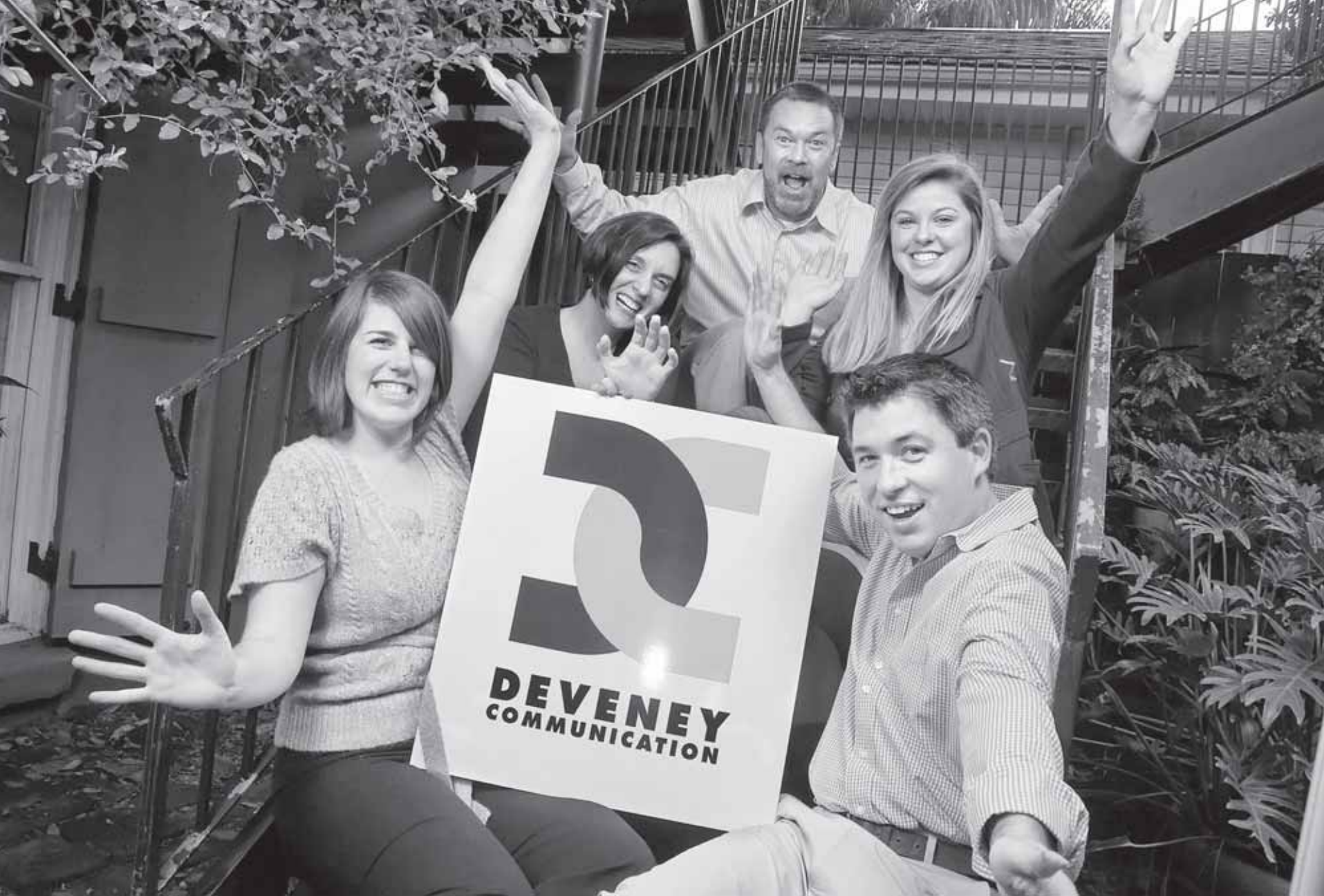


Photo by Frank Aymami

Clockwise from bottom left: Anna Whitlow, Lisa Fedele, John Deveney, Lauren Overby and Jeffrey Ory of Deveney Communication sit on the stairs of the firm's Faubourg Marigny office.

FIVE-TIME HONOREE

Deveney Communication

The staff of Deveney Communication, located in a small, private complex of studio apartments in Faubourg Marigny on Chartres Street, could be confused with a morning coffee gathering of friends or the 5 o'clock neighborhood cocktail hour on the balcony.

President John Deveney said that intimate atmosphere goes a long way in translating the culture of the small, boutique public relations firm he built in 1996.

"New Orleans has as rich a culture as they come, and what makes us one of the best places to work in this city is the way we embody that culture and exude pride in our own culture within the confines of the workplace," Deveney said. "We have the benefit of working out of one of the most cultural neighborhoods in the city, and we use that to our advantage to function more as a family than as a company — enjoying coffee together in the morning, sharing personal stories at lunch and celebrating professional success or even the arrival of the weekend with get-togethers at the upstairs studio apartment."

Deveney Communication has been named

one of the top five boutique public relations firms in America by PRWeek magazine, and its clients include Barnes & Noble, Starbucks, the Audubon Insectarium, the New Orleans Boat Show, the Young Leadership Council, Planet Beach and Ruth's Chris Steak House. The company also performs pro bono public relations work for organizations such as Each One Save One, March of Dimes, NO/AIDS Task Force and Children's Hospital.

Health care is covered 100 percent at Deveney, including co-pays and prescriptions. The company also provides \$1,000 per year for dental services and \$250 per year for vision services.

There are possible merit increases in pay, bonuses based on exceeding performance goals and expectations, 100 percent paid continuing education and paid mileage.

Every January, employees travel to Rosemary Beach, Fla., for a weekend Charge Retreat to discuss goals met in the previous year and objectives for the year ahead.

"It's a good opportunity to get everyone on the same page and look at the year ahead and also look at our accomplishments," said Vice

Nature of business: public relations

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 10

Average starting salary: \$46,000

Median salary: \$75,000

Average employment time: seven years

Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, continuing education program, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 21 with unlimited sick days

Web site: www.deveney.com

President Lisa Fedele, who joined Deveney three years ago after running her own design and marketing business for 10 years.

"John does a really good job of letting people play to their strengths, and I have had many opportunities to make company business decisions and that means a lot to me as a former business owner. You have a lot of autonomy in the work you do."

Another employee gathering that has grown popular over the past year is Fried Chicken Fridays.

"Every Friday, an employee goes out and gets a spread of food. Often it's a big bucket of chicken, and we work while we hang out and eat lunch together, said Vice President Jeffrey Ory, who has been with the company since its inception in 1996. "It's become a tradition around here."•

— Tommy Santora

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Nobody does it better.

PMOLink would like to thank our great employees, who made us one of the "Best Places to Work in New Orleans" six years running! Just imagine what they could do for your company. Contact us at 985-674-5968 or www.pmolink.com.

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Photo by Frank Aymanni

Employees of Fleur de Lis Financial/MassMutual gather around their namesake symbol. Front row, from left: Sang Nguyen, associate; Grant Collier, New Orleans brokerage director; Sam Hebert, Baton Rouge sales manager; Cham Mehaffey, New Orleans sales manager; and Gary Roth, associate. Back row: Christopher Bellew, Mississippi sales manager; John Oubre, recruiter; John Jabbia, Baton Rouge brokerage director; Xavier Angel, associate; Greg Core, associate; and Homer Fouquier Jr., president and CEO.

Fleur de Lis Financial/ MassMutual

Every new employee at Fleur de Lis Financial/MassMutual hears two presentations: the Lou Holtz speech and the Johari speech.

The first is a summary of a popular talk by the former Notre Dame football coach that centers on his use of the acronym TLC — for trust, love and commitment — to explain the secret to building relationships.

The other speech is an introduction to the Johari principle, a psychological tool developed in 1955 by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham to analyze interpersonal relationships.

The lesson drummed into new recruits in the presentation is how trust and feedback enhance the work environment.

Fleur de Lis President and CEO Homer Fouquier said he has adopted the Holtz and Johari philosophies as his own.

"I normally leave my door wide open," said Fouquier, adding that the company also conducts periodic anonymous surveys of employees to encourage feedback.

The boss's management style has already

made an impression on Greg Core, a financial services representative who joined the company in July after a long career in managing golf club facilities.

"He's willing to go on any appointments with you at any time," Core said. "He'll adjust your schedule, which is very important, especially for a new producer like me."

The firm's on-the-job training and support system is another plus for Core, who sells a variety of insurance products.

"When I wrote my first application, the new business coordinator, compliance manager and office manager all got with me to make sure that I did it correctly and felt comfortable doing it," Core said.

Cham Mehaffey, senior vice president of agency sales and Core's supervisor, came aboard in early 2005, bringing 25 years of experience in the insurance industry. Mehaffey said he was attracted by the freedom Fleur de Lis Financial offered him to make hiring decisions and by the company's method for training new agents.

Nature of business: financial services

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 40

Average starting salary: \$36,000

Median salary: \$60,000

Average employment time: more than five years

Benefits: health care plan with 50 percent coverage, dental and vision plans, 401(k) with 3 percent match, continuing education program, job sharing, employee recognition program, fitness program

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 25

Web site: www.fleurdelifinancial.com

Fleur de Lis Financial/Mass Mutual uses a tightly structured three-year training program that pairs each new salesperson with a manager.

"The whole day is planned out for each of the first 90 days," Mehaffey said.

The goal of the training program is to pass along some of the many years of collective knowledge that company veterans possess.

"It's very important that (agents) are surrounded with a support team and a mentoring environment," Fouquier said.

Mehaffey, who pointed out that most of the company's managers were hired either just before or soon after Hurricane Katrina, said their shared challenge of helping the company rebuild has had a positive effect on their working relationships.

"I guess tough times allow for great relationships to evolve when you go through them together," he said. •

— Sonya Stinson



Gauthier, Houghtaling & Williams employees hold stuffed animals they made at the Build-A-Bear Workshop to donate to children at Ochsner Medical Center. Front and center are the firm's partners John Houghtaling, left, and James Williams. Not pictured is partner Celeste Gauthier.

TWO-TIME HONOREE

Gauthier, Houghtaling & Williams

People are never more vulnerable than when their loved ones are in danger.

Jerry Gauthier, head of accounting at the law firm of Gauthier, Houghtaling & Williams, faced a stressful situation in 2006 when her husband had to undergo cancer treatments at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

In 2007, the grandmother of paralegal Danielle Bogan fell ill in New York, requiring Bogan had to spend eight days with her.

Both employees received all the time off they needed. The only questions asked were in regards to their personal well being. Jerry Gauthier, no relation to the firm's late founding partner Wendell Gauthier, was allowed to work from Houston while tending to her husband.

Bogan, a New York native, calls her co-workers her family in New Orleans. When she had to spend two months in Florida to work on a trial,

fellow employees helped take care of her dog.

Because of the nature of trial work, the entire office will often spend long hours in the office together while prepping for a case, which can build loyalty.

"We look at it as a football game," administrator Chuck Jouandot said.

If the necessary work is finished at the end of the week, the firm will shut down before 5 p.m. on Fridays. Employees are treated to pizza and fried chicken about every six weeks, and it's not unusual for the office to buy employees a daiquiri at the end of a stressful week.

Twice a year, the firm rents a limousine and buys the office lunch before giving them the rest of the afternoon off. The firm also has a suite at the Superdome for Saints games, and interested employees and their spouses usually go to one game a season.

Nature of business: law firm

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 33

Average starting salary: \$40,000

Median salary: \$45,000 for staff, \$200,000 for attorneys

Average employment time: eight and a half years

Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, prescription plan, 401(k) with 3 percent match, paid maternity leave, continuing education program, day care options, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 43

Web site: www.ghwlegal.com

"We do little things to allow employees to let loose and relax," Jouandot said.

Employees also make time to give back to the community. It's not a small delegation of two or three people, employees say, as everyone gets involved. This year the firm worked on a project with the Build-a-Bear Workshop and donated the 20 stuffed bears to children at Ochsner Medical Center just before Christmas.

Such activities have fostered employee loyalty. Gauthier, who has been with the firm for 25 years, lives on the North Shore but said she has no qualms about making the 37-mile drive to work every day.

"There's no place I'd rather work than here," she said. •

— Fritz Esker



Photo by Frank Aymami

From left: Silvana Lemos, Hal Collums, Lawrence Falencki, Bryon Cornelison and Leah Collums Glade peek through a window pane produced by Hal Collums Construction and Crescent City Millworks.

Hal Collums Construction/ Central City Millworks

Employees of joint firms Hal Collums Construction and Central City Millworks don't have a problem with the struggles associated with working for a small business, which is often synonymous with more work and fewer benefits. To the contrary, many of them say they are happier there than they have ever been.

Owner Hal Collums is a cancer survivor whose experience has given him a new appreciation for life and everyone's contributions, employees said. Each day, he shakes each employee's hand and thanks them for doing a great job and being part of the team.

"People ask me, 'Do you ever get tired of working at the same place?' and I say, 'No, it's great! Do you ever get tired of your family?'" said Yeni Salinas, administrative assistant.

Salinas said she walked out of the office with tears of joy in her eyes the day she was hired after moving from New York to New Orleans with few skills or connections.

"I would always be grateful for that," she said. "I was broke, and I had no family here.

That just shows what a good person Hal is and what kind of a company he runs."

Salinas is not the only person who refers to the joint companies as her family.

"As you grow, the company grows. And as the company grows, you grow," said Johnathan Anselmo, operations manager. "It's like baby-sitting someone's child or raising your own."

Anselmo compared working at a small business to a profit-sharing venture.

"The more you put in, the more you get back."

That also means his co-workers pick up the slack when he's dealing with a lot, and vice versa.

"That's good stability for me," he said.

Naima Frazar, project estimator, said what the construction industry lacks in security, it makes up for in work satisfaction.

"New Orleans has a great housing stock," she said. "The housing stock has been here for 100 years, but we get to put it together for the next 100 years."

Frazar said it's exciting to come to a office full

Nature of business: residential renovations/millwork
Where based: New Orleans
Employees: 45
Average starting salary: \$22,000
Median salary: \$50,000
Average employment time: eight years
Benefits: health care with 75 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, paid maternity leave, flexible hours
Wait time for benefits: none
Paid days off: 17
Web site: www.centralcitymillworks.com

of "young, talented and driven" people and be a part of restoring parts of New Orleans' history.

"This is the first office I've ever worked in where everyone wants to help each other," she said. "Because it's a small office, we all do so much more than our job descriptions. But you don't do it because you have to, you do it because you enjoy it. You learn from everyone and you're always learning new things."

Frazar said not to overlook one of the best perks of working for Hal Collums: Employees are allowed, and encouraged, to bring their dogs to work. Frazar has two basset hounds she brings to work every Friday, and on any given day they may have five to eight dogs roaming the office and mill shop.

"Contractors sometimes get a bad reputation, but everyone here really does care," Frazar said. •

— Katie Urbaszewski



From left: Hartwig Moss Insurance Agency employees Stewart Sheng, Laura Biggs and her mother Holly Biggs, and Stacey Giardinn serve up bread pudding at a company office party.

THREE-TIME HONOREE

Hartwig Moss Insurance Agency

Having a flexible schedule has paid off for Stewart Sheng, who started training to become a producer with Hartwig Moss Insurance Agency last year and joined full time in June.

But during his training, Sheng worked full time as a teacher and helped his wife Cynthia Lee-Sheng campaign for and win a Jefferson Parish Council seat.

"They were very understanding of my personal situation during that time, and they worked with me on my time allowance," Stewart Sheng said. "It's really the intangibles that impress me the most and the relationship I have developed with the Moss family."

Hartwig Moss is has been family-owned and operated by five generations spanning three centuries.

"It's the only job I ever had, and I would never go anywhere else," said Cleve Daigle, vice president of Hartwig Moss Insurance Agency and an employee since 1976, when he began as a sales trainee.

Cleve Daigle's father, C.J. Daigle, also served as vice president during his 40 years with the company.

In 1871, Hartwig Moss founded the agency,

which provides commercial and personal property and casualty insurance. Robby Moss, who represents the Moss family's fifth generation, now runs the company as president.

"The company has a strong reputation and history as a family business with close-knit ties, and it was brought up in a time and era to get business done the right way for your clients and treat your employees right, and those traditional philosophies have stuck," Daigle said.

Employee longevity is a byproduct of being a family business, said Daigle, with employees averaging 10 years of service.

"We really give employees every tool they need to be successful. It's just a matter of how hard you want to work," he said. "Every day we are investing in our staff and encouraging further certifications and payment for education for employees to pursue those designations to better serve their clients and to better themselves."

The company pays the full cost of employees' health, dental, prescription, vision and short- and long-term disability insurance and offers tuition assistance, continuing education reimbursements and paid mileage.

Nature of business: insurance

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 45

Average starting salary: \$38,851 for staff, \$168,000 for producers

Median salary: \$44,500 for staff, \$172,000 for producers

Average employment time: 10 years

Benefits: health care plan with 100 percent coverage, dental, prescription and vision plans, paid maternity leave, 401(k), continuing education program, flexible hours

Wait time for benefits: 30 days

Paid days off: 28

Web site: www.hmia.com

Hartwig Moss also has several employee gatherings throughout the year, including an annual state of the union address on how the business is doing; in-office holiday parties in which upper management does the cooking; an annual Rock n' Bowl event to mark the Hurricane Katrina anniversary; and community activities with employee volunteer time and money going to organizations such as the Louisiana Children's Museum, Touro Infirmary, Freedom Alliance-Support Our Troops and the Gulf Restoration Network.

"It seems like we're always getting together to do things, either just to be with each other or to do things for each other," said Amber Hebert, a customer service representative who has been with the company for six and a half years and commutes an hour and a half from Raceland.

"We have wedding showers, baby showers, showers for employees to replace things they owned that they lost after Katrina," she said. •

— Tommy Santora



Photo by Frank Aymami

Huseman & Associates mechanical department head Jamey Logrande, left, serves up white rice while mechanical engineer Pedro Gomez and owner Jeffrey Huseman dish out red beans. Renea Joseph, standing with loaves of bread, prepared the meal for her co-workers.

Huseman & Associates

Staff members at Huseman and Associates — consulting mechanical, electrical and plumbing engineers — do a lot more together than pore over designs at their Metairie headquarters.

"We have contests in the office to see who makes the best red beans and rice," said Jamey Logrande, mechanical group director at the 13-person firm. "In the summer, it's shrimp and crawfish boils at each other's homes, and we've got a bowling tournament coming up soon. Our year ends with a blowout in the French Quarter," including holiday gifts, food, drink and games such as scavenger hunts.

And there are other activities throughout the year.

"Our fishing trips are the best of times and the stories last forever," said Charlie Boyle, senior mechanical engineer.

Logrande said staff members are encouraged to do their utmost, but the group contains no big egos or prima donnas.

"We all back each other up and there's no tension in the office between employees," he said.

Renea Joseph, office manager, said owner Jeffrey Huseman stands behind each employee.

"Everyone is expected to really think critical-

ly and go the extra distance, but there's a safety net if we run into difficulty," she said. "The mechanical and electrical departments cross-train with each other. And we are all given a voice in important matters."

Joseph recalls hearing a colleague across the hall answering a call from a recruiter. The colleague told the recruiter he had "absolutely no interest in leaving the company and to call someone else."

The only two employees to leave since the firm started in 2005 did so for Katrina-related reasons, she said.

In 2005, owner Huseman recruited employees from Lace Engineering, which has since moved to Indianapolis, and added to the original group.

Employees say there's a compatible mix of office personnel.

"Jeffrey Huseman considers education and skills when hiring, but a prospective employee must also be a good personality fit for the team," Joseph said.

Boyle said employees from Honduras, Puerto Rico and India enhance the firm. And out of respect for the staff's religious and ethnic diversity, employees receive a floating day off to celebrate a holiday of their choice each year.

Nature of business: electrical, mechanical and plumbing consulting engineers

Where based: Metairie

Employees: 13

Average starting salary: \$59,000

Median salary: \$75,000

Average employment time: four years (company founded in 2005)

Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 3 percent match, continuing education program, relocation assistance

Wait time for benefits: 90 days

Paid days off: 25

Web site: www.husemanllc.com

When the office is under the crunch of deadlines, "Jeffrey has me order in some really good food for everyone's lunch, or for dinner if we need to stay a bit late," Joseph said.

Among the firm's many benefits, Huseman encourages the staff to attend training seminars, obtain needed licensing and join professional groups at the company's expense.

Huseman's cohesive staff is good for the bottom line, employees say. Clients include Tulane University, high-rise buildings downtown and Northrop Grumman. The firm also is working on Orleans Parish Prison projects.

"Clients know our staffers are available for problem resolution around the clock," Joseph said. "That's helped us build a spotless reputation in just over four years, and most of our new business is by word of mouth." •

— Susan Buchanan

THREE-TIME HONOREE

Loubat Equipment Co.

Felicia Fernandez likes selling the practical and trendy kitchenware Loubat Equipment Co. offers.

But what she finds most satisfying is talking to her customers, many of whom come through the doors of Loubat's showroom at 4141 Bienville St. on a regular basis.

"They give us feedback," said Fernandez of Loubat's loyal clientele. "I can ask, 'How did that under-counter refrigerator work for you?' and I'll know right away whether we hit the target."

In return, chefs and restaurateurs who regularly congregate in Loubat's showroom are constantly prodding the staff for information and details on the latest commercial kitchen products.

"Maybe they saw something when they were on a trip to New York. They don't know the exact name and can only describe it, and then we research what it is they are looking for," said Fernandez. "It's an exciting process, especially when you find exactly what they want."

And getting to know customers makes the job more enjoyable on a social level, employees say.

"We have a good customer base," said Judy Watterman, sales manager with Loubat, who has been in the food service industry for more than three decades. "They can be chefs, purchasing agents, people from schools and hospitals — basically anybody who is from a facility that serves a food product."

"And because this is such a specialty busi-

Nature of business: food service equipment and supplies

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 19

Average starting salary: \$21,000

Median salary: \$30,000

Average employment time: five years

Benefits: health care with 60 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 6 percent match, day care options, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: three months

Paid days off: 27

Web site: www.loubat.com



From left: Loubat Equipment Co. employees Aimee Sandrock from purchasing and Erin English and Felicia Fernandez from sales prepare a faux feast.

ness, we really get to know our customers," Watterman said. "It isn't like a more typical retail operation where it is one customer after another. This is more a situation where you get to know the customer as a person. And I think that very much adds to the environment that we have here."

"We are always busy here," said David Ybarzabal, Loubat warehouse manager, who points out that those showroom conversations lead to orders his department fills. "It's fun because the idea always is: If we don't have it, we will get it for you," he said.

"I like those kinds of challenges," said Ybarzabal, who works with a staff of four. "We have things coming in and going out all of the

time, and that keeps us hopping, which is good."

But beyond the business of the day, Ybarzabal also appreciates Loubat because "they treat you like an individual. You are not just an employee here. We have good benefits and get a paid holiday for our birthdays. And several times a year they even treat us to lunch," he said.

Massages and snowball days, Halloween costume parties, a \$250 employee finder's fee and door prizes at company meetings are a few of the extra bonuses designed to boost morale throughout the year.

"Those are the kind of things that make you feel like they care about you, and that means a lot," Ybarzabal said. •

— Garry Boulard



Photo by Tracie Morris Schaefer

Employees of PPOplus celebrate the company's 10th anniversary. Seated, from left, are: Sue Hymel, Beth Decuers, Stephanie Booth-McGinnis and Lori Tully. Back row, from left, are: Sharon Reiser, Stephen Boyd, Missy Senner, Toma Ferrari, Michele Rogers, Theresa Theriault, Angela Roche, Annette Scott, President Catherine Hill, Nan Wallis and Kelly James.

PPOplus

Not too long ago, PPOplus found itself in a position many companies have faced recently: The firm was not in a position to give out raises.

"So instead of just saying no raises, they gave us more paid time off to compensate," said Toma Ferrari, a provider services coordinator.

Ferrari said the company has been extremely generous with offering time off from the daily grind so employees can "refresh and recharge."

"Also, if anything comes up at home, management allows you to take off right away for as long as you need. The management truly listens to the employees."

With a staff of just 16 full-time employees, those who go to work every day describe the environment as one big happy family.

"There is no bull," said Lori Tully, senior provider services representative. "If you ask a question or pose a concern, the management staff handles it immediately. They really care

about the people."

Tully, who has been with PPOplus for nine years, said the atmosphere is vastly different from places she has worked in the past.

"It has been good from the beginning," Tully said. "We are a small company with a good core of people. The owners play a big role in the relaxed atmosphere. Employees are not micromanaged while on the job. It makes it easier to work."

The company's commitment to its employees is particularly meaningful to client services manager Stephanie Booth-McGinnis.

A little more than a year ago, Booth-McGinnis was pregnant with her first child at the same time her husband was preparing for a 15-month deployment to Afghanistan.

"The company really took care of me," Booth-McGinnis said. "They let me have as much time off as I needed to spend with him before he took off overseas. They also gave me great maternity leave and offered me extra time to

Nature of business: preferred provider network

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 16

Average starting salary: \$30,000

Median salary: \$45,000

Average employment time: eight years

Benefits: health care with 80 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescriptions plan, 401(k) with 3 percent match, paid maternity leave, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 27

Web site: www.ppoplus.com

take care of everything. The management had a sincere personal interest in me. That is the way it is for everyone."

"You want to give your all when you come to work here," she said.

Tully said management regularly celebrates employee birthdays and often gives extra time off around holidays.

"Occasionally, management will say that it is such a nice afternoon outside that they are shutting the doors early and giving everyone the rest of the day off," Tully said. "There are not too many places that will do that." •

— Robin Shannon



From left: Robert Piper, Jesse Henry and Tiffany Monier of The Receivables Exchange play tug-o-war with the Sales Associate of the Month trophy, which goes to the employee with the highest sales mark.

The Receivables Exchange

Jeans and flip-flops is the acceptable office dress code at The Receivables Exchange.

"We trust our employees to know how to present themselves in the right circumstances, so if they're meeting with clients, then they dress nicely. If they are just hanging around the office getting work done, then jeans and flip-flops are fine. I want them to be comfortable and feel comfortable," said President Nic Perkin, who co-founded the online accounts receivable marketplace on Camp Street with partner Justin Brownhill.

Perkin and Brownhill started The Receivables Exchange in April 2007 as an online portal for small and medium-sized businesses to gain quick access to working capital and provide growing companies with business financing. The company started with five employees; it now has 40.

"We offer instant gratification to our employees. They are in an intense, trading value environment every day, and they can see their work come to fruition each day by helping businesses and their clients," Perkin said. "That constant sense of accomplishment is important to people."

Though still in its infancy, the company has received several accolades. In May, The Receivables Exchange was named the Best Web-based Supply Chain Financing Solution by Global Finance magazine. In 2008, the company was selected as one of the Top 50 Entrepreneurial Companies at the New York Venture Summit. And in 2007, it won the Louisiana Technology Council Award for Technology Transfer Company of the Year.

"I used to work for a fast-paced, high-profile startup company in Silicon Valley, and I was happy to find the same kind of setting here in New Orleans," said Laurie Azzano, senior vice president and head of marketing. "It's spirited and intense interaction of daily trading and capital, and it's exciting to build a small company from the ground up to be a successful one."

Upon hire, employees receive 100 percent paid premiums for health, dental, prescription, vision, short- and long-term disability, and life and personal accident insurance for themselves and their families.

"When you want people to be invested in your company, you also have to be invested in

Nature of business: financial exchange

Employees: 40

Where based: New Orleans

Average starting salary: \$35,000

Median salary: \$50,000

Average employment time: one and a half years (company founded in April 2007)

Benefits: health care, dental, prescription and vision 100 percent, unmarried partner benefits, 401(k), continuing education program

Wait time for benefits: none

Paid days off: 27

Web site: www.receivablesxchange.com

their quality of life and provide for them a great place to work and the resources for their life outside of work," Perkin said. "That's our philosophy. We need to take care of the people who work for us."

In addition to 27 paid days off, newlywed employees receive two weeks of paid vacation for their honeymoons. Full-time employees also receive stock options, cell phone reimbursement and up to \$1,500 a year in tuition assistance.

"We all have shares and stock in the company, so everybody has a vested interest," said Christian Sauska, a sales director who started at The Receivables Exchange in February 2008. "The best benefit of working here is to have the opportunity to play a big role in the direction of the company and be a part of a company growing."•

— Tommy Santora



Photo by Frank Aymami

Shell New Orleans Federal Credit Union, which was federally chartered in 1947, has 44 employees of varying experience levels. Teller Lauren LeCron, left, has been with the company for six months, while account processor Dawn Miller has been with the credit union for 25 years.

Shell New Orleans Federal Credit Union

In the two years Jennifer Sahuque has been an employee with Shell New Orleans Federal Credit Union, she has embraced a guiding principle of the institution.

"They like to see you go up through the ranks here," she said of the credit union, which was chartered to serve the New Orleans employees of Shell Oil but is not run by the company. "If a position is opening up, they let you know about it. And if it is something you are interested in and qualified for, there's a good chance you'll get the job."

Even more impressive, Sahuque said, is the credit union's tuition reimbursement policy that pays up to \$1,000 per semester and \$3,000 for an entire year, including summer classes, for any employee taking college-level courses.

For Sahuque, a telephone sales representative, that help is crucial while she pursues her accounting degree.

"And once I get that degree, I can apply it to different positions that may be opened here

because I want to continue working and learning as much as possible about the business."

That sense of career momentum has been one of the primary reasons why Guizell Rosales has been with Shell New Orleans Federal Credit Union for more than two decades.

"I was a branch manager for two years, and also a teller and teller supervisor," said Rosales, now a lending manager. "I am the type of person who is always looking for the opportunity to learn more, and they give you that here.

"It isn't just that they promote from within, which they do, but that they encourage cross-department training so that you can really expand and learn as much about the business from as many different perspectives as possible," Rosales said.

Sahuque, who previously worked as a teller, said the company enables employees to learn more about different parts of the business.

"I became a service representative so that I could learn more about customer service and

Nature of business: banking and finance
Where based: New Orleans
Employees: 44
Average starting salary: \$26,436
Median salary: \$46,155
Average employment time: seven years and three months
Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, dental and vision plans, paid maternity leave, 401(k) with 6 percent match, continuing education program, flexible hours, employee recognition program
Wait time for benefits: first of month after date of hire
Paid days off: 26
Web site: www.shellnofcu.com

relations," she said.

CEO Michelle Duhe said helping employees advance is a priority at the credit union.

"By offering training opportunities and educational reimbursements, we try to do whatever we can to help a person here who has the drive to advance," she said.

The personal relationships employees forge with the credit union customers helps nurture employee happiness, Rosales said.

"Credit unions really emphasize member service," she said. "We know the people who come in here by name and really like it when we can do something that might make a positive difference in their lives."

Sahuque said the focus is always on member service.

"When a member is happy, so are we." •

— Garry Boulard

U.S. Risk Management

As an employee trying to further her education, Theresa Krueger welcomes the flexibility she is afforded at her job with U.S. Risk Management.

"If we have a test or something, then they'll let us go ahead and take care of that," said Kruger, an environmental technician. "Some companies would say, 'Do it on your own time.'"

Kruger, who is pursuing a degree in industrial hygiene, cites that and the company's commitment to personal time as two of the main perks of her job. When personal issues come up, the company understands, she said.

"Last fall, I was just buying a new house, had a new puppy and just got engaged, so all kinds of crazy stuff was going on," she said. "I had the flexibility to just go take care of that stuff, and come back and do what I needed to do after."

Kruger also appreciates the legroom the company gives her while she's on the clock, such as travel opportunities.

"We aren't in the same place every day, so that's always exciting," she said. "One of the coolest places I got to go was out to Colorado for the summer. We were just doing some inspections."

Employees say they also value the company's reception to new ideas.

"We just made a suggestion to the client on looking at a different approach on how to complete a task, and it's all been received very well," said George Coto, a project manager and industrial hygienist within the company.

U.S. Risk Management also gives managers such as Coto creative control over many projects, a reason he cites for staying with the



George Coto of U.S. Risk Management talks to logistics subcontractor Luis Navas in front of the Plaza Tower downtown.

Nature of business: environmental consulting
Where based: New Orleans
Employees: 25
Average starting salary: \$50,000
Median salary: \$70,000
Average employment time: more than five years (company founded six years ago)
Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 4 percent match, continuing education program, telecommuting, flexible hours
Wait time for benefits: none
Paid days off: up to 22 days
Web site: www.us-risk.com

company for four years.

The company also has been known to give employees loans in tough times, said Comptroller Liz Lotz.

"We have three people who have gone through divorces in the last couple of years," she said. "(Company owner Tracey Dodd) loaned them money to help them get through their proceedings."

After Lotz's paycheck went to her old home address after Hurricane Katrina, Dodd let her draw on the company's line of credit to put the first payment on her new home, Lotz said.

"She offered because I was the only one who

was affected that way," she said.

The company fosters a work environment in which many employees get along, Krueger said. Events such as a company crawfish boil, a holiday party, and tickets to Jazz Fest and sporting events give employees a chance to hang out together outside of work.

"I genuinely like the people I work with. We lean on each other and there is a great dynamic that you don't find everywhere else," she said. "We all get along, back each other up, support each other. Everyone gets everyone else."•

— Jessica Williams



Photo by Frank Aymami

Zehnder Communications employees wear many hats, but they say the workplace's jovial atmosphere makes their jobs fun. Crossing Canal Street in Abbey Road style are, from left: Dave Maher, director of digital communications; Mike Rainey, chief creative officer; Tom Martin, president; Shea Duet, art director and IT manager; Rob Hudak, interactive creative director; Joan Habisreitinger, media director; and Jeff Zehnder, CEO.

SEVEN-TIME HONOREE

Zehnder Communications

Early in his career, Jeff Zehnder made a promise to himself that if he ever started his own business, it would be a place where people enjoyed coming into work every day. Since Zehnder Communications opened its doors in 1996, the company has stuck to its mission of doing great work, making a difference, earning a fair profit and having fun.

Placing an emphasis on hiring people for their positive attitudes, Zehnder said creating a happy work environment is key to the company's success.

"I believe that life is too short to be unhappy, and I think we've always looked at hiring people in terms of whether or not they would be happy here. If you are going to be here, you are contributing to the well being of the company," said Zehnder.

Pointing to author Jim Collin's model in the book "Good to Great," Zehnder said it's all about "getting the right people on the bus." That careful recruitment and positive attitude has created a staff that works as a highly diverse, yet cohesive unit.

Art director and information technology

manager Shea Duet has been with the company for 11 years and said management's availability to employees and the cooperation between departments creates a positive and empowering work environment. Most importantly, the jovial atmosphere at Zehnder makes it easier to come to work and the reason why everyone always seems to be having fun.

"We really have a lot of fun here. We joke around a lot. We goof off. The fact that it's so fun is really one of the reasons why I've been here so long," Duet said.

Jeff Zehnder said that given the company's need for specialists in public relations, design and copywriting, they can't afford high turnover rates. The company offers competitive salaries and a solid benefits plan along with anniversary bonuses and awards, plus parking and cell phone stipends.

There are also a few other unique benefits including Free Beer Fridays, an annual Bowl-a-Thon, a margarita mixing competition and a chili cook-off.

Duet has seen Zehnder grow from seven to 33 full-time employees but said the company's core

Nature of business: advertising and public relations

Where based: New Orleans

Employees: 33

Average starting salary: \$41,475

Median salary: \$53,000

Average employment time: four and a half years

Benefits: health care with 80 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with 3 percent match, continuing education program, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: 30 days

Paid time off: up to 35 days

Web site: www.z-comm.com

mission to do great work has never changed.

Interactive creative director Rob Hudak has been with Zehnder for three years and said he has always been motivated by the company's desire to constantly "push the envelope." Being given the freedom and creativity to develop new campaigns is highly important for skilled creative types, and Hudak said Zehnder allows him to reach his full potential. He's especially proud of the Layar Voodoo Experience app, which the magazine Fast Company noted as one of the three mobile applications that are changing the music industry.

"We're always encouraged to take new approaches to things," Hudak said. "If I was just showing up every day to knock out some production ads, that would get old very quick." •

— Craig Guillot

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