

BEST PLACES TO WORK

MORE THAN 250 EMPLOYEES

PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT AWARD BKD LLP

KIMBERLY WILMOT VOSS

BKD's employee-friendly programs focus on two simple precepts — make employees feel valued and help them find their niche in the company.

"If someone's not happy, they'll leave," said Donna Himmelsach, a senior accountant who recently found her niche as a fraud examiner. "Yet if somebody finds something that they're interested in and enthusiastic about, it's good for them, for us, for the client."

BKD is one of the 10 largest certified public accounting and advisory firms in the United States. With offices in 11 states, the company is headquartered in Springfield, Mo., and has 100 employees in St. Louis. Its people-development policies include tuition reimbursement, mentoring relationships, sabbatical opportunities and a professional education program.

In a time when many companies are examining their budgets, BKD finds that the funds for the programs are well-spent.

"People are our No. 1 asset," said Mark Feldman, BKD partner in charge. "It's an important investment."

One investment that BKD makes is in a tuition-assistance program for work-related education. Employees can receive an interest-free loan from BKD to cover tuition and textbook costs. The loan is forgiven after two years of employment.

The centerpiece of its training program is Camp BKD, a biannual five-day orientation for new audit and tax employees. It provides technical training, client service and marketing guidance, and an introduction to the BKD culture.

At the camp, employees complete activities such as building an edible race car out of potatoes, carrots, gum and fudge cookies; building a cardboard boat capable of floating the firm's managing partner across a hotel swimming pool; and working at a Habitat for Humanity development.



JEREMY DEWESE

From left: Kurt Berry, Charlene Coulombe, Leslie Smith and Tony Spratte have all taken advantage of BKD's continuing professional education track.

New employees at camp also work through case studies and receive training on BKD's policies and procedures. The program is aimed, in part, at recent college graduates.

"It gives them the opportunity to transition into their careers after college," said Himmelsach, who has been an instructor at the camp.

Mentoring relationships also are put in place to help the transition. New employees are assigned mentors, who help them set career goals and then develop a career plan.

"Our goal is to help people find a balance in their personal and professional lives," Feldman said. "It's also helped the partners get closer to the staff. It's bridged the generation gap."

Employees who make partner are granted a one-month sabbatical. Every five years, a partner is required to take four weeks off. The time is used to take a course, to travel or simply spend time with family.

"It's been one of our most successful programs," Feldman said. "Even the most intense workaholic comes back refreshed."

BKD has a Continuing Professional Education Program that includes 15,000 hours of training annually. Audit and tax accounting staff receive more than 100 hours of training in their first 18 months. BKD will also pay for a CPA exam review course for all staff accountants who are preparing to take the exam.

Several of BKD's programs were a result of the company's use of human resource consultant Kathy Hatton of Hatton Consulting. Hatton comes in weekly to speak with employees who have problems or concerns, ranging from taking a leave of absence to talking about problems with a supervisor.

Hatton coaches mentors and focuses on employee relations, including helping employees find their niche within the firm. Hatton's meetings and exit interviews allow BKD to collect information about what employees want.

"It helps us better understand what's important to them," Feldman said.

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