

Woods & Woods

Growing by Giving

By Anthony Schoettle

When it comes to her work, Sara Hartig has one straightforward ask of her husband.

“I tell (him), ‘If I ever say I’m looking for a new job, put me in a mental institution,’ ” says the mother of two, pausing to let those words sink in. “This is the absolute best job I’ve ever had!”

At Evansville-based law firm Woods & Woods, where Hartig was hired in mid-2021 – and has since earned two promotions – there’s no dress code, no cliques and no internal drama. Bureaucracy in the workplace is minimized and emphasis on a work-life balance is maximized.

“I’ve never worked anywhere where everyone smiled and says hello even if they didn’t know who I was,” Hartig imparts. “I fell in love with the place from the moment I got hired. I never dread going into work. It’s always fun, and I truly enjoy being with my co-workers. And the managers are so supportive and encourage advancement even in other departments.”

Special focus

The firm’s culture and offerings have been a magnet for working women. Out of 125 Woods & Woods’ employees, 116 are females. That’s an extraordinary ratio for any company. But it may be more so



Woods & Woods supports more than 70 charitable organizations. The firm is title sponsor of Honor Flight, a non-profit organization that honors veterans by providing them with free trips to Washington, D.C. to visit memorials dedicated to their service.

considering the law firm was founded by four men.

It’s unclear whether brothers Mike, Bill, Rick and Steve Woods set out to establish a different kind of law firm in 1985, but that’s exactly what they did.

Though it started as a community practice focusing solely on the Evansville area, the Woods siblings soon found themselves handling Social Security and benefit issues for a growing number of military veterans. Mike and Bill were lawyers and Rick and Steve handled administrative duties.

Woods & Woods officials learned two things in the firm’s formative years. The need for U.S. military veterans’ assistance was tremendous – and there were few firms specializing in that field.

As the firm began to fill that void – and grow – it learned something else.

“They were a small firm and knew they couldn’t compete on salary and benefits with larger firms,” explains Neil Woods, Mike’s son and the firm’s president and owner. “They knew they had to compete in a different way.”

So, the Woods brothers set up a fun committee – a new concept in the 1980s – and came up with monthly events for employees, including trips to local wineries and eateries, a family picnic day, trips to baseball games, bring-your-kids-to-work days and more.

What began to develop, Neil says, “was a family.”

“The employees genuinely like and enjoy spending time with one another,” he states. “That translated into a culture of helping, serving and caring. That extended to the way we treat clients.”

Making its case

Over time, the firm began focusing on just military veterans’ needs – VA disability benefit compensation in particular – and in 2008 branched out to serve American veterans across the U.S. and around the world.

During that period of “hypergrowth,” Woods admits the practice couldn’t give the pay raises it wanted. So, in the last decade, Woods has tried to rectify that – giving on average – an 8.1% annual pay raise each year.

Watching his dad and uncles run the company, Woods says he “learned the value of giving employees flexibility and some power over their own lives. To have strict and rigid rules doesn’t give your employees any power over their own lives. You have to put some trust in the people who work for you. If you don’t trust them, they shouldn’t work for you.”

Bosses urge employees not to work more than 36.5 hours a week, encourage naps and insist vacations are taken – and on occasion the company even pays for the getaways.

“I think there’s this thought in business that you hurt the business by giving employees more,” Woods notes. “Every time I give my employees more, they give back more to the firm than I have given them. It doesn’t hurt your business to give your employees more. What really hurts is turnover.”

In the last 12 months, the business only lost two employees it wanted to retain. And one, reports Woods, returned after five months.

But the employees’ favorite perk: For every five years of service to the firm, each employee gets an all-expenses paid trip for them and



Employees enjoy a laid-back culture. “Our front desk staff sometimes wears sweatpants and T-shirts,” says Neil Woods, the firm’s president and owner. “In the long run, how you dress doesn’t impact how you do your job.”

a significant other. Woods & Woods pays for the equivalent of two people taking a week-long trip to Hawaii.

Woods explains why. “We want to pay for a trip rather than buy them something like a household appliance, because we want them to have an opportunity to get away and

recharge and to have that special experience and memories that last a lifetime.”

Strong connection

Jill Rager, Woods & Woods’ operations manager, joined the firm 30 years ago at age 19. After interviewing with co-founder Bill

Woods, she left her retail job to work as a receptionist at Woods & Woods because she thought working at a law firm “would be exciting.” It’s turned out to be a lot more than that.

“Right away they made me feel like family,” Rager relates. “You could tell they really cared about their employees.”

That caring has manifested itself in countless ways over the years. When Rager had a sick parent, “they allowed me to take time off and work remotely.”

“The biggest bonus for women working here is the family orientation,” she adds. “They always make accommodations for responsibilities involving kids and the family. And they give us three months paid maternity leave. The type of flexibility and level of empathy they have for their employees is really attractive. You can’t put a price on that.”

But there’s something else that helps the law firm retain its employees.

“The fulfillment of the job is the No. 1 thing along with the family feel here that keeps people here at Woods & Woods,” Rager offers. “What we do is life-changing for our clients. It allows them to live a much better life.”

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