

# Heartland Payment Systems Processing a Productive Culture

By Tom Schuman

**A**shley Wilson and Pam Abell admit they never would be on their way to an associate's degree without the structure of a Heartland University program.

When Johnny Burns needed to make a number of trips to Louisiana to take care of family issues, the company provided a gas card to help him out. "Something little like a gas card meant a lot," he recalls.

Ali Segura was recently promoted to the newly created position of employee programs & communication coordinator after less than two years with the company. Jeff Nichols, executive director of HSC operations, says to her, "The interview wasn't you sitting in that room; it was your body of work up until that point."

Heartland Payment Systems, founded in 1997, is the fifth largest payment processor in the United States, handling more than 11 million credit card and other transactions each day. While headquartered in Princeton, New Jersey, the Heartland Service Center in Jeffersonville (with nearly 800 of the company's 2,600-plus employees) is the hub of operations that serve 250,000 merchant customers and employ relationship managers in all 50 states.

Nichols has been with the company throughout its 15-year history. He has seen the evolution from a tiny office in a Jeffersonville strip mall to a 35-acre complex that features the Heartland Hugs daycare facility, full-service cafeteria, 24/7 fitness center, outdoor basketball courts and much more (massage therapist on Fridays, coffee bars, flexible break times and work arrangements).

"We treat our employees well with competitive pay, good benefits and the amenities. In turn, they take good care of our customers," he relates. "Every single day we get an e-mail or phone call from a customer or salesperson giving us kudos, telling us something great about an employee."

The headquarters groundbreaking took place in 2006, the same year a Merchants Bill of Rights was released that serves as an industry standard for fairness, honesty and transparency. That was also the time period in which a regionalization strategy was adopted, allowing call center customer advocates to serve merchants and salespersons within a particular geographic area. That has elevated the team atmosphere at Heartland.

"It's values," emphasizes Jaime Simms, a customer service manager. "I know I'm working for a company that has the same values I do. We can be honest, open. There isn't anything we're hiding."

DeAnna Wooldridge, with two years of experience as a customer advocate, cites the "atmosphere here; they really care about you. They reach out to you and make sure you have everything you need." Jeff Wendell, director of HSC service, adds, "It's the authentic, genuine care of every level of management, starting with Bob Carr, who founded the company. No matter what level you are, you feel like you're part of the same team."

Jean-Paul Seng, senior regional service director, came to the company eight years ago. "I had no idea what Heartland did. I just heard this chatter – so and so went to Heartland. It has just become the area's place to be."

Nichols terms the opportunities for advancement as "tremendous," with many stories of upward mobility throughout the office. Simms is just one example, starting on the phone taking inbound calls five years ago before advancing to supervisor and then her current role. "I've been in my folks' shoes. That helps because, as managers, we've done what they've done."

Donna Nelson, another senior regional service director, states, "All of us are walking



Outdoor basketball courts, a 24/7 fitness center and more are popular attractions, in addition to ping pong competitions.

testimonials. We tell our stories to those new folks who are coming in through the doors.”

Stressful telephone calls are a reality that cannot be avoided. Special events during the day help provide a temporary respite, while incentive competitions between teams, carnivals, movie nights in the parking lot and tickets to area events are among the ways the company recognizes its associates.

Maybe the biggest investment is Heartland University, which began in 2010. It partners with Ivy Tech Community College to deliver – on-site and at no cost to employees – an associate degree in business administration. There are now four cohorts that total 60 students. In addition, there are numerous seminars (for example: time and stress management, ethics and values in the workplace) offered to all throughout the organization.

“It’s an investment in education, trying to make people better by giving them the tools that will help them better serve our merchants and relationship managers,” offers Chris Hargett, director of HSC training. “The degree is business; that’s what we do here. We want to streamline things that are centric to what we do here, while getting a formal education for those that may not have been able to do that on their own.”

While the Heartland Cares Foundation provides assistance to those in need (including victims of the March tornadoes in the area), Burns points out that management called everyone that day and evening with addresses in the most heavily impacted communities to check on them and make sure they were OK.

With his wife also at the company and 4-year-old son part of the daycare program, Burns adds that coming to work really



**The 2012 Heartland summit – featuring new product launches, education sessions, awards and more – brought people together from all 50 states.**

doesn’t seem like a job. “Also, you are recognized for what you do; a pat on the back goes a long way.”

Wilson, one of those seeking her degree, lists a business management course as her favorite thus far – one that offered a compelling lesson. “I took away that leadership is not always a management function. It’s something you can portray in any position that you have.”