

By Matt Ottinger

# BUILDING ON THE BASE

## Companies Strive to Hold On to Top Talent

In order to grow, a company must build upon the team members already in place. Nothing novel there. Just basic arithmetic. Cultivating a culture that retains talent, however, remains a primary focus for four companies that earned 2014 Best Places to Work in Indiana rankings.

Most employers report a similar theme when it comes to keeping employees engaged and on board.

“Respect is a core value of the company,” relays Michelle Straumins, chief financial officer at National Trade Supply in Greenwood. “We focus on the fun environment here, with no drama. We want everyone to come into work and be happy that they’re here. As soon as someone starts dreading coming in, we need to assess it and find out what the root cause is. That’s not what we want.”

For some, employee desires pertain directly to their fields. Wayne Schmidt, CEO of Schmidt Associates in Indianapolis, explains architects and designers require the latest tools at their fingertips.

“A big (component of retention) for us is being on the cutting edge of technology,” offers Schmidt, who founded the company on Independence Day 1976 and has seen it grow from a one-man operation to nearly 90 staffers.

Now his staff has the independence to operate at the penthouse level when it comes to tools of the trade.

“Everything we do is 3D and 4D; they don’t want to work somewhere that doesn’t have the latest in technology, and we do.”

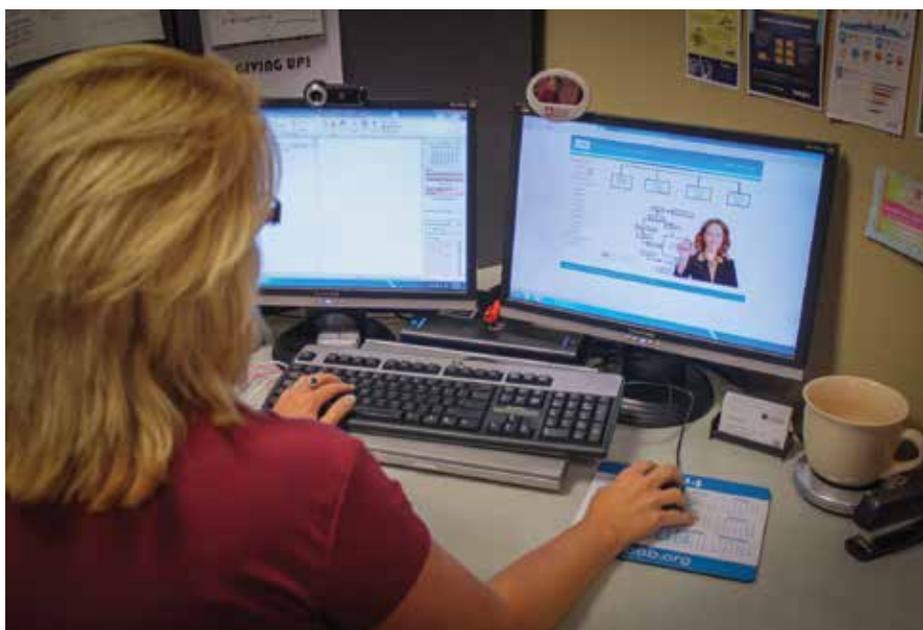
For others, priorities may vary between regions. Ash Brokerage is based in Fort Wayne, but has locations throughout the country.

“When you get out on the East Coast, employees are definitely looking for flexibility because of the time it takes to get into work – because they often use other transportation like trains,” relays Cara Bauer, human resource manager.

### You’ve got a friend

Many organizations take the approach that employees tend to be more faithful when the employer helps them achieve their professional goals along the way.

“Many of the academic institutions don’t offer a degree in this area of retirement planning,” Bauer expands. “As a result, developing an interest in our business among eager talent out



Schmidt Associates (top) and Ash Brokerage are among organizations that give their employees access to the top technology, as well as flexibility, as part of their ongoing retention efforts.



Schmidt Associates Principal Anna Marie Burrell and CEO Wayne Schmidt have enjoyed a mentor/Sherpa relationship ever since Burrell joined the staff.

of college has historically been a challenge. We've worked to combat that through the development of different onboard initiatives and have experienced success as of late.

"Providing clear career pathing and development opportunities is imperative to retaining our top talent," she adds. "We focus on creating a flexible, yet productive environment – one where employees want to invest time and energy. In turn, that helps retention in the long term."

Schmidt Associates offers its own branded educational program called Schmidt Academy, which offers continuing education courses in the field. Additionally, the company provides new hires with a mentor and "Sherpa" to help them acclimate.

"A mentor is someone at a partner level; they have a list of books and an orientation program that takes about three months to go through – (take the mentee) out to a job site, have conversations internally; it's a long list and about seven or eight books they're expected to read and discuss."

He adds that the Sherpa is an "instant friend" to help guide staffers through the office and the day-to-day routine.

Larry Wright, global human resources director at Indianapolis-

based Interactive Intelligence, says his company targets top employees and brings them into an emerging leaders program to aid their professional development and enhance management skills.

"They're nominated by their managers (for entry into the program)," Wright says. "These are people we look at for a talent pipeline down the road who have a desire to go into management. We have classes to show them what it's like on the management side. That way we can promote from within for many key positions."

He adds that the creation of the program was based on feedback from staff, indicating a collective desire that hiring managers look internally to fill positions when possible.

Interns are also groomed and developed to ultimately play important future roles in the organization.

"In our summer class of 2013 alone, 90% of our graduating seniors stayed on board with us," Wright quantifies, noting the Indianapolis office has over 100 interns each year. "We have days you can bring your family to learn about the company and open houses. We also have team leaders speak, so they're not just doing the work but learning about the company as well."

### Oh, won't you stay?

One retention trend in the human resources field now is the concept of stay interviews. Instead of waiting until employees decide to leave and perform an exit interview, these meetings allow for a candid discussion of what's right or wrong about the company. It's a practice that's currently being piloted at Interactive Intelligence.

"With stay interviews, our leaders can meet with their 'high potentials' and ask them how they feel about the organization, what challenges they're facing, how we can help them be more effective – and if someone called them about a job today, would they listen?" Wright reveals. "We're asking those questions and going after our key talent to find out about those things ahead of the game."

Wright relays that Interactive Intelligence doesn't often lose employees to larger software companies.

"We have less than 10% (voluntary and involuntary) turnover. With our tremendous growth, that's pretty good," he surmises. "Once we get them on board and get them in, we've got good retention after that first 18 months or so. That first 18 months is critical."

The company has nearly 1,000 people in Indianapolis, but now has a presence in over 20 countries.



Interactive Intelligence keeps workers engaged with sports competitions and other activities. Helping workers bond and have fun has helped the company maintain a high retention rate despite substantial growth in recent years.



Ash Brokerage employees receive in-service training throughout the year on a variety of topics to keep them informed about developments in the industry.

“We actually see a little stronger retention internationally,” Wright states. “But we try to take our corporate culture into every country. A lot of the offices are set up like Indianapolis. I was just in Brazil and felt like I was walking into an Indianapolis office. But we do factor in their country’s culture as well.”

Schmidt adds that building trust in the beginning is critical for long-term rapport with staff. He outlines five promises he makes when he meets new hires:

1. We will meet payroll
2. We will obtain the right projects
3. We will allow staff to do good work (and

- give them enough time to do so)
4. We will act with integrity
5. We will be intentional about the future (by setting goals and achieving them)

### **Workin’ for a livin’**

Allowing employees to prioritize their lives in a healthy way, and providing a more relaxed culture, is a popular approach among the Best Places to Work.

“Our owner has an understanding of the work-life balance,” Straumins reports. “He’s always told me that family comes first. As a manager, that’s what I try to make sure my employees understand. In fact, this morning, my administrative assistant was up at 2 a.m. with a sick baby – so she won’t be in until later this morning.”

Straumins believes that approach is what helps National Trade Supply maintain a desirable experience.

“We don’t have a problem with turnover. Usually when people are here, they’re here to stay,” she remarks over the sound of a dog barking in the background.

“Oh yeah, and we allow dogs in the office.”

**RESOURCES:** Cara Bauer, Ash Brokerage, at [www.ashbrokerage.com](http://www.ashbrokerage.com) | Wayne Schmidt, Schmidt Associates, at [www.schmidt-arch.com](http://www.schmidt-arch.com) | Michelle Straumins, National Trade Supply, at [www.nts supply.com](http://www.nts supply.com) | Larry Wright, Interactive Intelligence, at [www.inin.com](http://www.inin.com)

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