



WINNING AS A TRUE TEAM

United Consulting

By Matt Ottinger

Building a first-place culture for Indianapolis-based United Consulting has been a process. This year is its 15th time on the Best Places to Work in Indiana list and its first year claiming the No. 1 spot.

President Michael Rowe knows it's an evolution, having been a part of the company for over 25 years. His loyalty to the organization has been spurred by the relationships he's built within its walls.

"We became a much more sophisticated company over these 25 years," Rowe reflects. "And you couple that up with the fact that I grew to really have some of my best friends that work here."

United Consulting began in 1965 with professional engineers, planners, surveyors, environmental specialists, construction inspectors, land acquisition specialists, technicians and more providing clients with the resources to complete encompassing projects.

The company started with just four people at its inception and has now grown to a staff of 116, with around 80 in the Indianapolis office.

Easing burdens

Being a source of comfort for staff in a deadline-driven business is of utmost importance at United Consulting.

"The biggest thing that's going through companies across America is stress and anxiety and it's really a heavy burden to a lot of employees," Rowe contends. "So, I really would say that over the last five years, our focus has been on creating an environment where people can be their best selves, that we give them grace, that we're intentional on their career development."

He points to those career development opportunities, as well as tools to help mental well-being and gym membership reimbursements to promote physical health as evidence. The company also provides access to trainers and emphasizes collective exercise together in various capacities.

Senior project manager Dann Barrett has been with the company for nearly 15 years.

"I had heard a lot of good things about United and was looking for a place that I could really grow my career," he recalls. "So, I was looking for a company that would support my growth professionally and my growth personally and was really trying to kind of sharpen my skillset."

"It's nothing that just happens overnight, but (leaders) are really intentional to sit down with you as you go through your career," he

adds. “(They ask), ‘What do you want to aspire to do?’ and ‘How can we support you along the way to help you achieve those goals?’ ”

He points specifically to guidance like paying close attention to annual goals in conversations with supervisors and many water/wastewater conferences like those organized by the American Water Works Association and Indiana Water Environment Association to help him thrive in his niche of the industry.

“That’s a great way to network with the industry, meet with fellow engineers, meet with clients, but then also break out into technical sessions as well to focus on new regulations, new permits, moving requirements and new technologies,” Barrett explains.

He also recognizes a new internal program as being beneficial.

“They’ve established the United Academy, which includes internal courses led by professionals across our company,” Barrett relays. “So, it’s employee led, employee driven, but it’s a way to educate.”

At the end of the day, for Barrett, it’s all about feeling supported when he finds an opportunity to pursue.

“I think all that just focuses on how as a company we’re continually looking to improve,” he remarks. “We don’t know everything, but we’re always looking to grow.”

Bonded together

Rowe describes the company as “family first” and praises “glue people” on staff who are skilled at noticing when an employee may be having a problem and seek them out to assist.

According to human resources department manager Karen Wood, that type of empathy goes a long way and is noticed when her team seeks input on morale.

“People really care about each other, and they notice when you’re not in a great headspace; they notice things and they ask you and they genuinely want to know if you’re doing okay,” she says.

Rowe points to years of involvement in the Best Places to Work in Indiana program as being beneficial, noting surveys have helped him understand deadline-related anxieties and contributed to development of benefits like paternal leave, for example. Other feedback has also resulted in the company being a hybrid workplace for most staffers. But he notes the idea of mere flexibility can sometimes be oversimplified.

“One of the questions I never love in the Best Places to Work (survey) is about work/life balance,” Rowe admits. “I believe that life and work happen in the extremes. From time to time, we’re going to be extreme toward work, and sometimes our focus is going to have to be on our family.”



Engagement with interns has been an ideal way to build United Consulting’s staff with proven young talent. Speaking of which, a mustachioed Dann Barrett and his colleagues incorporate a golf simulator into a charity event to celebrate “November.”



“When you follow the dotted line down the middle, you don’t see the extraordinary things that can happen,” he adds.

Ultimately, Rowe lists retention of staff as the company’s top priority and its employee-friendly policies are the keys to success in that objective.

Barrett also shares team-building activities to which staffers are privy. He lists board games during lunch; basketball on Fridays; department cookouts; attending sports games like the Indiana Pacers, Indianapolis Indians or Cincinnati Reds; visiting escape rooms and go-karting as just some examples.

“It’s really up to the teams themselves to decide how they want to spend that time,” he notes. “There’s a little budget that’s allocated for that to support those endeavors. I think all that stuff is fun, but it also contributes to how we communicate, how we work together and just deepens those ties and those relationships.”

Internal culture, external impact

A bulk of the company’s clients are

municipalities across the state, and even the state of Indiana.

Rowe’s hope is that clients feel they are a part of the team as well, conveying that United Consulting is “walking beside them” during projects.

“We’re not following, we’re not leading – it’s something that we’re doing together,” he states. “And that’s essentially kind of what we do in the office. Although there is an org chart, we believe that everybody should be a servant leader where we’re walking beside each other and we’re helping each other become their best self.”

Authenticity ultimately becomes the foundation on which long-term partnerships are built, according to Rowe.

“What we try to do is make sure that we’re authentic with our employees, that we’re authentic with our clients, that we’re sitting and listening to what they are wanting to do, what their aspirations are, what they’re trying to grow to and then work the best that we can to deliver it,” he summarizes.



United Consulting's annual Thanksgiving pitch-in feast remains a way to bring staff together with a sentiment of gratitude.

Wood was first introduced to the company while at a previous employer. She saw speakers from United Consulting at a mental health conference, then later would have a chance meeting with Rowe.

They would ultimately get coffee together and discuss leadership. Then a position opened up.

"I saw him as a mentor and then kind of wanted to come here, but didn't really know how that would happen," Wood shares. "And

so, I just kept trusting the process and doing my thing. And then last year an opportunity came up and we both kind of jumped at the chance."

Her introduction to the company was emblematic of United's focus on personal development, which made it an ideal place to work.

"I wanted to learn more and more because we make each other better," Wood recalls.

"And that's how I am in my personal life; my husband and I – we make each other better. My friends and I – we make each other better, so I wanted to be at a workplace (like this), because you do your best work if you're your best self."

'Plus' sides

Wood shares the company pursues talent from such universities as Indiana State, Purdue, Rose-Hulman and Trine, and many of its new hires start as interns.

"Then we get to know them here as a person and see how they fit within our culture," she offers. "If they're a good worker and then after they graduate, we'll likely offer them a job. And you already know them. They already know you."

Rowe welcomes the new additions to the culture with hopes the company will continue to thrive by cultivating the types of lifelong friendships he's experienced with a focus on adding what he calls, "plus-one individuals."

"They're good on the inside and they're good at what they're doing," he qualifies. "And when you get a company that's continuing to evolve and become better, and couple that up with the right individuals and people that you consider friends or family, it just makes it something that's very appealing."

RESOURCE: United Consulting at www.ucindy.com



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