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Best Places to Work 2014

By Liz Merfeld Mar 20, 2014



Best Places to Work 2014

Clan. Folk. Group. Tribe. Family. These might not be the first words to roll off your tongue when dishing about your boss or coworkers.

But the winners of our latest “Best Places to Work” contest referred to their colleagues as family so frequently, we found ourselves double-checking the dictionary.

“We’re really a family here.”

“Team members treat each other as family.”

“We treat all of our employees as if they were family.”

“We are a big family here and have fun.”

What does it mean, in the context of work, to feel like a family?

“Feeling like a family can be interpreted as having one’s work valued, being treated with respect, and being given the opportunity to grow and develop in one’s career.”

That’s according to Dr. Patricia Mullins, senior lecturer in UW–Madison’s School of Business and an expert in careers, specializing in life-work balance.

“First and foremost,” she continues, “people want to be in a situation in which they are able to do their best work—and having flexibility, connection, trust and development opportunities foster that.”

These attributes are precisely what our “Best Places to Work” awards set out to recognize. Every two years *Madison Magazine* invites local businesses, government agencies and not-for-profits to take part in the contest, in hopes of nabbing a top spot on the list.

This year a hundred companies from the Madison area threw their logo’ed hats, baking aprons and lab coats into the ring. To be eligible, at least fifty percent of the staff had to answer forty open-ended and agree-disagree-type questions in a web-based survey conducted by employee engagement research firm Next Generation Consulting.

Of the seventy-eight eligible businesses, twenty-six emerged as winners based on their scores in these six areas of engagement: trust, management, development, connection, life-work balance and rewards. In five of these six categories, companies needed scores above eighty percent and in the remaining one they could not dip below sixty-five percent.

A sensible algorithm, yet we couldn’t help noticing that “Best Places to Work” seem to offer something far greater than the sum of its parts: that most salient sense of family.

In our quest to honor our sizeable swath of winners, we grouped them by size into three categories: 1–10 employees, 11–99 and 100-plus.

This was a record-breaking year, with more winners than ever and scores rising in every single category, compared to previous years.

None of this surprises Next Generation founder, economist, futurist and Rebecca Ryan, who notes that Madison is now in a period of economic stabilization, reflective of a national trend.

“The Recession probably created a few more ‘Best Places to Work,’” she reasons. “There is nothing like a foxhole to bond people to each other, and the Great Recession was a colossal ruckus.”

Above all, this bonding built trust, both by and for employers. “At many companies, when leaders reached out to employees and said, ‘I’m the first one who’s going to take a salary cut and I need your ideas and energy to help us make it through this,’ trust abounds. It creates a sense of connection. And it makes you feel like your manager gets it.”

Kitchen confidential

One manager who “gets it” is Denise Quade, certified master kitchen and bath designer. Her four-year-old interior design firm, Denise Quade Design, is our 2014 Best Places to Work winner in the 1–10 employee category.

“Denise involves us in every decision she makes,” says senior project coordinator Pam Krivanek, who is seated at a marble-top table in a mock dining room. “Take the showroom,” she continues, referring to their newly minted space off Verona Road. They made every decision together, down to each handle and countertop.

Quade, an industry veteran, feels lucky that she can trust her five-member staff (seven, if you count pooches Emma and Roscoe) and that she can draw from their eclectic tastes. This mindset, Next Generation’s Rebecca Ryan points out, is a hallmark of savvy business owners.

Companies with high trust levels “tend to outperform their competitors on profitability by up to three times,” she says. “The great firms of the future will be those that can tap the human ingenuity of every employee. Companies had a terrific chance to start that process during the Recession.”

Not coincidentally, that’s precisely when Quade went into business for herself, after unwrapping a custom-designed business card and a book on starting your own business that her kids gave her for Christmas. “I started in the worst of economic times,” in April 2010, she remembers, “and we hit the ground running.”

For the first year, this was an all-Quade operation, with her daughter and twin sons handling marketing and graphic design, and husband Tim playing jack-of-all-trades between day jobs. After he retired, Quade brought him on full-time to head up IT, service work and deliveries.

In year two, Krivanek came on board, as did design coordinator Erica Miller, Quade’s “right arm.”

“I totally trust the girls.” Sure, her management style was “more in their face” at first, she says. Soon, they were so accustomed to her ideas and she no longer had to oversee every decision. “It goes back to trust. I don’t have to double-check everything anymore.”

“You don’t feel like you’re under a microscope,” Miller explains. “Even when bad things happen, my intentions are never questioned.”

Contrast this with working in a low-trust environment. “It sucks,” Rebecca Ryan says. “And we probably cherish our time or memories working in a high-trust environment, where you feel heard, where you feel like your boss has your back, where you feel safe making mistakes.”

Miller says they always give each other the benefit of the doubt. “The finger never gets pointed at anybody. We live as a team and die as a team—except when Pam screws up,” she adds, tongue-in-cheek.

“We all respect each others’ opinions,” Krivanek starts, “no matter how awful they are,” flashing a disarming smile toward Miller.

Sitting around the table, listening to “the girls” throw playful barbs back and forth, you might easily mistake this team for a nuclear family. Quade says their “mix of personalities” is part of what makes this dynamic work so well.

To wit, Miller says, “We’re all so different. Pam and I would not be friends in real life.” In essence, she says, “it feels like family. We love like family and we hate like family.”

They often eat like a family, too, taking turns cooking lunch for each other in the working kitchen here. “We work a lot of hours together,” Quade says, “so we make sure we can have fun together.”

But getting burned out on work is discouraged here. Quade believes firmly that “everyone’s private life is as important as work life.”

It’s not just lip service, Miller says. “She’ll yell at us to go home at five o’clock. Or if she knows we’re here late, she’ll tell us to sleep in and come in late tomorrow.”

This is referred to as “life-work balance,” and survey respondents ranked it as the most important driver for determining workplace satisfaction.

Careers expert Patricia Mullins calls it “work-life flexibility” and underscores its influence. “The availability of flexible work solutions like telecommuting, flexible hours and job flexibility can foster an active employee–employer partnership based on the unique needs of a particular business and its staff.”

Nixing the nine-to-five

Jennifer Persike could have told you that. She runs Lodi- and Madison-based promotional marketing company , this year’s “Best Places to Work” winner in the 11–99 employee category (and 2008 “Best Places to Work” alum).

The majority of her twelve-person staff works from home or outside of the office. The two who do commute to the office say the thirty-two-year-old company's commitment to life-work balance extends far beyond working remotely.

Arriving at CMS from a large corporation, account executive and sales coordinator Tracy Sachtjen knows all too well the difference working for a small business, especially one that puts a premium on family and personal health, can make.

When Sachtjen wanted to take some time off to travel, she didn't feel as though asking would put her job at risk.

"I used to curl," she starts to explain, before fellow sales coordinator and officemate Megan Moericke interrupts.

"She's being modest! She was in the Olympics!"

Sachtjen smiles. "That was really nice. Some people would say, 'No, you can't take off!'"

When account executive Carol Roeker became sick two years ago, she recalls the amazing outpouring of support. "I was off for four or five months and I didn't have to worry about anything."

If you're thinking that such a sympathetic tack might be bad for business, consider that life-work flwnt thing."

Life-work flexibility, Mullins continues, “means not having to choose between work-life issues and advancement, whether you are a single person dealing with personal health issues or caring for aging parents, or whether you are a parent managing adoption, sick kids or continuing education.”

“There have been several times when someone’s kids are sick or a family is in crisis,” Persike says, and everyone will just step in where the other left off. “It might not be your project or sale, but it does represent us.”

If it sounds like something a mom would say, it is. Persike and her entire staff are mothers.

“Family is very important” to Persike, says Roeker. Lucky for business, this dedication comes back full circle. Wrote one employee in the anonymous survey: “I consider my coworkers family!”

Room to grow

Having life-work balance also means feeling supported in one’s drive to learn and develop, professionally and personally, Mullins says. “In general, employees want to grow and develop in their careers. A flexible workplace will recognize that career development may mean an employee needs time off to attend continuing education courses or seminars, financial support for tuition or deferred completion opportunities.”

Take Heather Dotzauer, accounting manager at , our 2014 “Best Place to Work” winner in the 100-plus employee category with 109 employees in the Madison area.

She started here answering phones part-time while in college. After graduating, Dotzauer did some time in “the real world” before returning here, where she’s stayed for the last thirteen years.

“I’ve always felt that this is a second family here,” she says.

Her business card lists a second title: Realtor. She says management “welcomed and encouraged” her to get her real estate license. “Whatever you want to take on, they are open to that.”

President Dan Kruse explains, “We like to look within for growth. We love to support people, whether it’s our front desk person getting a real estate license, a new mother or someone looking to go back to school. If someone wants to grow as a human, we want to support that.”

It’s a strategy that’s paying off: Just three years ago, Century 21 Affiliated comprised some three hundred agents in Wisconsin. They are now twelve-hundred strong, with offices in Madison, Stoughton, Sun Prairie, Cross Plains and Mt. Horeb, as well as outposts in the greater Chicago area, Indiana, Michigan and Minnesota.

“Last year, we grew in profit by over ninety percent,” says Jason Fowler, who also worked his way up from the front desk, and who is now corporate project manager, as well as a licensed Realtor. “We are number one [in sales] out of 7,100 locations worldwide.”

The appearance of real estate firms like Century 21 Affiliated on the “Best Places” roster is a signal of the economic uptick.

“Two years ago,” says Ryan, “you didn’t see real estate companies angling for a ‘Best Place to Work’ award because the market was grim and many agents were struggling,” hit hard during the Recession.

But Century 21 Affiliated has hung on to its staff, even in lean times. Says Fowler, “We’ve always had owners who care about what you do. You can see that in the nine staff members that work here. Half of us have been here for ten years.” Liking your coworkers helps. Fowler says that at a lot of workplaces, “people will want to go on vacation to get away from the people they work with. We go on vacation together.”

What does it take to be the best? Take a look at the playbooks of these six winning workplaces

Be Inspired Salon

Founded: 2010 Employees: 10

If your heart is set on a post at Be Inspired Salon, the bridal hair styling and makeup boutique on Yellowstone Drive, you've got your work cut out for you. Founder Kati Whitledge believes in lifelong learning; professional and personal development are cornerstones of her company.

Whitledge offers monthly advanced education to her stylists, who collectively specialize in curly hair cutting and styling. Most of it is industry-related, like their training to become certified DevaCurl cutting experts. Other courses cover topics like nutrition, self-defense, insurance and even retirement planning.

"Part of our hiring process is determining the personality styles of each candidate," she explains, noting that she gravitates toward stylists with a drive for self-development, the kind of people who would gladly take part in an annual "vision board" project. "When working full-time together, you will spend more time with your team than you sometimes do with your own family."

She takes the same care in pairing stylists with new clients. A survey on their website called "Meet Your Match" couples you with a compatible coiffeuse based on personality and dress type.

"We believe in building lifetime relationships." That goes for their relationship with the community too. Be Inspired Salon belongs to Dane Buy Local and the Middleton Chamber of Commerce. Individual hairdressers also frequent local networking groups, "which helps us stay connected to the community."

Community Shares of Wisconsin

Founded: 1971 Employees: 9

There's an all-too-common notion that nonprofit employees should be expected to work for less than their for-profit counterparts. The nine employees of Community Shares of Wisconsin, a social action fund that serves sixty member nonprofits (and a 2010 "Best Places" winner), are glad their board of directors thinks differently.

“We’re lucky because the Community Shares board is committed to providing competitive compensation in terms of salary and benefits,” says executive director Crystel Anders. “The extraordinary talents that employees bring to work every day deserve to be acknowledged and rewarded.”

Established in 1971, CSW raises funds and offers support to local, grassroots nonprofits working toward social, economic and environmental justice. Last year they distributed more than \$600,000 to their member nonprofits. The reality, Anders points out, is that “real social change takes years,” not days or months. And the staff knows that. “We are all in it for the long haul.”

It helps that their work aligns so closely with their personal values. Employees report that a sense of purpose, and impacting the community in a positive way, are vital reasons this is a “Best Place to Work.”

Working closely with member nonprofits and the board (made up of a representative from each nonprofit) also builds a sense of unity. Says Anders, “I would guess everyone here is a hopeful person; they believe that if we all work together the world can be a better place for everyone.”

Pegasus Games

Founded: 1980 Employees: 10

The folks at Pegasus Games think the world would be a better place if people would just relax and play tabletop games with each other.

“Instead of mind games,” quips “Boss Lady” Lory Aitken, one of three owners. Her management philosophy? You can take work seriously without being serious all the time.

Wisconsin’s oldest operating games shop, located in the Market Square shopping center, Pegasus Games sells tabletop games like board games, card games, role-playing games and miniatures. Part of the store is reserved for game playing, which takes place every evening and weekend.

On the topic of life-work balance, there's no competition here. Work is not life, Aitken believes, especially for part-time and temporary workers, who make up the majority of the ten-member staff.

"We refuse to be an unreasonably demanding employer that breeds resentful employees," which she calls counter-productive.

Here, having fun is kind of the whole point. "If we have to sacrifice our dignity while dodging plush projectiles for mouthing off, so be it. Laughing at ourselves is a daily occurrence."

On a more serious note, Aitken suggests that she and her staff share a love for something beyond fun and games.

"We all love gaming in that it builds social relationships, teaches myriad lessons people of all ages need to learn and brings people face-to-face," she says. "This connects us to each other as Pega-minions and to our larger communities of gamers and future gamers."

Communication Innovations

Founded: 2006 Employees: 43

Imagine witnessing the very first time an infant looks up at his mother and smiles, the first time a little girl cheers, "I did it!" or the moment a child has a breakthrough and finally signs, "more." Then imagine you played a part in these victories.

Pediatric therapy center Communication Innovations "is about being able to experience those firsts with a family and their child," shared one staff member anonymously.

Since 2006, CI has been providing occupational, physical and speech and language therapy and myriad specialty services to three hundred to four hundred children in the Madison area, says clinic director Jenny Gilles.

“When you walk in the door at CI,” at any of their locations in Fitchburg, Sun Prairie or Middleton, “you belong,” wrote one staff member. “You are a respected and valued member of the CI family.”

Overwhelmingly, staff cite the opportunity “to engage with individuals who have overcome insurmountable obstacles and continue to persist and remain incredibly positive in the face of challenges” as what makes working at CI so gratifying for its forty-three employees.

Therapists here also treasure the way they are encouraged to suggest new ideas and pursue their interests through continuing education.

As one of them put it, “No idea is too big, too small or too crazy. Our suggestions are always valued and given the opportunities to flourish.”

Added another, “We have the ability to dream of something we want to become or specialize in and not only are we able to do this, we are encouraged.”

“Staff members have opportunities to learn from one another daily,” wrote one therapist. “Working closely together, whether it be co-treating during a session, sharing an office, or brainstorming with the team, allows the clinical skills and creativity of our team to blossom and make the greatest impact for the individuals we serve!”

Keller Williams Realty

Founded: 1983. Madison location opened in 2000. Employees: 150

Chairman and co-founder Gary Keller is fond of saying that this is “a training and coaching company that just happens to be in the business of real estate.”

True to this vision, Keller Williams Realty in Madison (a 2012 “Best Places” alum), offers ongoing educational courses to its agents and employees to help them build signature brands, grow their personal businesses and “keep them on top of their game,” says Tony DiMaggio, COO/CFO and market center administrator of the Madison west location.

“If we grow the careers and business of our agents, then they will grow our company.” But the ultimate goal isn’t a multi-million dollar sale or snagging a sought-after client. It’s “having a life worth living.”

In a line of work that can be cutthroat, you’ll be hard pressed to find any bad blood here. Agents at KW, DiMaggio says, are more like business partners than competitors, thanks in part to their profit-sharing system.

“Basically, we take all the profits that are generated to the brokerage and we split that with the agents (forty-eight percent goes to agents) and staff,” who are eligible to participate by bringing agents to the company. Employees are vested after three years, and assuming the agents they attracted are still active with KW, they receive residual income, even if they leave the company.

“We truly work as a team, from our top and most experienced agents down to our brand new agents,” says DiMaggio. “Everyone is truly dedicated to helping others succeed in our office.”

Like agents, employees are primed to excel here, too. With each new hire, management takes their “true personality profile” into consideration and assigns them a role in which they’re most likely to succeed.

Batch Bakehouse

Founded: 2009 Employees: 21

Not many of us are in the mood for dancing at work in the wee, dark hours of the morning. But even before the sun comes up and pours through the storefront windows of Batch Bakehouse on Williamson Street, you’ll find busting a move and baking go hand in hand here.

Susan Detering, one of Batch’s managers and one of its four co-owners, helped open the bakery in 2009 on the heels of a French holiday in which she sampled croissants in France.

Surprised to find a bakery on a “Best Places to Work List”? We were. Food service workers aren’t exactly beating down our doors to nominate their bistros or bars. But the pastry chefs and bread bakers at Batch receive generous health insurance, paid vacations and year-end bonuses, all rarities in the industry.

“But what makes our bakery the ‘best place’ is our positive work environment,” says Detering, who is routinely awed by the way her staff stays upbeat while pulling a twelve-hour shift on a holiday or weekend, when most people are home with their families.

Co-owner and head pastry chef Lauren Carter “humbly inspires her entire team, listens, learns from them and empowers them to bring new things to the table.”

Like the time one of their chefs adopted a vegan diet. At first, Detering says, “That was a bit of a problem because we have to taste everything we make.”

But they made it her métier by arranging to have her fellow chefs taste her sweets and having her lead research and development on their new vegan line of baked goods. How does a butter-free treat pass muster? “A non-vegan has to taste it and not notice.”

A common thread among our winning workplaces in the Class of 2014 is an intentional effort to put employees first. The ethic is deeply embedded into these nine companies’ corporate DNA.

Dental Health Associates

Founded: 1969 Employees: 275

The three words that best describe DHA are also the three “Fs” ... Fun, as in a relaxed and friendly workplace and, apparently, the best holiday party in town. Flexibility, as in accommodating work hours. Family, as in employees aren’t just coworkers, they’re, you know, just like family.

Edward Jones

(Madison area) Founded: 1983 Employees: 141

At employee-owned Edward Jones, both the workplace culture and bottom line literally depend on the autonomy of its advisors, each of whom have their own branch offices (sixty-nine total in the Madison area) and one administrative assistant. For employees, working for a Fortune 500 company and running their own small business has proved to be the best of both worlds.

First Choice Dental*Founded: 1996 Employees: 165*

Production and profit aren't the end all be all here, "they're the natural outcomes of relentless pursuit of superior patient care and tireless commitment to employees," says marketing director Hilary Kleese. With ten locations, leaders must be intentional in crafting the perfect dynamic of personality and skill sets at each office. And they must be getting it right; this is the company's third trip to the top of our list.

Impact Networking*(Madison branch) Founded: 2007 Employees: 10*

Most branch managers at this Illinois-based document management services and strategy firm work their way up from entry-level sales thanks to a comprehensive mentorship program. Senior-level staff retention rate is one hundred percent. And if the promotions aren't incentive enough, perhaps the all-expenses-paid trip to Cabo is.

Madison Endodontic Associates*Founded: 1973 Employees: 17*

Four-day work weeks and periodic bonuses are the icing on the (sugar-free) cake for staff at the first endodontic (read: root canal) specialty practice in the area. In fact, cake and flowers are on the menu here whenever a birthday rolls around at either of their two locations on the east and west side.

The QTI Group

Founded: 1957 Employees: 109

Long known and respected for high-quality and highly effective human resources and staffing services along with a huge heart for charities and other key community causes, QTI, a 2012 Best Place to Work, practices this same kind of care and compassion on this inside. “We take care of each other, our clients and our communities,” says marketing director Jill Dohnal.

Summit Commercial Finance

(Madison branch) Founded: 2012 Employees: 5

Employees of this Midwest outpost engage in regular, friendly sales competitions with one another as well as with their Scottsdale, Arizona, coworkers for goodies like company-paid holidays, big-screen TVs, even a Rolex. “Each employee is treated with respect, professionalism and with the expectation that they can each achieve great things,” says marketing coordinator Becca Hamilton.

UW Credit Union

Founded: 1931 Employees: 449

Perhaps there’s a karmic connection to the fact that the credit union’s roots date back to the Depression in light of the fact that they showed their true colors during the Recession. Thanks in part to a transparent approach to decreasing benefits, right up to the CEO, membership grew by eleven percent and employees voted them a Best Place to Work in 2010. They did it again in 2012, and again this year.

Wind River Financial

Founded: 1999 Employees: 31

Three words: warm and fuzzy. This is how it feels when thank-you notes, dubbed “Warm and Fuzzy Cards,” are read aloud during the company’s quarterly summit. The U-Rock Awards are great, too. They’re for someone who goes above and beyond for a

customer or fellow teammate, and that someone receives a small rock picked up in a special place. Small gestures, big returns.

– Brennan Nardi

Top-notch tech

“The tech and entrepreneurial communities in Madison are just exploding,” says Stephen Anderson, co-founder of Bendyworks, a software development and design company. This year, four Madison-area tech companies exploded onto our “Best Places to Work” list for the very first time. Although the fast-paced tech industry can make for a high-stress work atmosphere, employees at these winning businesses still have the kind of jobs people brag about.

Acumium

Just as its name implies, there is a veritable sense of acuity in the air at Acumium, a thirteen-year-old web technology and online marketing company located on John Nolen Drive. By placing value on focus and providing flexibility, employees give more when they’re at work, says Christopher Uschan, vice president of marketing and sales. However, it’s clear the quiet, focused hum of Acumium’s twenty employees isn’t constant; NERF darts cling to the ceiling, a shiny bell waits to be rung for employee successes and founder and CEO Dan Costello has the place wired for employees to play DJ. “I see our employees passionately wanting to be here,” Uschan says.

Bendyworks

Shoes are stacked near the door and laughter bounces through the quirky downtown Madison Bendyworks office. It’s a space where the energy is still rising at 5 p.m., according to co-founder Brad Grzesiak. The secret to keeping their sixteen employees from feeling cashed out? They program in pairs and work at a sustainable pace, four days a week. Every Friday is dedicated to personal or company growth projects. “We’ve surrounded ourselves with a diverse set of minds that are really a joy to interact with,” says Grzesiak.

Hardin Design & Development

Founded in 2007 by Jon Hardin while he was still an undergraduate, this software and application firm continues to keep its office culture young. “We work hard, but we play hard as well,” says Kyle Crossman, vice president of development. With Lake Mendota views, the Hardin D&D office has an entire room dedicated to blowing off steam, outfitted with a pool table, a ping pong table and a jumble of video game controllers. This may be essential: The twenty employees work directly with high visibility clients to develop cutting-edge applications. Hardin D&D takes its employees seriously, too, encouraging them to set up an IRA and providing health insurance. “We offer this startup atmosphere, but we have stability of a much larger company,” Crossman says.

Vonlay

“We treat people like the experts they are,” says Aaron Carlock, founder and one of three managing partners, along with Mike Kolpien and Farhan Ahmad. In the Madison area since 2009, Vonlay is an Epic consulting company. Employees volunteer to take part in the Vonlay Ventures team, created to develop ideas and launch projects that are important to the company. With 130 employees, Vonlay is the largest tech winner this year, but the management strives to be approachable and maintain a casual vibe. “We don’t oversee every little detail,” says Kolpien. “We believe that they can do what they’re supposed to do, and we let them go do it.”

– Emily Rappleye

Home sweet work

It can be a tough, cut-throat and isolating industry between short sales, odd hours and the notoriously volatile housing market. Yet for four real estate firms in Madison, company culture and a sense of community put these firms on the map as “Best Places to Work.”

“There is an enthusiasm. You can tell that most people really like their jobs and what we do as a company,” says Traci Dalsin, vice president of Sara Investment Real Estate, a small firm that has been doing business in Madison for sixteen years.

Sara Investment establishes community in the office through the nature of their work. Employees collaborate in teams on projects and are often given the opportunity to perform work outside their job description.

“I think that just lends itself to trust and transparency,” Dalcin says. The company also prides itself on its open office atmosphere. “There are not a lot of closed doors.”

At the First Weber Group, a Wisconsin real estate company, this open-door policy is taken rather seriously.

“We want people to feel they’re all part of one team,” says chairman and CEO James Imhoff. “I’ve even talked about taking all the doors off in the corporate office.” First Weber even went so far as remodeling several of its offices around the state to create what Imhoff calls “collaboration zones,” open work areas for staff with high tables, couches and larger tables. The atmosphere fosters conversation and new ideas and employees like the white noise.

“Even in the last ten years, of which a good percentage of those were struggling years, we really didn’t lose any people,” says Imhoff.

Agents and employees braved the Recession at each of these four Madison companies.

“We helped our agents through a time of crisis,” says Erik Sjowall, president of Bunbury & Associates Realtors. “That’s why the people here are so loyal.” The company assisted staff in any way it could during the past few years.

“We’re a family business, and that doesn’t mean you need to be a blood relative to get all the benefits,” says Sjowall.

This year, real estate agents have reason to be optimistic: The housing market is up. In 2013, home sales increased 15.4 percent from 2012 in the south-central region of Wisconsin, and increased thirty-four percent from 2011 statewide, according to the Wisconsin Realtors Association.

“People are back to really wanting to own housing again, and the inventories are low,” says David Stark, president of Stark Company Realtors. “It makes it easier. It makes it a lot more fun, but it also brings its own set of challenges.”

For one, agents are busier. Stark encourages agents to schedule time off and keep their priorities in order.

“I know all my people. I’m invested in them; I want to see them succeed,” Stark says.

– Emily Rappleye

How we ranked our winners

Madison Magazine’s Best Places to Work is based on an employee-engagement framework developed by Next Generation Consulting. Employees were asked to rate their employer in a forty-question, web-based survey that measures? companies in these six “areas of engagement”:

1) Trust. ?Working in an environment where information is shared and people act with integrity and respect??

2) Management?. Working with supervisors and managers who lead, guide and give feedback to individuals and teams??

3) Development. ?Having opportunities to learn and grow??

4) Rewards. ?Being compensated and appreciated according to one’s performance and contribution to an organization?

?5) Connection. ?Feeling a part of something bigger; working for more than just a paycheck?

6) Life-Work Balance. ?Having flexibility to pursue their career and a life outside of work

The winning companies for 2014 were chosen because they ranked the highest in all six dimensions of employee engagement.

In work we trust

Cumulative results of our Best Places to Work reveal a culture of trust that employees value most

A summary of all survey responses from the twenty-six winners provides a scorecard on the six areas of engagement based on respondents' level of agreement that employers are performing at or above average.

Trust: 94.5%

Connection: 94.4%

Management: 93.5%

Life-Work Balance: 92.4%

Development: 89.0%

Rewards: 84.1%

Overall Engagement: 91.3%

Fun Fact: Engagement scores in all six areas are higher than our last survey conducted in 2012, with Trust and Connection swapping the #1 and #2 slots, if only by a hair.

Long-term engagement

When employees were asked to rank the number one driver of engagement, life-work balance ranked highest.

Life-Work Balance: 42.7%

Connection: 19.2%

Trust: 17.0%

Development: 9.3%

Rewards: 7.8%

Management: 3.9%

Fun Fact: In all four surveys we've conducted (2008, 2010, 2012, 2014), life-work balance has won out as the most important ingredient of a best place to work.

Liz Merfeld is a Madison-based freelance writer. Editor Brennan Nardi and editorial intern Emily Rappleye contributed to this story.