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Ryan Cos. US Inc.

Focusing on people instead of policies

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Many companies develop policies meant to anticipate different employee situations, from management issues to flex time to

HR strategies. But Ryan Cos. US Inc. doesn't even like to use the word.

"We just don't like 'policies,' because we don't want to manage that way," said Jim Nahrgang, vice president of human resources at

the company. "We prefer to say we manage by circumstance. Whatever someone needs, we'll work it out with them on an individual basis."

The company is a large believer in "family first," added CEO Jim Ryan. "Work should come second. If someone is spending too many hours here, we tell them to go home."

To ease child-care issues, the company offers backup well-child day care, in case a regular day care provider gets sick.

Responsibility, too, is handed out liberally, and accountability isn't tracked by policy, but by the employees themselves, preventing micromanagement of projects, said the president of the Minnesota region, Collin Barr.

"There's free Caribou coffee, and you can't underestimate the power of that."

— Collin Barr, president of the Minnesota region

The firm has other perks that are notable, such as an employee cafeteria and workout room. But it's not the free snacks or new treadmills that set the company apart.



Top: From left: Jeff Cupka, Dan Elenbaas, Eric Anderson, Nate Enger, Ryan Soukup, Mark Nordland
Bottom: Peter Ilten fills up in the company breakroom.

It's the atmosphere of flexibility mixed with professionalism, in an environment that can only be created by hiring employees with a high degree of integrity and honesty, Ryan said.

To maintain the culture, there's a special focus on interviewing and hiring the right people, and a small committee has been created to interview every potential candidate, regardless of what position he or she might take within the company. Hiring managers do some pre-assessment to determine working style, but mainly, candidates are screened according to how well they

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First-time Winner

Score: 92.89

CEO: Jim Ryan

Headquarters: Minneapolis

Description: A commercial real estate firm offering integrated design-build and development, as well as asset, property and facilities management services.

Minnesota employees: 575

Total employees: 975

Year founded in Minnesota: 1938

Type of business: Privately held

Web site: www.ryancompanies.com

might fit with the current team.

Once a candidate becomes an employee, the benefits can be formidable. The company has had a profit-sharing plan in place for more than 30 years that pays 15 percent of an employee's salary. In the past three decades, it's never missed the 15 percent mark, and the firm has set up another structure that if the company does better than the plan, the employee could get another 15 percent. In the past dozen years, Ryan Cos. has missed that "stretch goal" only twice, which means most employees get a profit-sharing bonus of up to 30 percent of their salaries. While they're thinking about where to spend all that money, they can enjoy the annual holiday party, for which employees from around the country are flown in. Everyone from construction su-

perintendents to vice presidents are given tickets, as well as their spouses, to come and celebrate the holiday spirit. In 2006, about 1,000 people attended.

Another item of note is the company's participation in community giving.

Newer employee Ella Carlsson, the company's marketing communications specialist, said she and others at the firm look up to leadership, because of their commitment to the community. "We see them doing good things, treating everyone with respect, and caring about families both within Ryan and in the community. When you have leadership like that, it rolls down the rest of the organization. It makes people feel good."

The company is involved with the United Way, but also encourages employees to become involved with charities that match

their interests. So far, nearly all of the employees have given time and contributions to organizations such as the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation and Children's Hospital. Through the Ryan Foundation, the company matches any charitable donation.

"Really, I think our culture is the driver of employee delight," Ryan said. "There's no hierarchy, and we're open even in terms of our floor plan, with 70,000 square feet of open space."

"Plus," added Barr, with a smile, "there's free Caribou coffee, and you can't underestimate the power of that."

Elizabeth Millard is based in Minneapolis.