

# TIES THAT BIND

Creativity, Camaraderie Are Powerful Connectors

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Imagine the characteristics that shape your company culture woven into an elaborate tapestry. Take a closer look. Are the colors (representing employees' personalities) bold or more subdued? Is the artwork (signifying management styles) meticulous (hands-on) or free-flowing (hands-off)?

It's said that life is an art form. If that's true, then polishing off a "masterpiece" is all in a day's work for 2015 Best Places to Work in Indiana honorees.



Are you an eagle, Bigfoot or other creature? Associates at JA Benefits sculpt animals they relate to during a team-building exercise. Employees and their families hit the ground running (and walking) at the inaugural Bedford Half Marathon.



*BizVoice*<sup>®</sup> explores inspiring stories driving success at four workplaces: American Income Life Indiana, Diverse Tech Services (DTS), Indiana CPA Society (INCPAS) – all headquartered in Indianapolis – and JA Benefits (based in Bedford).

A common thread is that the workplaces (which had the smallest employee counts during the Best Places to Work application process) find creative ways to boost satisfaction and performance.

Gary Bolinger, president and CEO at INCPAS, shares his perspective: “What makes a best place to work is the people. The people create a culture of giving and supporting and caring. They want to help each other – and if you let the environment be a caring, nurturing environment, it will be.”

## A sense of solidarity

George Apgar applauds the teamwork at DTS, a technology management service company he co-founded in 2009. Services include managed IT support, network security, backup and disaster recovery, remote helpdesk, web development and more. In addition to its main Indianapolis office, the company has regional satellite locations to assist in supporting national clients.

“We help companies manage, protect and grow their companies through the use of technology,” he explains. “There’s a lot of teamwork in technology. It’s a complicated industry, and you have to work with others and share ideas to solve the problems our customers are facing.”

Sometimes, we work a lot of long hours. The teamwork and camaraderie we have as a group makes it a lot of fun.”

Since applying for the 2015 Best Places to Work in Indiana program last fall, DTS has experienced tremendous growth, more than doubling its staff from 16 to approximately 40.

INCPAS marks a milestone of its own this year: a centennial anniversary. The organization serves as the professional home for 7,000-plus certified public accountants in Indiana.

“There’s a wide variety of functions, if you will, in the organization,” Bolinger comments. “People will jump in and help out to the extent that they can. That’s an advantage of a small organization.”

TGIF takes on new meaning at INCPAS. Employees (there are approximately 18) receive a paid half-day off every other Friday during the summer months.

“People haven’t abused that sort of thing,” Bolinger proudly declares. “The ones that are here really pitch in to make sure everything is covered.”

### Walking the walk

At JA Benefits, wellness and work are intertwined.

The employee benefits consulting firm, which has 18 full-time employees, offers staff and their families free access to health clinics throughout the state.

“It comes down to walking the walk,” reflects president Chris Johnson. “We spend so much time with our clients focused on finding ways to get engaged in their health care that it’s important to us to have been there, done that, and to have had those real-world experiences to share with our clients.”

CEO Doug Johnson (Chris’ father) recalls a memorable holiday party where employees played laser tag.

“I learned quickly that I was not as good (as everyone else),”

Doug quips with a laugh. “I think I was set up! I think some people got there early and practiced.

“You know, it’s interesting. We’ve learned so much from other folks and clients that we work with. There’s always something new out there. In this game of trying to help people become healthier, it’s not easy, but it’s more fun if you can add a twist to it here and there and do things that may be a little out of the norm.”

An on-site outdoor fitness trail provides a way for DTS’ employees to step away and enjoy a stroll. “We encourage people to take part in that, and (we) reimburse up to \$100 for a gym membership,” Apgar notes.

Summer outings have revolved around activities such as volleyball, basketball and flag football.

### Inspiring change

James Cunningham is passionate about community service – and he brings that zeal to American Income Life Indiana, which provides life and supplemental accident and health insurance. It’s a distributing agency of international company American Income Life.

“I’m proud to say that in the past four years, we’ve given more than \$50,000 collectively (to local and international charities),” declares Cunningham, owner and state general agent. “It’s pretty cool to be able to do that. That’s something we believe in.”

The day we spoke with him, employees (there are a total of 17) were delivering donations to Alternatives Incorporated of Madison County, which strives to eradicate family violence through education, prevention and intervention.

“When we’re going through our interviewing process, we talk about who we are and our culture and our mission,” Cunningham reveals. “I think that’s (the organization’s commitment to giving back) a major thing that attracts people.”



A commemorative banner marking the Indiana CPA Society’s 100th anniversary is filled with member signatures.



Aspiring accounting professionals in the Scholars program tour Bankers Life Fieldhouse.



Ready for liftoff! Teamwork soars as employees compete in a paper airplane contest.



Employees at American Income Life Indiana bond – and make a difference – by volunteering with organizations such as Make-A-Wish and Second Helpings. The company donated \$1,500 worth of items to a classroom it sponsored at Thomas D. Gregg School. James Cunningham, owner and state general agent, times a colleague blazing through the office during the company’s Indy 500 week office chair race. Current record: 27.55 seconds.

“Overall, it’s bigger than the services we provide. It has everything to do with, ultimately, what kind of legacy do we want to leave? What kind of difference or mark can we make in Indiana?”

INCPAS, through the Scholars program, pairs minority high school students with young accounting mentors to explore college opportunities and accounting careers. The year-long initiative features a mentoring dinner, campus visits and educational events (topics include business etiquette, interviewing, networking and applying for financial aid). Participants who successfully complete the program receive a \$500 academic gift.

“The (goal) is to encourage these

students first and foremost to go to college,” Bolinger explains. “That’s our No.1 objective. If we get them to college, we want them to consider accounting as a career.

“Everybody is excited about the program and very supportive. It’s one of the things we do that makes it worthwhile for people to come to work every day.”

### Beyond the basics

Training is ongoing at DTS. The technology company focuses on technical skills as expected, but also soft skills. In short, training is personal.

Annual performance reviews encompass internal feedback and customer input.

“We use that feedback to put together a

career advancement plan that enhances not only the technical skills of the individual, but also the soft skills. It creates a much more complete professional,” Apgar reveals.

“The career enhancement plan helps identify training needs – whether it be additional certifications or leadership classes (DTS covers expenses) – to continually evolve and grow the knowledge of our staff.”

### Two words: Thank you

Staff appreciation is top of mind at all four companies.

Take weekly meetings at American Income Life Indiana. Top performers are honored amid a festive atmosphere that often includes music and lots of laughter.

“We may have karaoke contests or things like that,” Cunningham says. “We like to try to embarrass each other to a degree where it’s fun embarrassment. We want (to provide) an environment where people feel like they can be themselves. Just be yourself and have some fun!”

INCPAS celebrates milestone employment anniversaries with luncheons that feature presentation of a personalized gift. Loved ones are welcome.

“It’s so important that your family, spouse and children can see how well respected you are and that your efforts are truly valued,” Bolinger emphasizes.

And did we mention that “You Rock”?

“We started a ‘You Rock’ program,” shares JA Benefits’ Chris Johnson, chuckling. “It’s the corniest thing you’ve ever seen. There’s a bowl of plastic gemstones. You take a little red rock and let people know you saw them (going above and beyond) and that they rock and did an awesome job.

“As our leadership team and executive folks walk around the office, it gives them an opportunity to say, ‘You’re doing an awesome job; tell me about that.’ It gets people excited about doing a great job.”

DTS celebrates employees’ success with awards luncheons and caps off each year with a celebration in downtown Indianapolis.

“If your employees know what’s expected of them and they’re doing it well, they’ll be self-actualized,” Apgar asserts. “If you can come to work every day and feel like you’re achieving your career goals, adding value to your customers, adding success to your company and that success goes back into you, that’s how we grow.”

**RESOURCES:** James Cunningham, American Income Life Indiana, at [www.aILOfindiana.com](http://www.aILOfindiana.com) | George Apgar, Diverse Tech Services, at [www.diversetechservices.com](http://www.diversetechservices.com) | Gary Bolinger, Indiana CPA Society, at [www.incpas.org](http://www.incpas.org) | Chris and Doug Johnson, JA Benefits, at [www.jabenefits.com](http://www.jabenefits.com)