

#1 - Small Company

J A BENEFITS

Insuring Clients Starts With Ensuring Culture

By Charlee Beasor

"If you've come to find out what the secret sauce is, you let us know if you figure it out," jokes JA Benefits CEO Chris Johnson.

It's understandable Johnson would assume that was the purpose of a BizVoice® visit to the Bedford-based benefits consulting company in early March. It is the seventh time JA Benefits has been named to the Best Places to Work in Indiana list. The company employs 24 people.

There's also a mention of leaders not sure if they should be "nervous or excited" about the fact that BizVoice was there, wanting to know who or what makes the company tick.

What we discovered, as for that secret sauce? There's nothing secretive about it. The company's mission is to insure people. Leadership and employees take that mission to heart.

"It's not commercial insurance, where we're insuring a building. We're insuring people," Johnson asserts.

"Our goal is to help our clients serve their team members. There are real people walking around with real cards in their wallets and when they have a challenge, it's not an automobile or a car. It's real people. I think our family orientation comes from that place."

Financial consultant Mike Fidler started at JA Benefits when it was founded by Doug Johnson in 1988. He says the public recognition from continual involvement in Best Places to Work reaffirms what he already knew.

"Everybody's got each other's back and we know that comes from the top on down and we push that back up. It gives you enough confidence to really talk to whomever you need to speak with and go boldly after what you want to accomplish," Fidler offers. "The big goal is to help the client and I see that every day, no matter who it is."

About that other shoe ...

Danielle Hitchcock and Jenni Beeler get choked up when they talk about the impact JA Benefits has had on their personal and professional lives.

Both account managers at the firm, they have personal stories to tell about how they've been supported by their co-workers and the executive team.

"Just two weeks ago, these people jumped in and supported me personally," Beeler offers, gesturing to those around her in the



Recognition is crucial at JA Benefits, from the peer-to-peer “Red Rocks” program to the anniversary Pandora charms given to each woman at the company.

company’s conference room. “I have a stepparent that’s going through some really difficult times and these co-workers, these family members, pitched in and donated a bunch of things to help my stepmom. It’s very touching to me.”

Hitchcock also recently felt the care from her work family when her grandmother passed away.

“These people – almost every single one of them – showed up at the funeral home and gave me a hug. I even brought (their) cards,” she shares, picking up a stack of well wishes.

“This is something we do for the loss of someone, but also birthdays, anniversaries and each one of them sign it and we get to look back together and keep it forever.”

The cards weren’t the only items Hitchcock brought to show off. In front of her was a Mason jar filled with (plastic) rubies. Those are the “red rocks” that team members use as a form of peer recognition.

“It seems silly to give a piece of plastic to someone,” Beeler concedes. “But it’s really cool. Like, yes! I got one today!”

Another favorite recognition method is the annual Pandora charm that the women of JA Benefits earn each year to go with the Pandora bracelet awarded on their one-year anniversary. Alternatively, men receive engraved gifts or gift cards.

Mary Fisher, lead solutions advocate, recently celebrated her 25th year working with the company. She received an all-expense paid trip (a cruise to the Bahamas with her daughters) and has several bracelets worth of charms on her wrists.

“My daughter just finished up playing high school basketball, (a sport) she has been playing since she was five. And I can say I’ve never missed a ballgame because (company leaders) were willing to work with me. . . . That is humongous to me.”

Employees have a voice in the company’s direction and culture through the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) Team, which also ensures an open-door policy.

In Fisher’s experience, the feedback and recognition efforts at JA Benefits have truly evolved over her 25 years.

“When I first started, I got a metal suggestion box that was locked. I can tell you we’ve come a loooooong way,” she recalls, to bursts of laughter around the table.

Account manager Tatiana Ritter puts it bluntly: “It’s like waiting for the other shoe to drop. I’ve said that from the first month I started and it’s two years in and it still feels like that.”

“We aren’t just a number here,” Beeler asserts. “They care for us like we are their own kids. I don’t know how else to put it; I’m going to start crying!”

Young leaders

Doug Johnson, founder, partner and vice chairman, is proud of how the company’s leadership has transitioned over the last few years.

His son Chris took over as president five years ago and was recently named CEO. Clint Parker is the company’s new chief operating officer; he’s been with JA Benefits for 11 years.

“It gives me a lot of pride to look around and see what we’ve been able to do over the years. The formal transition took place recently, but this has been going on for 15 years. Clint and Chris have been involved in the organization since right out of college,” Doug Johnson offers.

“We’ve got good, pipelined individuals that have been groomed to be the next leaders in the industry. . . . It gives them a really bright future career-wise that they might not be able to get somewhere else.”

Jaren Hornbeak, business development associate, graduated from college in May 2018 and joined JA Benefits one month later. He was drawn to the company precisely for those career development experiences.

“Even in my interview, Clint and I sat and talked about ‘Where do we want to end up?’ and worked our way back. Knowing I had the investment from the leadership in my growth professionally is helpful,” he says.

Another strategy is being an “incubator” to know what really works, so the company can more effectively recommend benefits to clients.

“We try to lead by example in what we do and try things out ourselves first. So, we are a little bit of an incubator, if you will. We try it first, see if it works, see if it makes sense,” Doug Johnson adds.

One that’s stuck – and helped JA Benefits stick out – is the near-site clinic access for all employees, spouses and dependents, whether the employee is on the company’s insurance plan or not.

In a collaborative way

Part of the executive team’s strategy at JA Benefits is ensuring employees know what great culture is so they can help assist their clients in attaining it in their companies.

“They know what exceptional can look and feel like, so they know how we want to deliver that to our clients,” Chris Johnson contends.

Parker says the employee-client connection is critical.

“Our balance comes simply from listening to our employees and the feedback they bring,” he explains. “They work with clients every day; they see things we don’t see. They’ll suggest (ideas), and we’ll review and work through and sometimes implement those ideas.”

Sandi Brinson, director of HR solutions, points out frequent touchpoints with staff and an emphasis on communication.

“Everybody feels very comfortable giving feedback. Creating that environment is not easy to do and JA has done an excellent job with it,” she reveals.

Parker recently facilitated individual touchpoints with staff members. He was delighted by the results.

“I asked the question about what they’re most proud of or their biggest achievement in the last six months. And two different people, their biggest achievement was something somebody else did. That speaks to the culture that we have,” he shares.

Keeping the company’s mission and values top of mind is critical. Each workspace, office, open space and conference room has a plaque inscribed with the words.

“It’s things they look at every day. We coach to (the values). We start all our touchpoints with them. Our meeting agendas revolve around mission, purpose and growth. It’s a practice,” Parker elaborates. “I don’t know that you ever actually arrive, you just continue the practice.”

Brinson adds that employees take “ownership in our culture.

“They are vested. They love JA as much as Chris and Doug and the owners,” she confirms.

Associates at JA Benefits also impact their own compensation through personal and professional development. The team, Chris Johnson says, is naturally curious and wants to learn.

“Our team digs it. They want to be part of it. They challenge us on how we can make it better. And I think that’s fair. We’re asking



Team-building challenges occur both in and outside the office of the benefits consulting company. Testing out benefits as an “incubator,” offers founder Doug Johnson, is a way for the company to be confident about the programs and policies it recommends to its clients.



them to develop personally, professionally. We're incentivizing them to do it, but they are truly invested in what type of organization we can become," he adds.

One of the recent additions to the repertoire at JA Benefits is the group book study of *The Collaborative Way: A Story About Engaging the Mind and Spirit of a Company* by Jason Fickett and Lloyd Fickett.

Everyone read the 114-page book, which touches on themes of speaking straight, listening generously, honoring commitments, being there for each other and more.

"Our team loved it," Brinson recalls. They couldn't wait to go talk about it."

Parker says the group book study gave everyone the same language to work with, enabling clearer communications.

"It's a pretty quick read, but it gives you a common language. I'm under no illusion that every day is going to be perfect, but when something happens that's challenging, it gives you a common language (to work through it)."

Hard to ignore

One thing that's clear from a few hours spent at JA Benefits: These people care about their clients and each other.

Doug Johnson provides an example.

"We were in a meeting this week and Greg, who's one of our account executives who's not here today, he walks into an insurance committee meeting for one of our clients and this young lady brings Greg up

This is the seventh year JA Benefits has been on the Best Places to Work list. The company's employees regularly go to lunch together, and celebrate or support each other through life events.



this big smiley-face cookie.

"Greg got involved in a claim situation she had. She went from owing \$15,000 in out-of-pocket expenses to basically getting a credit of \$1,300 because Greg intervened and got the claim processed the way it should have been. She had a \$17,000 swing in a matter of 24 hours.

"Those kinds of things happen all the time. The solutions team does it every day. We sometimes take it for granted, but when Greg gets a big smiley-face cookie, it's hard

to ignore."

Fidler points out the joy Johnson clearly feels in relaying that example.

"Doug's telling that story and there's a smile on his face and you might call that enthusiasm," he exclaims.

"But that's every day, knowing that we have a collective mission and we all work together to accomplish that and there is an amount of pride and satisfaction in doing the job right. I feel very fortunate (to be here). They can just prop me up when I'm 100."