



Erin Eberly, director



Elizabeth Paulus, staff accountant



Jamie Ellis, chief of operations and finance

# KATZ, SAPPER & MILLER

By Rebecca Patrick

## IT'S ALL ABOUT THE EMPLOYEES



KSM took first place among the financial industry competitors at the 2015 Corporate Challenge, a fun-filled community event that emphasizes healthy lifestyles and company camaraderie.

“A long time ago I heard this and it stuck with me in leadership: When you are faced with a decision (about your people) and you err on the side of the employee, nine times out of 10 you will end up making the right decision. And I believe that,” declares David Resnick, managing partner at Katz, Sapper & Miller (KSM).

The Indianapolis-based CPA firm, which started in 1942, has grown from that company of two to a national player in the accounting, tax and consulting industry; today it employs more than 250.

Resnick joined the firm right out of college. He took to the engaging culture and the philosophy that “everyone is unique” and there were no limits to their ascension.

In his role today, he’s built on those foundations to strengthen the “collegial” atmosphere.

“I like to talk to people and understand what they think, and then bring them together and have an agreed-upon result,” Resnick offers. “I think that really helps with the mood of the organization and people’s buy-in to what we are trying to accomplish.”

### Tone-setting

Jim Nestor, director of human resources, is eager to discuss the company’s leadership and what he refers to as “the big heart” they have.

“I’ve never worked with a group of leaders who care so much, and when it comes down to it, they want to do the very best for the employees,” he stresses. “They really have the employee’s (best) interest and outcomes at heart.”

He recounts the time an intern didn’t have enough money to replace a dead car battery and was finding alternative means to work.

“It was the second day of this, and they came in and underneath their desk was a brand new battery. It had anonymously been purchased and put there. Subsequently, we found out that it was one of the partners in that group who did that but wished to remain anonymous.”

Jamie Ellis, the chief of operations and finance, continues to appreciate the “sense of oneness” the company has maintained as it’s grown.

“It’s very difficult as you get above 100 people, 150 people, 200 people, to keep that

sense within the firm and we’ve been able to do that. We’re named a Best Place to Work and that’s important to us, but what’s almost more important is that we’re doing the right things to be considered for the award,” he explains.

“At other places I’ve worked, we had to talk about how a great culture is important to us. We don’t have to do that here. It just is. When you preach too much, it’s almost like fake culture. People arrive here and because we’re hiring the best people, they just live it from day one.”

As is generally the case, a great culture starts from the top.

“The management is incredible, very approachable. People can be afraid to approach a manager with a question,

especially a partner with 30 years of experience,” shares Elizabeth Paulus, a staff accountant. “But here you can go to them and say, ‘I really don’t understand this, can I sit down with you?’ It doesn’t matter if it takes an hour out of their time. They’ll talk with you, make sure you understand.”

Management also takes an appreciated proactive approach when needed.

“We’re really good at just being direct with people – in a good way,” Ellis begins. “And I think that’s really helped us. If we have someone who’s struggling, if we have someone who’s doing very well, I think we recognize that early on to try to provide a corrective course or to applaud what they’re doing.

“At the end of the day, we’re all human.



Catered-in “busy season” meals and having a well-stocked breakroom are big hits with employees.



Whether it's at the annual bring-your-kids-to-work Halloween party, another fun group activity or volunteering on a community project, KSM team members work well together.



We make mistakes; we all do things that need corrective action at times. And I've never been in a place that does such a good job of addressing those on the front end and it allows employees to excel," he says.

## Pipeline success

Nestor calls recruiting another company hallmark, with the majority taking place on Indiana college campuses.

"We go through a very rigorous screening process that starts with our recruitment of interns (15 to 18 each spring) – usually in their junior or senior years. And ideally, we take those interns and flip them over into full-time hires. Our conversion rate is probably running close to 90% at this point."

That critical task falls primarily to recruitment manager Karen Hill, who has been with the company 22 years. Nestor praises her dedication and notes her attending a college student's soccer game as one example.

"I'm really big on establishing relationships and just getting the students comfortable," Hill stresses.

"Public accounting is really about the company culture. All of the work is the same no matter where you go, but the company dynamics are very different with each firm. I feel like that no matter what stage (of life) you are at, we have a lot to offer."

One of the interns Hill lured back is Paulus, who started full-time last fall.

"After I got the offer from KSM, I just broke down crying when I got off the phone. I was just that emotional and excited to have an offer from them."

She says it was the overall impression the firm made on her that put it at the top of her list for permanent employment.

"Just knowing that all of these people had been here for so many years and they're not planning on leaving anytime soon. The other place that I interned at, so many people left just between the time that I left there and the time I graduated school."

## Taxing times

KSM is one of only two companies (Edward Jones being the other) to make the Best Places to Work in Indiana list all 11 years. That feat is all the more impressive given the intense environment employees live in for a portion of each calendar.

From mid-March to mid-April "it's like a little pressure cooker," Resnick admits.

Offers Ellis: "Imagine thousands upon thousands of tax returns that have to be completed in a very short period of time. For everybody to remain sane, they've developed ways to alleviate some of those pressures."

Resnick explains one substantial way: "We have this feeling that it's not fair for one person to be here until 9:00 at night while the other one left at 4:00. So we are willing to help each other and we have a mechanism in place to share the workload."

"It's that whole spirit of pitching in to make sure we are providing our clients with the very best work product that is really a part of our culture throughout."

Among the appreciated things KSM does for its employees during the rush of tax time: afternoon breaks for catered-in ice cream sundaes, a massage therapist on site, a chocolate fountain, the NCAA

basketball tournament on big screens, a stocked breakroom and "busy season" meals.

"They bring in dinner for us every night, Monday through Thursday, and then on Friday we leave by 5 or 6 to go spend the evening with our family," Paulus notes.

"Then Saturday we come back in and they have lunch for us. But if you want to leave early one night to go spend time with your family, because you don't see them very much during this period, they're very much okay with that. They know that we work very hard."

And staff members also do what they can to make the long days more manageable.

"We have people bringing in homemade snacks. They're working until midnight but then they're going home and making homemade snacks to bring in so that 9 o'clock the next night they have snacks for people to eat. That's the atmosphere that's been created," Ellis describes.

Surviving the tax season culminates with a nice dinner party at a local restaurant and everyone getting the following workday off.

## A cut above

Spend any time with the KSM staff and you will hear plenty of stories about what further distinguishes the company.

For Hill, it's the career compass framework "that kind of maps out your career, whether you're an administrative assistant or all the way up to partner level. What are those tools you are going to need? We have a learning and development manager on staff who looks at all the curriculum and makes sure that people are going through courses when they need to."

Erin Eberly, a director who has been with the firm since 2002, points to the focus on millennial appeal.

"We're really trying to be out in front and be a leader in the industry in that area; we have a lot of things coming down the pipeline – including rolling out an app, potentially, to engage our employees, as both a recruiting tool and here within the firm."

"There is flexibility to work from home, so trying to shift our mindset and make sure that we continue to recruit the top talent and learn how to adapt (are important)," she continues.

"People here are willing to try new things and to facilitate and foster that environment to bring about change more quickly. We try to be ahead of our competition."

Nestor cites how KSM has empowered him to do his job.

"We have a group of partners and leaders who allow me a lot of autonomy and independence, and really are open to hearing my suggestions and my recommendations in order to move the firm forward as it relates to talent. That's been tremendous and my greatest sense of pride."

Ellis echoes that feeling of ownership. "(The industry) is a very competitive environment and we have to do things to get the best people in the door to serve the clients the best. I think our model of – I don't want to say, 'Be your own boss,' but you're an adult."

"We all live different lives and we understand we have to be flexible. If you want or need to go do this or that, go to it. That's served us very well and allowed us to serve our clients very well. It's just a special place."

## VIDEO BONUS: DAVID RESNICK ON WHAT SETS KSM APART

