

2011 Best Structural Engineering Firms to Work For

By Christina M. Zweig



The staff at No. 1 Best Structural Engineering Firm to Work For, ARW Engineers.

Reports of pay cuts, slashed benefits, and longer work days have filled the headlines, but not all firms are convinced a profit comes by extracting the most from employees while giving the least – these exceptional firms put the needs of their employees first. Winners of this year's Best Structural Engineering Firms to Work For ranking were set apart from their peers through superior leadership, strong communication, and well-established values – the qualities that transcend the short term value of material perks and make them truly some of the best places to work.

Best Firms Top Ten	
1	ARW Engineers
2	Barrish Pelham & Associates, Inc.
3	Bracken Engineering, Inc.
4	Degenkolb Engineer
5	Hinman Consulting Engineers, Inc.
6	PCS Structural Solutions
7	Simpson Gumpertz & Heger
8	Baldrige & Associates Structural Engineering, Inc.
9	Douglas Wood Associates, Inc.
10	Ehlert/Bryan, Inc.

The Participants

This year's sixth annual Best Structural Engineering Firms to Work For had 22 applicants. All of the firms that applied are vested in creating a better world through initiatives such as commitment to sustainability, giving back to the community through charity or education, and a commitment to ethical practices.

The Process

A corporate questionnaire, and surveys from HR, top management, and an anonymous employee survey (for which a 20 percent minimum response rate was required), were all tabulated to give all applicants a numerical score. Three judges made the final call: Gerri King, Ph.D., president, social psychologist, and organizational consultant for Human Dynamics Associates, Inc. in Concord, N.H., Stephen Gianotti, founder and president of the Woodland Group, LLC., in North Hampton, N.H., and Barbara H. Irwin,

founder and principal of HR Advisors Group LLC in Herndon, Va.

Top Three

This years' winners are all Best Firm veterans and have risen through the ranks!

First place – ARW Engineers (www.arwengineers.com), based in Ogden, Utah, is the top 2011 Best Structural Engineering Firm to Work For. ARW Engineers was established in 1969, and specializes in the design and analysis of new structures, structural/seismic investigations, and evaluation/upgrades of existing structures, including commercial office buildings. With a professional staff of 23, ARW exemplifies the sentiment that firms that value their employees are valued in return.

Judge King said she was particularly impressed with ARW for a number of reasons. "They trust their employees and their expectations are clear," she said.

"Getting to know everyone, at all levels, is a high priority," King wrote, noting that the firm has experienced "little or no turnover, no doubt due to an 'employee first' approach, which results in satisfied clients... happy employees result in happy clients."

"And, especially great, not only do they invite suggestions, but they explain why if input can't be implemented," King said.

Other traditional benefits, for both employees and their families, are also a strong point for ARW Engineers, "With medical benefits for employees and families at 100 percent and dental insurance at 100 percent for the employees and 52 percent for family, the firm acknowledges the importance of providing an employee's family with good, affordable care," said Judge Irwin.



At ARW, there's always time for grilling.

The firm supplies employees with the technology needed to make their jobs easier and reduce their level of dependency on the office environment. Cell phones that include data plans and laptop computers make it possible for employees to be at work from locations outside the office.

ARW reaches out to its employees and their families to help them serve the local community. "Whether through their American Red Cross mobile donation or their 24-hour walk to signify that 'cancer never sleeps,' ARW shows that it supports the 'family' by being one," Irwin said.

The employee survey showed that ARW Engineers topped or tied with other competing firms in most

categories. They also had 100 percent employee participation on the survey – an impressive feat.

"The key factor that I could not ignore was the trust score that dwarfed the scores of the other two candidates. Other positive factors were the frequency of updating technology, ARW's philanthropic efforts (even though there is no employee recognition for it); they offered the most options for insurance benefits, and the mission statement is the most comprehensive and clear of the three candidates," said Judge Gianotti.

"When it became obvious during the recent downturn that reductions would be necessary to 'weather the storm,' those reductions began at the top. However, what really struck me was the overwhelming agreement of the staff to reduce salaries rather than lay people off," Irwin said.

Second place – Barrish Pelham & Associates, Inc. (www.barrish.com) from Sacramento, Calif., may be small, with only 14 full-time employees, but has big benefits! Barrish Pelham & Associates has vast experience in new construction, modernization, and seismic retrofit projects utilizing structural steel, concrete, masonry, and timber structural systems. They also specialize in the design of public school facilities. BPA has received the approval of unique structural systems through DSA, and has integrated project delivery (IPD) experience working closely with owners, designers, contractors, and suppliers to achieve rapid approvals and construction schedules. They also have building information modeling (BIM) technology experience and leadership in the Sacramento structural design community with over a dozen DSA-approved REVIT projects.

Judges



Gerri King, Ph.D.
President, social psychologist, and organizational consultant for Human Dynamics Associates, Inc.

Barrish Pelham and Associates demonstrates its commitment to its employees' professional growth and development in many ways. It not only encourages its employees to attend classes and reimburses tuitions, it also encourages involvement in professional organizations and participation at industry events. This firm also offers a variety of fun "extra-curricular" activities, including picnics, softball, triathlon relay teams, blood drives, service at the local soup kitchen and Habitat for Humanity work days.

Barrish Pelham and Associates offers flextime and also non-vacation paid time off that allows its staff to make choices. Flexibility is also facilitated through other methods.



Barbara H. Irwin
Founder and principal of HR Advisors Group LLC.

"In its efforts to meet the diverse lifestyle and technical development needs of its employees, Barrish Pelham and Associates, Inc. has instituted online meetings and more flexible schedules through GoToMeeting," Irwin said. She also mentions that they have technical training incorporated into every staff meeting.

Irwin also lists some other unique features that make Barrish a top three Best Firm to Work For: "The firm readdresses its strategic plan yearly and includes not just the partners, but all associates in a two-day strategic planning retreat. With a mission statement of 'Implementing Necessary Change,' they have mobilized the associates to create new processes for the company, which empowers the next level of leadership."



Stephen Gianotti
Founder and president of the Woodland Group, LLC., in North Hampton-Dynamics Associates, Inc.

King echoed the sentiments expressed by the other judges and also commented that she felt Barrish seemed like a "fun place to work" and that "personal and professional growth is more important than the bottom line. Openness, honesty, and respect are core to the firm. They have a 'no wrong door' approach – none of the 'it's not my job'



response." She adds, "They're committed to hiring right. Support of employees at all levels is important."

Third place – Bracken Engineering, Inc. in Tampa, Fla. (www.brackenengineering.com) was established in 1996 and is the youngest of the top three Best Structural Engineering Firms to Work For. Despite the firm's youth, they have a firm grasp on how to treat their employees and stay involved in the community. Specializing in engineering and design, forensics, construction, and disaster support, Bracken's team of 15 full-time employees offers a wide-range of skills.

Bracken Engineering listens to its employees. Through the use of benchmarks and employee feedback surveys, Bracken's management has listened to what employees had to say and consequently modified benefits. Some examples include adding additional holidays, increasing company sponsored activities, and creating new employee rewards.

"The firm has also proven its commitment to its community by encouraging participation in or sponsoring such things as mentoring/tutoring programs, Habitat for Humanity, Corporate Challenge and the Urban Search and Rescue Program. The employees are recognized for their participation in these community activities," Irwin said.

The ability to work from home, have a customized schedule, or have flexible time off is a major asset to any employee. Bracket offers its employees a number of options to fit their lifestyles. "Such offerings as flex time – flexible starting times, condensed work weeks, etc. – telecommuting, or job sharing provide select staff with options that allow them to continue to contribute to the organization through non-traditional means," Irwin said.

Traditional benefits are certainly not lacking at Bracken. "I was impressed with the full benefits at 25 hours for part-time employees. This was the most generous of the three candidates," Gianotti said.

Overall, Bracken's philosophy is one of professionalism and respect. "Sounds like everyone is treated like a professional at all levels of the organization," King said, noting the firm's "acknowledgement of employees as 'people first'." King felt Bracken's core values are impressive, and said, "People are more important than the bottom line."

Conclusion

The 2011 Best Structural Engineering Firms to Work For all realize that any firm is only as great as the sum of its parts. They have made a commitment to putting employees first and have grown successful firms as a result. We wish the top three and all the participating firms good luck in the coming year! Special thanks to the three judges who made this year's ranking a true success.