



Evidence of Excellence

"The evidence never lies" is a common catchphrase of Gil Grissom, the lead character in the popular CSI television show. This also proves true in the case of two Indiana companies in which the findings are convincingly conclusive:

Their employees love where they work!

By Rebecca Patrick

Schmidt Associates

"Everyone is so willing to share and help you to grow and help you to become whoever you want to be. That's fantastic! I love what I do and every morning I wake up and am excited to come to work. Every day, I know there's a new challenge, there's something new and fun to do, fun to learn, people to talk to, people to meet. It's just been great!" – Desma Belsaas, graduate architect

Testimony like this affirms Wayne Schmidt's conviction in starting an architectural firm nearly 31 years ago. He wanted to be in downtown Indianapolis for its vitality and to foster an environment for quality service and professional development. He accomplished both.

Today, Schmidt Associates is home to 95 employees. Throughout the company's evolution, Schmidt has pledged to his staff to: meet payroll, obtain the "right" projects, allow you to do good work, provide for career growth, act with integrity and be intentional with the future.

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Edward Jones

Exhibit 1: For the second year in a row, Edward Jones – the nation's largest investment firm – finished first in Indiana's Best Places to Work program among large employers.

Exhibit 2: At Edward Jones, employees are actual partners in the company and share in its profits.

Exhibit 3: As long as profitability is met, individual branches have the flexibility to run their offices in the manner that works best for them.

Exhibit 4: The Edward Jones way, instilled from the corporate office in St. Louis, is a national model for employer and employee satisfaction. Besides Indiana, the firm has recently garnered top Best Place to Work honors in six other states: Colorado, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, Ohio and Oklahoma, as well as made *Fortune Magazine's* "100 Best Companies to Work For" list.

The most persuasive evidence, though, comes from those on the scene – the employees at the 357 branch offices in Indiana.

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“I promised that I’d never have to let anybody go due to lack of work. It was my job to make sure we had enough. To let someone go because I failed would not be acceptable,” Schmidt states. “And, the couple times we couldn’t make payroll, I took a pay cut (so staff got paid).”

The Evansville native says venturing out on his own seemed the natural thing to do. “My dad always told me you’re not going to make any money working for someone else. I knew from day one that I would have my own office eventually,” Schmidt offers. “It’s fun; it’s a great hobby that I get paid for.”

Over the years, many notable projects have made for good times, including the NCAA Headquarters and Hall of Champions in Indianapolis, the Monon Trail in Carmel and the Virgil T. DeVault Alumni Center at Indiana University in Bloomington. Schmidt Associates has also worked on local landmarks like the Greensburg courthouse and the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Monument in downtown Indianapolis.

Right people, right path

Schmidt cites the company’s hiring and orientation processes as two keys to getting bigger and better.

“When we hire, we really look for attitude. You can teach people skills, but you can’t teach people attitude. If they come in with a can-do, great attitude, then they’re our person,” he explains.

The orientation program includes the standard meetings with management, but that’s only the beginning. Each new employee receives several books to read during the 90-day orientation, plus gets personally assigned staff members to turn to for guidance.

Besides having a mentor (either a partner or associate at the company) who conveys the company mission and assists with individual goal-setting, each new employee also gets a Sherpa, traditionally known as a guide over the Himalayan Mountains. In this case, the terrain covered is all the ins and outs of Schmidt Associates.

“The Sherpa may answer simple questions like why is something done this way or help me figure out this person’s personality,” states Susan Sigman, human resource manager. During the orientation period, the new employee meets periodically with his/her mentor and Sherpa to examine how things are going.

Further down the line, professional development is an encouraged avenue, one much appreciated by employees.

“One of the strongest things that brought me back to the company (after my internship) was the ability to grow,” Belsaas states.

Schmidt Academy, the brainchild of Lisa Gomperts, program manager/associate, offers continuing education courses related to the company’s four distinct career tracks, with 10 classes available for each group.

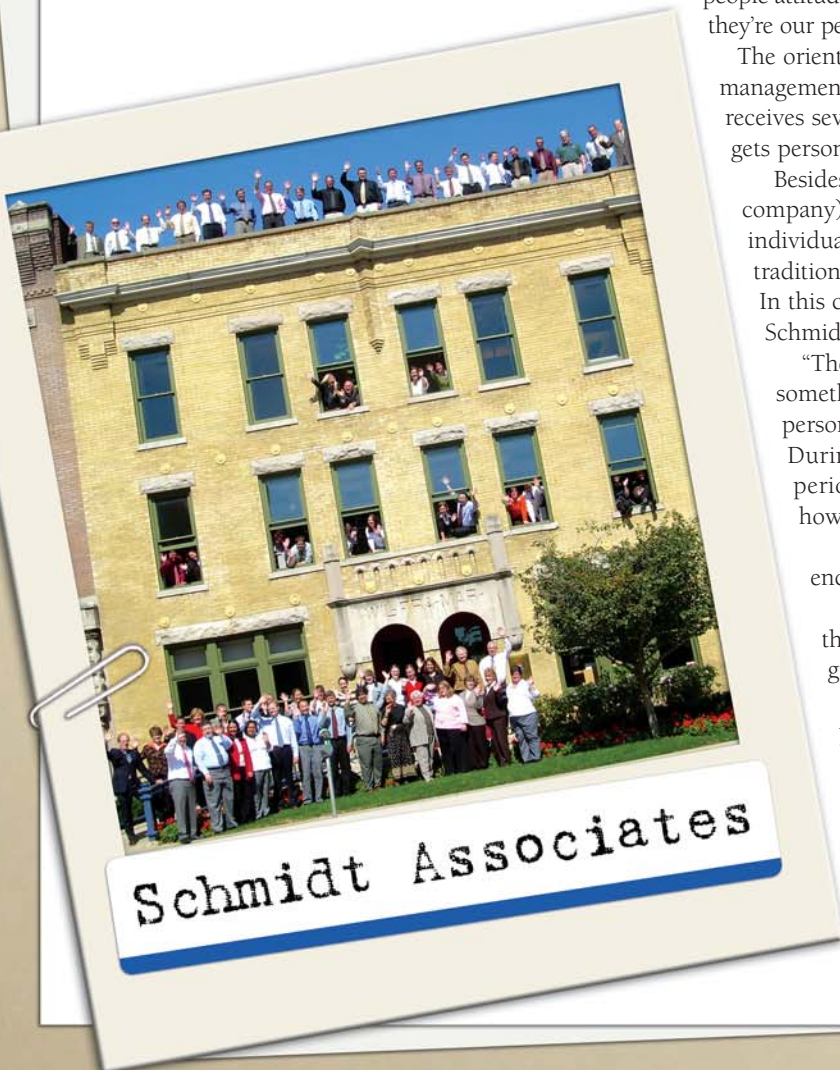
“We bring in some outside consultants each year, but most of the classes are internal training done by a lot of our senior people – managers and principals,” Gomperts reports. “I think people have enjoyed it, and it provides a way for some of the younger staff, who have to get licensed, an

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ASSOCIATES

Architecture
Engineering
Technology
Interior Design
Landscape Architecture



opportunity to gain that knowledge.

“That’s just the best thing ... the focus and the investment they are willing to put into their employees. Twice a year, we give career pathing for every employee to try to understand what their goals are,” she adds. “There’s a certain culture here that starts with upper management and just emanates down to everybody.”

Sigman concurs. “We have a great atmosphere for helping you get from one level to the next in your career. Once you set your goals and tell us what those goals are, we’re going to do everything possible to help you obtain them.”

Setting the tone

Everything Schmidt Associates does – internally and externally – is based on the guiding principle of servant leadership.

“Very simply, if I serve your needs, whether you’re a client or an employee, you will allow me to lead. I firmly believe that you don’t declare you’re the leader. People have to vote for you to be the leader,” Schmidt asserts. “They vote silently or they vote against you, but if you’re not meeting their needs, you’re not going to be leading them anywhere.”

Schmidt is also a big proponent of setting an example. “I don’t expect anyone to do something I’m not willing to do. But if I’m willing to do it, I expect everyone else to do it too, no matter what it is – if it’s picking up trash in the front yard. I just expect other people to care,” he shares.

That attitude resonates, says Steve Schaecher, architecture quality manager. “It’s a real open and friendly atmosphere. Everybody is approachable and willing to help. The principals sit out here (in cubicles) like everybody else. People can listen and learn.”

Freedom is another welcome part of the work dynamic. “People know what their responsibilities and goals are, but there’s not a lot of hand-holding,” Sigman offers.

Adds Deb Kunce, program manager/associate, “We don’t have a silver bullet, but people are treated fairly here. We have a lot of independence. The CEO and the principals of the firm are open to new ideas and change, and trying new things. There is a culture of continuing to grow over time.”

There is also a culture of taking time to have a little fun.

“We have slipper days, we dress up for Halloween, we have chili cook-offs every year with prizes for the hottest and most original – you name it, we have it,” Sigman states. (This year’s chili cook-off also raised \$1,100 for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation.)

“We often send out surveys to our employees to see what they would be most interested in doing and if they have suggestions,” she notes. “We really try to make it a fun atmosphere. We’ve done everything from a company picnic with a Survivor (reality show) theme to a night at the IRT (Indiana Repertory Theatre).”

One periodic event that remains a favorite with staff is the gala gallery. “Everybody was asked to submit any type of ‘artwork’ they were working on outside the office to this art show, and the men dressed up in our black turtlenecks and tried to act all cool,” Schaecher recalls. “One year they had a champagne fountain downstairs, and we invite clients to attend and actually post signs along Massachusetts Avenue for people to come too.”

Adds Kunce, “We’ve had people bring in house plants, sculptures, woodworking and paintings. We’ve also had people do interpretive dance. The gala showcases your own individual spirit, which I think is part of our culture here.”

Be it the company’s growth, the career opportunities for employees or the little bit of levity often found in the office, Schmidt couldn’t be happier with how his “hobby” turned out.

“Every morning when I come in here, I think how fortunate I am to work with such great people. They’re motivated and they’ve got the right perspective on life.”



Lisa Gomperts oversees Schmidt Academy, which provides continuing education courses to employees.



Having fun — such as on a “Survivor” company picnic — is a key part of the company culture.