



# Pursuing Excellence

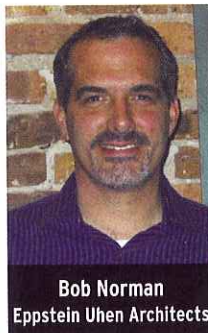
## What it takes to be a best place to work

By Karen Erstad

**G**reat businesses — ones that value their employees as much as their customers — share a few characteristics that make them topnotch workplaces. These businesses have great managers and competitive compensation and benefits. They also respect peoples' lives outside of work, engender trust, offer professional development opportunities and help employees see how their work connects to the businesses' mission.

### Working example

**Eppstein Uhen Architects** (EUA) is one of these businesses, says **Bob Norman**, an associate and human resources manager at EUA. The firm was recently ranked the 29<sup>th</sup> "Best Architecture Firm To Work For" in the United States in a national survey conducted by management consulting firm Zweig White.



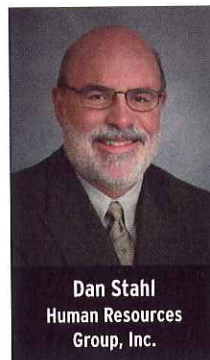
**Bob Norman**  
Eppstein Uhen Architects

"We are always striving to improve and involve all levels of employees in doing that," says Norman, who points to the strategic planning retreat EUA held early in 2008 that included representatives from all levels of the company.

"It wasn't just the leadership assuming they knew what was happening in the production areas. And I think that went a long way in terms of our employees feeling they did have a say in how the company was going to succeed," says Norman. "Following that retreat, we decided to pursue three strategic initiatives, made teams for each initiative and opened up participation to the entire company."

An environment where all employees are

listened to is a critical component of a great place to work, says **Dan Stahl**, president, **Human Resources Group, Inc.** "All feedback must be honored, acknowledged and responded to, whether it's agreed with or not. In addition, it's definitely the responsibility of management to create a safe environment where it's OK to disagree."



**Dan Stahl**  
Human Resources  
Group, Inc.

Stahl also believes management must model the business's values, because employees are quick to see hypocritical behavior between espoused values and leader behavior. "If employees know that treating people with respect is one of the values of an organization and they see their boss yelling at someone in the hallway, there's a real disconnect."

In terms of compensation, Stahl says, "Unless the organization is under 10 employees, it's desirable to have some kind of compensation structure system that is market based, clearly communicated and understood so that it's no mystery about how pay decisions get made. You should also have a compensation philosophy, which is a statement that describes what the company values and is willing to pay for in times of both business expansion and contraction."

While the best places to work provide traditional benefits like health and dental insurance, they also often offer nontraditional benefits that may cost the company nothing but are priceless to the employees. For example, some companies allow dogs in the workplace.

### Balance and beyond

While Generation X gets credit for bringing the importance of work-life balance to management's attention, says Stahl, it's really important for every age group and both men and women.

Norman says EUA has recognized the need for flexibility for many years.

"Just three months after I started here almost 12 years ago," says Norman, "I was allowed to teach a class at UWM during work hours on Monday and Wednesday morning as long as I made up the time and got my work done. I had just started here as an entry-level architect, and I was floored by the trust they placed in me immediately. That's just one example of the kinds of things they allow people to do to better their own lives."

### Always learning

To make professional growth one step easier, EUA offers in-house educational sessions that qualify for AIA (American Institute of Architects) continuing education credits. "We encourage employees to participate in those learning opportunities that can help their career," says Norman.

Keeping up with the latest technology and software is also critical today, says Stahl. "Everything else being equal, if employees, especially younger ones, don't feel like they're growing, they may leave." ■

Want to learn more on how your company or organization can become a great place to work?

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