

Making Your Firm a Great Place to Work

In its February 4, 2002 issue, *Fortune* magazine published its fifth annual list of the "100 Best Places to Work." Four law firms were included on the list for the third time, this year with the following rankings: Alston & Bird, number 9; Fenwick & West number 14; McCutchen Doyle Brown & Enersen, number 54; and Brobeck, Phleger & Harrison, number 78. The qualities and cultures of these four firms, which ultimately landed them on the list with the likes of Cisco Systems, Goldman Sachs, Charles Schwab, Microsoft and Intel, are in many ways similar. Most notable are a strong and positive culture, open and honest communication, and strong firm and practice management.

Being One of the Chosen Few

It is evident from talking to these firms that being a "great" place to work in today's competitive environment for law firms is no small feat. It requires more than providing financial incentives and rewards. "We were selected for the obvious reason that the firm, and management of the firm, has worked very hard in recent years to make Brobeck a great place to work," says Abe Isenberg, executive director at the firm. "It didn't happen by accident."

However, the hard work is worth it. These firms have realized definite returns on their investment of time, resources and energy. Returns include greater productivity, enhanced client service and quality of work, a positive reputation in the market and the prestige of being named one of America's top employers. "There are tangible benefits that come to our firm as a result of getting this recognition," says Ben F. Johnson III, Managing Partner at Alston & Bird. "We have found it helpful in recruiting staff, associates and partners. It was even a factor in our recent New York merger because it provided an external validation that our culture was as good as we said."

It is impressive that any **professional services** firm could score well enough in all of *Fortune*'s criteria to be considered for the list. **By their very nature, law firms are far more production-oriented than most corporations and do not offer stock options to every employee.** To gain a spot among this year's list, *Fortune* magazine says that the 279 candidates had to undergo considerable scrutiny. First, they agreed to allow the magazine to survey a randomly selected group of their employees (at least 250 employees per firm). This included partners, associates and staff. The employee survey evaluated trust in management, camaraderie and pride in work and the company. All survey responses were sent directly to the Great Place to Work Institute of San Francisco, the consulting firm that created the survey instrument. Some respondents also provided individual written comments about their workplaces, and others sent e-mails or phoned *Fortune* with their views.

The survey and comments accounted for two-thirds of the scoring. The remainder of the score was determined by each company's responses to the Institute's Culture Audit, in which the company or firm explains its philosophy and practices, and includes supplementary materials (such as employee handbooks, company newsletters, and videos).

A Strong and Positive Culture

Fortune, in its summary profile of Alston & Bird, says: "Employees praise the firm's culture of integrity and fairness." While *Fortune* did not evaluate the firm's systems and processes, these, of course, impact the firm's atmosphere and culture, and ultimately enabled it to score well on the survey. Johnson, the firm's **Managing Partner**, says the firm's systems and policies are fair and transparent.

An example is the firm's lawyer evaluation system. "The associates get to review the written evaluations prepared by the partners who evaluated them. They can sit down with the partner, challenge what they said and discuss it. As a result, people think more about what they say. Our partner evaluation system is exactly the same. Every partner here knows that he or she can come to us and get an explanation of his or her

compensation. It is transparent and open for discussion. [Our people know they will be treated and respected as important parts of the organization and that they will advance in a system that they understand."](#)

Another example of Alston & Bird's culture was evidenced at one of the firm's Associates' Weekend. An associate asked Johnson, "What do you want most for Alston & Bird to be?" Johnson responded that he wanted it to be the best place anywhere to practice law. From that point forward, he realized that he had raised expectations and that he had to try to ensure that they would be that kind of place.

McCutchen Doyle prides itself on its diverse culture and pro bono activities, as well as its emphasis on respecting each individual as a person and not just as an employee. The firm also has gone to great lengths to support its people. For example, after September 11, the firm took a number of steps to respond to events, including facilitating several fundraising efforts, scaling down its plan for a lavish Christmas party, and taking part in a newly created referral service started by the San Francisco Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights to defend victims of hate-motivated crimes. McCutchen's culture is characterized as caring, civic-minded, collegial and accepting of others.

The firm has the largest percentage of female attorneys among the top 250 law firms in the country. It was also ranked one of the "25 Most Diverse Law Firms in America" by *Minority Law Journal* (Summer 2001). It was ranked the number one law firm in California and the number five firm in the country in terms of its commitment to pro bono work. And it was ranked number one in California (and number nine nationwide) in the *American Lawyer's Annual Associates Survey*.

This was Fenwick & West's third year in a row on the list. [Fortune reported that the firm leaped ahead by raising associate salaries and creating a venture fund in client businesses for all staff, not just lawyers.](#) The firm maintains two condos in Maui for associates, and its associate vacation program entitles associates to a full week's paid vacation (and the firm pays for roundtrip airfare for two). It also offers on-site back-up childcare for all employees. On the other hand, Cheri Vaillancour, the firm's chief employment officer, says that based on what employees tell management, the firm's most important benefit is its culture. She says it "can only be described as friendly, open, supportive and fun."

At Brobeck, articulated core values include integrity, fairness, loyalty and respect. "All of our core values lead to a shared commitment to a common purpose and operating principles that strengthen the firm," says executive director Isenberg.

There is another aspect of the culture of these four firms that distinguishes them from many others. [Each firm makes significant efforts to minimize distinctions between lawyers and staff. At Fenwick & West, the mantra is: "The firm respects the individual and the individual respects the firm."](#) In 1997, the firm's management committee issued a memo entitled "The Golden Rule." The memo is circulated periodically to remind employees of the ethic that every staff person is a member of the Fenwick & West team, working together toward the primary goal of servicing clients. "Law firms have long suffered morale problems because of distinctions drawn between those with law degrees and those without," says the firm's chairman, Gordon Davidson. "Since the inception of the firm, we have worked hard to eliminate those distinctions. At Fenwick, everyone is important, everyone contributes to the success of the firm, and everyone is made to feel valued."

Each of the firms has numerous events in which lawyers and staff participate. Alston & Bird involves lawyers and staff in community activities such as building a house for Habitat for Humanity, as well as in social events. Lawyers and staff alike at McCutchen Doyle also participate in shared activities, such as food drives and "adopting" families, as well as outings to museums or the symphony. In addition to similar staff-initiated programs, Fenwick has sponsored beach clean-up days, supports local charities and builds teamwork and morale through its firmwide participation in the annual Sand Hill Challenge soap box derby.

In addition, Brobeck shows its appreciation to staff with a monthly "Star" award for exemplary performance and "Life Saver" awards for staff who help each other. The firm also actively solicits employee suggestions for improvement by offering prizes for participation.

Open, Honest Communication

Open, honest and frequent communication--particularly from management--is another key to creating a positive culture and making a firm a great place to work.

Management at Alston & Bird places a high priority on communication. "One week out of the month, any partner has the opportunity to meet with me one day for lunch," says Johnson, managing partner of the firm. "So it eliminates the gripes in the hall. We do the same thing one week a quarter for the associates. Some don't come. But at least they know they have the option. That is powerful because so many things happen in law firms as a result of miscommunication and a rampant rumor mill." Alston & Bird's assistant director of human resources, Linda Newman, also says firm management makes strong efforts to communicate with the nonlawyer staff.

Through a process of communication, management of Brobeck has also instilled a culture of inclusiveness. Says Isenberg, "We help people feel that they have ownership and that they are empowered to be part of the process." Management of the firm visits each office yearly to have half-day meetings with each group of firm members--partners, associates and staff. "We have a culture that we think leads to each individual feeling that he or she makes a difference."

At McCutchen Doyle, the chair and management team hold an annual "State of the Firm" meeting in each office (open to all firm members) to discuss the firm's goals and challenges for the upcoming year. This is also a forum in which employees ask questions. This is not the only time, however, that management makes itself accessible to these types of questions. In fact, the firm maintains an open door policy. In addition, firm management attends lawyer and staff meetings on an ongoing basis to share information. The director of marketing issues biweekly emails to all employees containing any press coverage the firm has received.

Fenwick & West's executive committee also makes extraordinary efforts to keep all employees informed, through regular meetings, newsletters, Webcasts and the firm intranet. The firm recently added "fireside chats," which consist of weekly voice mail messages to all firm personnel from practice group heads, managing partners and administrative managers, discussing firm plans and any recent successes.

Strong Firm and Practice Management

All four firms emphasize firm and practice management. This clearly contributes to each firm's placement on the *Fortune* magazine list. Say Johnson of Alston & Bird, "Practice group management has a big impact on making this a great place to work. It breaks up the larger organization into much more manageable, humane, hands-on units. In addition, having practice groups that understand the importance of training and mentoring is very important."

Alston & Bird, which ranked 36 on the *Fortune* list in 1999, moved up to number 24 last year and broke into the top 10 this year. One reason was the firm's low voluntary turnover rate of 12 percent, compared to the average attrition rate of 24 percent among the National Law Journal's top 250 largest law firms. In this year's *Fortune* survey, Alston & Bird received its highest scores, relative to the norm, in response to the following survey statements (among others):

- "Management trusts people to do a good job."
- "Management delivers on its promises."
- "Management has a clear view about where the organization is going."

- "Management is competent in running the business."
- "Management is honest and ethical in its business practices."
- "People avoid politicking and backstabbing."
- "I'm proud to tell others I work here."
- "People care about each other here."
- "This is a fun place to work."

Alston & Bird also has a formal training program for staff, called Top Echelon. Every month the firm provides training to its staff on one of the firm's core values. It was the research that the firm conducted in advance of establishing this program that prompted the firm to nominate itself for the *Fortune* list. "We were trying to create a mentoring program," says Cathy Benton, director of human resources. "At the same time that we were doing research on such programs, the *Fortune* list had just been published. We found that 60 percent of the companies on the list have mentoring programs. We thought our firm's qualities were comparable to the companies on the list, so we decided to nominate ourselves." Perhaps as important, it was the firm's staff that drove the nomination process--not the lawyers. The staff felt very strongly that Alston & Bird deserved national recognition as one of the best places to work.

McCutchen Doyle's management team and practice group heads receive leadership training. In addition, each of its four major practice groups offers in-house training to its members on a monthly basis. Its new litigators are trained for five intensive weeks, at the end of which they conduct a mock trial in an actual courtroom.

Brobeck provides substantial training to all levels of firm members. According to executive director Isenberg, "We have numerous programs on leadership and management, utilizing both in-house and outside resources. We also offer management coaching skills to partners to enhance their management capabilities." He emphasizes that today's competitive climate for attracting people and clients drives Brobeck's focus on training. "We want to further enhance the quality of service we provide, which means that we must continually enhance the quality of people on our team. To be a leading law firm, you have to deal with the motivational and service aspects of the business."

Mentoring and training skills are appreciated and rewarded at Fenwick & West. To underscore the importance of these skills, the firm dubbed the year 2000 as "Year of the Mentor." The firm is providing strong incentives for its partners to become effective mentors. "We provide mentoring training for our partners and senior lawyers throughout the year, and we reward good mentors with significant year-end bonuses to underscore our commitment to mentoring," says firm chair Davidson. "We view this as a win-win for the firm because our partners develop new skills and our associates reap the benefits." The firm also created Fenwick University, a structured, 10-week training program to prepare senior associates for partnership. The program emphasizes the business of law and practice development as opposed to substantive legal skills, which are covered in other training programs.

Firmwide Special Benefits

Each of the firms provides special or unique benefits to all its employees--lawyers and staff alike. Many of these benefits are focused on the health and well-being, as well as the financial security of the firm members. These firms know that happy, healthy employees are more productive and contribute to a more positive working environment.

McCutchen Doyle offers full benefits to domestic partners of all firm members. In addition, when crafting its

child-care policy in 1993, the firm intentionally designed it to be the most generous in the nation. The firm gives 14 weeks of paid maternity benefits for lawyers, parental leave benefits and a generous short-term disability policy that includes 100 percent salary protection.

Employees can earn cash bonuses, ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000, if they refer an external applicant who is hired to fill an [open position](#) and \$15,000 if they refer a lawyer who is hired by the firm. McCutchen Doyle also offers discounts at health clubs, and discount membership in alternative health services, which include yoga, nutrition and massage.

Brobeck invests annually in client stock for both associates and support staff. In the past three years, the firm has invested more than \$3 million in this stock. Two years ago, the firm created its "Share the Success" bonus program. "It was a surprise," says Isenberg. "The first year we gave each support staff member a \$1,000 check. Last year we gave them \$1,500. Both years, we paid the taxes."

Fenwick & West has established programs that allow employees to participate in the distribution of gains derived from the firm's investments in private clients and venture capital funds. "The firm has made, and will continue to make, substantial capital contributions to these investment partnerships on behalf of employees," says Davidson. "Any cash profits from the sale of stock in the partnerships will accrue and be distributed to employees on a semiannual basis," he adds.

In addition, Fenwick & West offers flexible work schedules to associates who want to devote more time to family or personal interests. The firm once required only 1,800 billable hours annually from its associates. When it increased associate salaries, it also increased its billable hour requirement to 1,950, but not without creating a compensation system that could accommodate valued associates who did not make the 1,950 hours commitment. "We established a two-tier compensation system to allow lawyers who wished to devote more time to family or personal interests to continue to bill 1,800 hours," says Davidson. "They are still considered full-time employees, and they remain on track for partnership consideration. Because their preferences and priorities may change over time, lawyers are allowed to change their election from year to year, or during a given year."

Fenwick & West also offers, and supports, part-time schedules for all employees, telecommuting and compressed work schedules (three and four-day weeks). Approximately 6 of the firm's partners and 13 of its associates work part-time schedules, and 24 of the firm's legal secretaries participate in the firm's job share program.

[All these firms recognize their long-time employees in special ways.](#) And bonus programs are based on merit as well as the firm's success.

Alston & Bird, for example, opened a child-care facility near the firm's main office in Atlanta last October and has also undertaken child-care initiatives in other offices. It has an on-site fitness facility, an on-site Weight Watchers group and on-site massage therapy. The firm also provides flexible hours, job share arrangements, referral bonuses up to \$5,000 and three-month paid maternity leave.

Lessons To Be Learned

As law firms realize they are in a competitive battle for lawyers and staff, as well as clients, more and more are willing to invest heavily in improving their work environments. These four impressive firms offer several lessons on how to do so.

First, regularly show appreciation to your people. From handwritten thank-you notes for a job well done to awards and parties to special bonuses, find little and intermittent ways to recognize and appreciate. [Few law firms ever "over-appreciate" their people.](#)

Second, share your firm's vision, goals, progress and challenges with your people. Everyone in the organization needs to feel a sense of pride and belonging. Open communication is almost always better than too little.

Finally, use practice group management to retain (or enhance) your culture and sense of belonging. It is at the practice group level that you can develop closer relationships, more meaningful training programs, new services and more--all of which enable your firm to be competitive in many ways and to be a "great place to work."

Interested in Learning More About Legal Hiring? Read the Definitive Guide:

[How to Hire a Legal Recruiter for Your Law Firm: How Law Firms Recruit Attorneys Using Legal Recruiters](#)