

CYCLE of SUCCESS

By Tom Schuman

Best Places Honor Leads to More Top People

A theme that is certainly not new but continues to carry even greater significance: It takes great people to serve customers and clients at the highest levels.

One way to attract and retain outstanding talent is to be recognized as a Best Place to Work in Indiana. Thus, a winning progression is in place: Build or enhance a strong workplace culture, which helps elevate the people part of your business equation and, in turn, takes your organization's accomplishments to an even greater plateau.

That was one of many areas discussed as we brought together three representatives of the 2018 class of Best Places to Work.

- **Pamela Carrington Rotto**, senior vice president and chief operating officer for J.C. Hart, which does development, construction and property management of multi-family communities. Contact her at pamela@HomelsJCHart.com
- **Matthew Griffin**, chief operating officer of The Garrett Companies, a multi-family developer, builder and asset manager with properties throughout the United States. Contact him at matt@thegarrettc.com
- **Joshua Plank**, a partner with WestPoint Financial Group, a broad-based financial

services company. Contact him at jplank@financialguide.com

Hear ye, hear ye

WestPoint is being honored in 2018 for the 11th time in the 13-year history of the program. It's easy, Plank, says, to point to one of the immediate benefits.

"Where I think we get the most value out of it is in recruiting. We've had several candidates reach out to us – I don't know whether it's seeing it in the magazine or just talking to someone else – but they said, 'Hey, we came across you. We're interested in the industry. You were a Best Place to Work. So-and-so told us to talk to you.'"

Carrington Rotto seconds that, noting that associates and prospective employees have, in more recent years, indicated that they only apply to companies that have received the designation. She also points to social media and other avenues that make the information so much more accessible.

A seven-time honoree, J.C. Hart has realized other benefits from its participation.

"It's the feedback that we receive from our associates," Carrington Rotto observes. "I'll give you a couple of examples. Our associates have wanted more development and training, so we've developed something called Hart Smart – an internal and external professional development opportunity for all associates across the company.

"It's everything from book clubs to leadership development courses to things that are more industry specific," she continues. "We set company goals around that now, so everybody's challenged to earn at least 18 credits in 2018.

"One other example: They (our

associates) have a lot of creative ideas, so we now have our own internal *Shark Tank*. This year the emphasis is on the value or return on those ideas. We're doing some education within the company, which has the reciprocal benefit of helping people understand that a good idea only becomes a great idea when there's a return on the investment."

The Garrett Companies is a Best Place to Work newcomer, having grown from six people a few years ago to 40-plus today. That expansion mode continues, and the word is already out.

"We seem to be constantly interviewing," Griffin affirms, "and in the last few weeks since we made the list, five out of 10 people that came in for interviews said, 'Hey, we noticed you're in the Best Places to Work.'"

The new status, he believes, will only help as "the next layer is to really get the message out that we're looking for the best. We're looking for creative people. We're looking for doers and makers. We want the best, and we're unapologetic about it."

Firm grasp

New talent, of course, is only part of the equation. Retention is critical. J.C. Hart and The Garrett Companies face traditionally high turnover percentages in some parts of their businesses. WestPoint, however, operates in an atmosphere in which four-year retention of new financial advisors is less than 10%.

"One out of 10 people is going to make it through those first four years," Plank emphasizes. "We're closer to 30%, which is better," but with room for improvement, he confirms.

WestPoint strives to raise those numbers through training (scheduled sessions on



“People like being part of something bigger than themselves, being part of a company that’s reaching high and wide to achieve something that might otherwise be seen as insurmountable. I think that’s really connected people together.”

*Pamela Carrington Rotto
J.C. Hart*

Monday and Friday mornings, with additional opportunities also available). An annual gala – the location and entertainment for the coming year keep people talking and engaged – brings together associates (with spouses) from all offices. Skype is also used to more closely connect the various locations.

“Another thing that we’ve discovered that helps with retention,” Plank confirms, “is starting people in classes (or cohorts) so they aren’t just starting one or two at a time.”

Griffin terms retention a developing issue for The Garrett Companies. For now, it’s going beyond the training, lunch and learns and educational reimbursements to making sure each team member feels valued.

“We’re trying to understand their passion and really trying to align with what motivates them and makes them want to come to work,” he reveals. “(We want people to be) excited to be part of this growing group project ... that you feel a direct tie from your talents to the success of the company.”

“We want to stress to each person, whether that’s the front desk person or all the way up to the owner of the company, that your touch and your talent is directly affecting how well we’re doing.”

Griffin recalls what owner Eric Garrett told him when the two worked together at a previous company. “He says to me, ‘You know, I hope I will give you the tools and the ability to go off and start your own company. The biggest compliment would be every one of my team to be able to branch off ... and I can look back and say I sort of seeded all of this.’”

Helpful to the cause

Another enduring Best Places lesson is that gestures that may seem little in nature often carry a big impact.

At The Garrett Companies, weekly yoga and biweekly haircuts will be supplemented by oil changes starting this summer. With many team members having new families and younger children, Griffin and the management group stress that “milestone events in your life can’t be left behind. If you’ve got a birthday or a recital, we’re expecting you to go to it. It’s not PTO; we just expect you to go take care of that.”

Ping pong tables, cornhole boards and various cook-off “competitions” are commonplace. WestPoint Financial adds in celebrations of certain food holidays with staff leaving early, for example, for burgers and beverages on National Cheeseburger Day.

Plank notes that incoming recruits, who have gone through the formal hiring process to become part of the team, are often brought in to celebrate such occasions in a far more informal atmosphere.

For J.C. Hart, core value awards (which come from peers) and a “team of teams” concept (allowing employees to engage beyond their main assignments) are two examples of extending engagement.

“We have a variety of opportunities for people, where they benefit in an area where they want to grow,” Carrington Rotto shares. “It also gets us in greater contact with them so that we can recognize and appreciate how they’re growing in their contributions.”

Among the other staples of a strong workplace culture:

- Family friendliness, from special events to everyday approaches: “We’re a family-owned business, so family is very central to what we do and that includes dogs,” says Carrington Rotto. “There are occasions when we have dogs at the office and that has been welcomed. I’m not sure (president and CEO) John Hart loves it as much as some of the rest of the people, but he tolerates it.”
- Multi-generational alliances: A Summit Vision Council for J.C. Hart brings workers of different generations together for meaningful conversations and learning about each other instead of relying on generational labels or stereotypes.

At WestPoint Financial, one example is a team member with nearly 50 years of experience teaching a class to incoming advisors.

“For one, it shows Paul’s not living in an ivory tower to these kids,” Plank explains. “If they just walked by his office – it looks like a museum inside of there – they would think, ‘Well, Paul’s unapproachable; I can’t talk to him.’ But he gets in there (in the class) and

starts cracking jokes and they’re like, ‘Well, this guy is just another person.’”

- Giving back to the community: WestPoint Financial focuses on associates bringing forward ideas regarding their passions and personal interests. That’s “instead of us kind of telling them, ‘This is what’s important, and it should be important to you.’ The millennials that we have, and we have a lot of them, seem to like that.”

Listen and learn

Best Places to Work is one of the avenues winning companies use to listen to their employees. Regular surveys are often part of the mix. Among the WestPoint offerings is gaining immediate feedback from new classes or cohorts as they complete their initial training. The Garrett Companies include peer, working group and supervisor evaluations in an annual process.

Carrington Rotto says J.C. Hart also uses the Net Promoter system, which relies on the responses to this or a similar question: *Would you recommend this company as a place to work to your friends and family members?*

Benchmarking allows separation of promoters from detractors, with a focus on moving those in the middle toward the promoter end of the scale.

In the evaluation process at the company, every employee also meets with Hart. “He asks great questions and really listens, so people feel their voice is heard and valued through that. And then he reconnects with people by writing every single person in the company a personalized Christmas letter.”

The panelists share what they feel makes



“The next layer is to really get the message out that we’re looking for the best. We’re looking for creative people. We’re looking for doers and makers. We want the best, and we’re unapologetic about it.”

*Matthew Griffin
The Garrett Companies*

their organizations special:

- Plank: “For us, I think it’s our culture. There are a lot of financial services companies out there that do ... the products and services are always commodities. So how we are going to differentiate ourselves to the advisors is the culture. You know we’re going to work, we’re going to take care of our clients, but we’re going to have a lot of fun doing it at the same time.”
- Carrington Rotto: “J.C. Hart started as a much smaller family business and that family aspect of it has really been treasured and valued over the years.”

Citing a big, hairy, audacious goal of 12,000 enjoyable living experiences by 2025, she adds, “That has created opportunities to be very innovative and to get our associates involved. People like being part of something bigger than themselves, being part of a company that’s reaching high and wide to achieve something that might otherwise be seen as insurmountable. I think that’s really connected people together.”

- Griffin: “It’s the people. We expect a lot out of our team, and they tend to surprise us by how much they can deliver. If we can

keep that alive, we’re slowly trying to become sort of a beacon for the creative class of folks in our industry.” The head of development was formerly an airport designer and a development manager has a sales rep background in the shoe and apparel industry.

‘Just do it’

What would you say to those who have not participated in Best Places to Work?

Plank emphatically offers, “Just do it. There are only good things that come from being part of the program.”

Carrington Rotto adds, “Make it a priority and don’t be afraid of what comes out of it. You’re going to grow and learn from it.”

“For us,” Griffin concludes, “everything is sales, everything is marketing, always be closing. This is an excellent platform to rise above and be in a more elite class of our peers and to really get that message about who we are and what we’re doing out there. There are very few channels, I would say, like this that afford the opportunity. So, yeah, that’s why we went for it.”



“For us, I think it’s our culture. There are a lot of financial services companies out there ... the products and services are always commodities. ... You know we’re going to work, we’re going to take care of our clients, but we’re going to have a lot of fun doing it at the same time.”

*Joshua Plank
WestPoint Financial Group*
