

TOP WORK PLACES

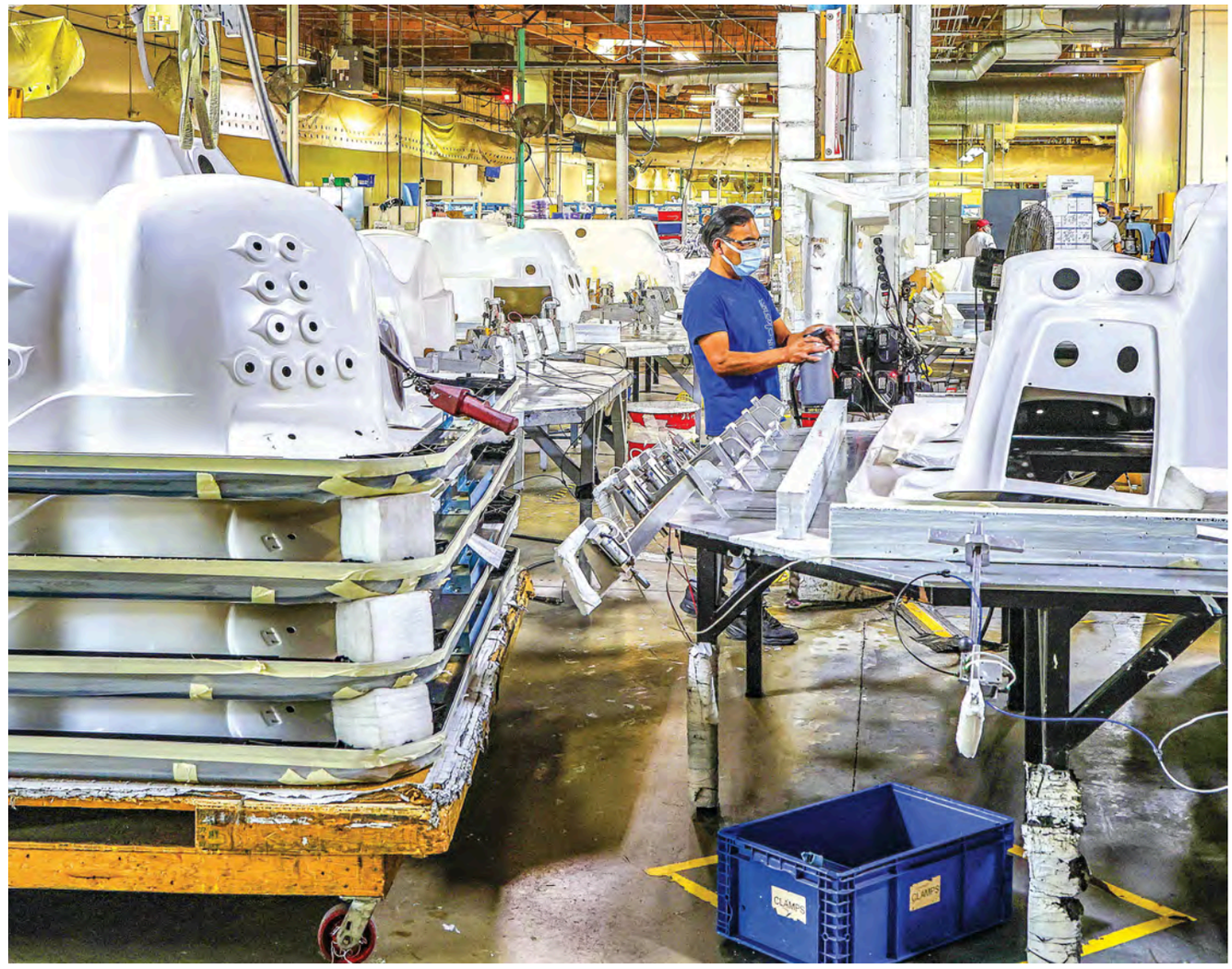
Companies and organizations in the county that employees rated the best

San Diego's Top Workplaces

HIGH-END HOT TUB COMPANY IN VISTA KEEPS IT FLEXIBLE

The way Watkins Wellness adapted to pandemic earned it top rating by employees

BY PHILLIP MOLNAR



EDUARDO CONTRERAS U-T

Employees manufacture hot tubs at the Watkins Wellness headquarters and manufacturing facility in Vista.

A lot of businesses had to adapt to working at home during the pandemic, but things get a bit tricky when your main function is manufacturing.

Vista-based Watkins Wellness, which makes high-end hot tubs and aquatic fitness products, had no choice in the early days but to briefly furlough workers. It wasn't long before the business was up and running again with workers inside the plant wearing masks and observing protocols to stop any spread of the virus.

For the rest of the workforce, it meant learning how to do their work from home. Despite being a manufacturer, there are a lot of jobs that aren't necessary to take place in the Vista factory, such as positions that deal with the ordering and selling of products, and other logistics functions.

Watkins was surprised to find much of its workforce wanted to keep the work-from-home thing going even when things calmed down or, at the very least, some type of hybrid situation. The company responded by looking at jobs on a case-by-case basis. Some people work one day from home, others work three, some chose to come back full time and others are fully remote.

The flexibility is one of the reasons why Watkins was voted the No. 1 Top Workplace (large company category) for the first time based on employee interviews. Employees also say they enjoy the team atmosphere, lack of micro-management, opportunities for advancement and pride in the product they are building.

Watkins Wellness was founded in 1977 but has been part of the publicly traded Masco Corp. since 1986. Masco has a lot of well-known brands under its portfolio, including Behr paints and Delta faucets. Watkins has 760 employees across the United States but the majority, 700, are based in Vista.

Silvia Rocha-Espino, a vice president of people and culture (human resources), said the business gives flexibility to many of its workers depending on the task.

"There's weeks when I'm not here at all, and others where I am here every day," she said.

Rocha-Espino said about 70 percent of the workforce is in manufacturing, making it impossible to work from home, so there are other things that keep people around. Benefits included 401(k) programs with a 4 percent match; an annual bonus program; tuition reimbursement; discounts on products owned by Masco; a gift-matching program for charitable donations; and a profit-sharing program that employees are eligible for on Jan. 1 in the year following their date of hire.

She also said Watkins takes the "wellness" part of its name seriously with different programs to encourage employee health. One is a book where people can get points for different health-related accomplishments — going for a run, getting a flu shot, etc. — and then participate in a raffle where they give out prices based on points accumulated. Prizes range from dinners and gift cards to tickets to amusement parks like Legoland and Sea World.

Watkins says it has a 94 percent retention rate and an average tenure of 12 years. One of the employees to stick around for a long time, 10 years, is Robert Hall, an engineering lab manager.

He started as a quality inspector of its many hot tub products, moved up to engineering technician, then lab supervisor and then lab manager. He started at the company without a college degree but used Watkins' tuition reimbursement program to obtain a degree in information technology through the online program of Colorado State University.

Hall said what keeps him there is working with the same people that he likes year after year.

"For me, that makes the job," he said.

A lot of workers take pride in Watkins' final product. Its brands include Hot Spring Spas, which can seat up to seven people and cost up to $16,000 for the most luxurious models. Features can include its patented Moto-Massage jets, touch screen controls, multicolor lights and sound systems.

It also produces Endless Pools, at-home pools that allow a user to swim in place or have an underwater treadmill. There are many different models that

SEE PAGE 4

1. Watkins Wellness

It manufactures hot tubs and aquatic fitness products, including brands such as Hot Spring Spas, Caldera Spas, Freeflow Spas and Endless Pools.

Founded: 1977

Sector: consumer goods

Local employees: 700

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vary in price, but its high-end Elite Pool can start at $37,999. Its other spa brands include Caldera Spas, Freeflow Spas and Fantasy Spas.

Like many businesses around the world, Watkins has had to deal with supply chain shortages. However, it also produces many of its own parts at a separate facility in Tijuana.

One of Watkins' newest employees is Eden Allen-Duenas, an assistant manager of production control, who started about 13 months ago. She works three days at the office and two days at home.

Allen-Duenas said working from home two days a week is a major help because she has two daughters at home, one 5 years old and another 17. Her husband is full-time remote, but she still said being there two days a week at their home in Temecula really helps out.

Allen-Duenas, who has worked at similar roles in other companies, said she likes the culture of Watkins and lack of a dress code.

"Everyone is really down to Earth," she said. "There's no uptight corporate feel."

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EDUARDO CONTRERAS U-T

An employee at Watkins Wellness tests a hot tub at the Vista facility. About 70 percent of its workforce is in manufacturing and must work in person, but the company's benefits offer perks including a 401(k) plan with a 4 percent match, an annual bonus program, profit-sharing and tuition reimbursement.

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LEADERSHIP AWARD

STEVE HAMMOCK

President of Watkins Wellness

BY ROB NIKOLEWSKI

Watkins Wellness, the Vista-based company that makes and markets hot tubs and aquatic fitness products like swim-in-place vessels, offers a host of training programs for its more than 3,000 global employees.

Among those is its Leadership Academy — a 14-week multidisciplined and cross-functional program designed to help expand employees' knowledge of the overall company.

"The more you know about how this business ticks and the 'why's behind our decisions, the more valuable your opinions will be," said Steve Hammock, the company's energetic 62-year-old president. "And we try to get good ideas from everybody."

Hammock discussed the company's commitment in mid-October, just moments after congratulating the most recent class of Leadership Academy graduates. This interview has been condensed for space and clarity.



EDUARDO CONTRERAS U-T

"I think the No. 1 difference between people who make it to the top and otherwise really smart people who don't is the ability to make a decision on time."

Why did your business make this investment in leadership? We're a fast-growing company and it's hard to find people and keep people. And the reality is that if you invest in your people, they are going to stay.

What's your definition of leadership? Leaders set a vision, do the right thing and set the tone for the organization. A leader has to be the communicator-in-chief, get everybody on the same page. You have business success when you have engaged employees. And to get engaged employees, you need to rally around a shared set of goals, a shared set of values and principles and a shared direction. The leader is the one providing all that.

Are there certain qualities you look for in potential leaders? I think the No. 1 difference between people who make it to the top and otherwise really smart people who don't is the ability to make a decision on time. There's a lot of backbenchers in the world who have all sorts of opinions about what everyone else is doing. But until they get in the chair, well, now it's your turn. And people can't pull the trigger

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or they can't make a tough decision or they can't fire anybody or they can't do whatever. So decision-making is really the key.

I think the three skills that we don't teach enough in this country anymore that are absolutely paramount to doing anything in life well is think, talk and write.

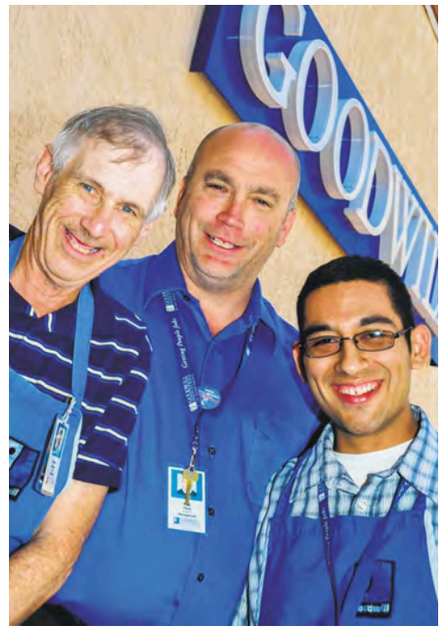
I want people who can think. Everybody's smart, but who can connect the dots quickly? Who can see the big picture? Who can make an argument? That's what thinking is.

Talking. You have to be able to have a one-on-one where I'm going to deliver bad news to an employee I'm giving a review to, and you've got to command the room. You've got to stand in front of the group and persuade a large group of people to be on your side.

And writing is the lost art in this world. People can't write anymore. You have to be able to communicate difficult ideas on paper. That is a separator.

Then my last one is energy. I like high-energy people. I like passionate people. It doesn't mean people who are more reserved are not competent or capable. But here we're about team. We're about rallying. We're about being communicators-in-chief. We're about getting everybody ready to just charge the building and knock down the door.

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GOODWILL

Goodwill Industries creates jobs for people with varying levels of abilities, and helps them gain skills to move toward independence.

THE LIST

500 or more employees in San Diego County

1. Watkins Wellness

It manufactures hot tubs and aquatic fitness products, including brands such as Hot Spring Spas, Caldera Spas, Freeflow Spas and Endless Pools.

Founded: 1977

Sector: consumer goods

Local employees: 700

2. Aya Healthcare

Aya's platform provides access to a pool of available contract clinicians in the country, improving efficiencies and reducing costs for health care systems.

Founded: 2001

Sector: healthcare staffing

Local employees: 951

3. Bartell Hotels

Independent hotel owner-operator of eight hotels that include Pacific Terrace Hotel and The Dana on Mission Bay.

Founded: 1975

Sector: hotels

Local employees: 773

4. Booz Allen Hamilton

For more than 100 years, military, government and business leaders have turned to Booz Allen Hamilton to solve their most complex problems. Helps organizations as a consulting firm with experts in analytics, digital, engineering and cyber.

Founded: 1914

Sector: consulting

Local employees: 1,238

5. Panda Restaurant Group

Parent company of Panda Express, Panda Inn and Hibachi-San. The family-owned business has about 2,200 locations worldwide.

Founded: 1973

Sector: restaurant

Local employees: 1,096

6. Guild Mortgage Company

Founded in 1960 when the modern U.S. mortgage industry was just forming, Guild offers pilot and niche residential mortgage products and local in-house processing, underwriting and funding.

Founded: 1960

Sector: mortgage lending

Local employees: 958

7. Cox Communications

Cox connects nearly 7 million residential and business customers via TV, Internet, phone and home security and automation services.

Founded: 1898

Sector: TV, Internet, telephone, home security

Local employees: 1,057

8. Goodwill Industries of San Diego County

We provide job training and employment services to people with disabilities and other barriers to employment.

Founded: 1930

Sector: used goods retailer/training/employment

Local employees: 1,034



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FAMILY FEEL KEEPS TITLE AGENCY'S EMPLOYEES MOTIVATED

Corinthian Title workers were encouraged by managers even with flood of transactions in '20

BY JENNIFER VAN GROVE



KRISTIAN CARREON

"You're not a number when you're working at Corinthian Title, you're a name," says President Michael Godwin.

When the world slowed down, business picked up for San Diego-based Corinthian Title, which has spent the better part of the pandemic processing an influx of home refinance transactions.

The work would seemingly weigh down any workforce, but the title agency, which won The San Diego Union-Tribune's top prize for a mid-sized company, managed to keep employee morale high.

"It was a challenge and that's why we're proud of our employees," said President Michael Godwin. "We all had to pull together and adjust our workflows to accommodate all the business that we had. It was a really unprecedented time from a business perspective because of all the refinance transactions ... because of lower interest rates."

Started in 2008, Corinthian Title is a title agency providing title and escrow services throughout California, with a focus on San Diego. The privately held firm, whose home base is in Mission Valley, employs around 100 people in town and another 50 in other markets. The job, which centers around verifying that a title to a piece of real estate is legitimate, is predominantly paper based, meaning most employees still had to report to the office while their friends were staying home.

The low-interest-rate-fueled surge in transactions to process, further complicated by COVID-19 office dynamics, could have been a recipe for workplace dysfunction. But Godwin attributes Corinthian Title's day-to-day focus on reinforcing each employee's value to keeping the atmosphere copacetic.

"Our management team, we really are hands on. We believe in that upside down pyramid philosophy, as far as we're here to support the employees," he said. "It's a family type company. You're not a number when you're working at Corinthian Title, you're a name. And we take great pride in that."

Top Workplace survey respondents echoed the sentiment with a chorus of statements that applauded the company's management style.

"I have worked at many title insurance companies in the past and this one has the best environment to work in," one employee wrote. "Managers support a flexible work environment, which makes the job more enjoyable."

There's nothing particularly flashy about the firm's offices or its benefits package. Employees are paid competitive salaries, and they're offered medical, dental and life insurance policies, Godwin said. Offices have breakrooms with coffee, lunch is provided at the end of the month and casual Fridays are also doughnut days. Otherwise, holiday parties have been replaced by end-of-year bonus checks because of the pandemic, and the annual Halloween costume contest comes with a $250 reward for the winner, he said.

Employee survey responses, then, suggest that the simplest of things — as opposed to elaborate fitness centers or beer on tap — proved the most consequential in a year when the relative positivity of San Diego workers was measurably lower than in 2020, as viewed across two dozen factors such as pay, benefits and company loyalty.

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1. Corinthian Title Company

Corinthian is a title agency providing title and escrow services.

Founded: 2008

Sector: title and escrow services

Local employees: 163

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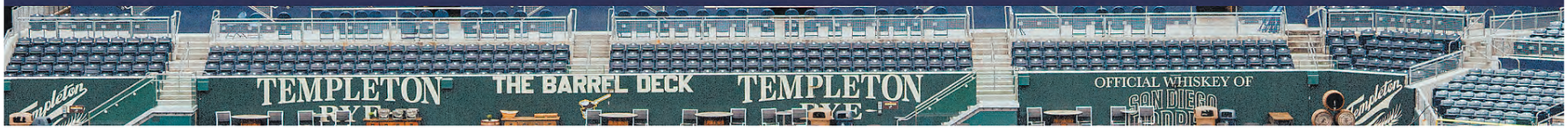



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LEADERSHIP AWARD

KIMBERLY LARSEN

Executive director and CEO of Community Interface Services

BY ROB NIKOLEWSKI

Since 1983, Community Interface Services, or CIS for short, has helped people in San Diego with intellectual and developmental disabilities improve their lives.

The nonprofit's administrative office may be in Carlsbad, but most of its 225 employees are out in the field, making face-to-face contact with more than 1,000 participants with issues such as autism, cerebral palsy, seizure disorders or intellectual disabilities.

The company's core value, executive director and CEO Kimberly Larsen says, is to put the people they support first. It was instilled by the founder of Community Interface Services, Rojane Lindkvist, who retired five years ago. Larsen, who worked alongside Lindkvist for 28 years, replaced her.



EDUARDO CONTRERAS U-T

"I feel like we have a really good balance of having strong business practices at our foundation, being very mission-driven and supportive for our staff."

This interview with Larsen has been edited for space and clarity.

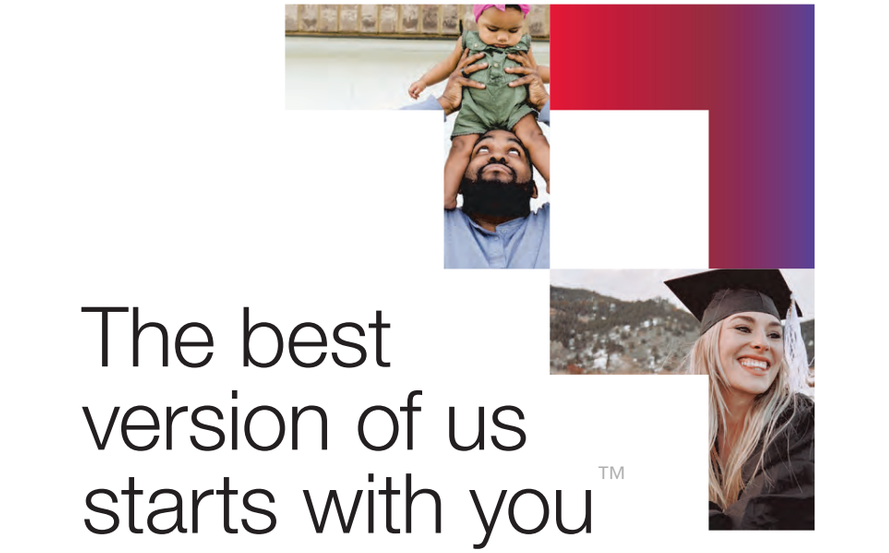
What's your definition of good leadership skills? It's kind of hard to separate me from CIS because I pretty much spent my life here. We're all about common sense, compassionate decision-making. We have a really good team. We're like a family. We just work together and have a common vision.

How do you define your leadership role as CEO? It's kind of environmental scanning — keeping an eye on where the environment in our industry is heading, making sure that we're poised to take advantage of opportunities, looking at threats that might be coming and making sure we can handle those so that the organization is heading in the right direction.

And then it's trying to make sure we hire the best people, give them good training and support, make sure they understand our philosophy of the person being first, adapting our services as needed, make sure they have what they need, and let 'em go.

Why is making it person-centered so important? It's considered a best practice in our industry, first of all. For Community





Interface, it has always been a core tenant. We're here to provide the services for the people who need them and should reflect what those folks want. It doesn't matter what we want or what we want to offer. If nobody wants it, that's not useful. So we really try to make sure that we understand why we're in someone's life, what it is they're trying to achieve and how we can best help them do that.

How long does a participant stay with you? It looks completely different for every person. It could be a day, it could be a lifetime. We have folks we've been serving since we opened. It all depends on where they're at and what they want.

How do you think this company is different from a traditional, private company? A lot of people have the impression that if they're at a nonprofit, if you're worried about the business side, that's a bad thing. And it's not. You have to worry about the business side. You have to be a healthy business, whether you're a for-profit or nonprofit in order to continue to provide the services for participants and provide employment for our staff. So I feel like we have a really good balance of having strong business practices at our foundation, being very mission-driven and supportive for our staff. So it's kind of a win-win.

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THE LIST

150-499 employees in San Diego County

1. Corinthian Title Company

Corinthian is a title agency providing title and escrow services.

Founded: 2008

Sector: title and escrow services

Local employees: 163

2. ClickUp

Its platform has more than 3 million users.

Founded: 2017

Sector: productivity and project management software

Local employees: 175

3. Dr. Bronner's

Founded by Emanuel Bronner who brought his family's German-Jewish soapmaking tradition to America, it produces natural soap products.

Founded: 1948

Sector: intermediate goods

Local employees: 322

4. MD7

As a provider of mobile infrastructure consulting, MD7 has served more than 60 mobile operators across 21 counties, 13 languages and 5 continents.

Founded: 2003

Sector: wireless communication

Local employees: 156

5. Balboa United

It's a medical practice management services organization, designed to help medical practices develop and operate their practices.

Founded: 1973

Sector: physicians practice

Local employees: 202

6. Community Interface Services

It supports individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities at home, work and in community to maximize their quality of life and inclusion.

Founded: 1983

Sector: services for persons with intellectual/developmental disabilities

Local employees: 207

7. Seismic

Seismic provides content intelligence and analytics to enable marketers to prove and improve their impact on the bottom line, revealing what is really driving revenue and what needs to be adjusted.

Founded: 2010

Sector: enterprise software

Local employees: 212

8. Northwestern Mutual – San Diego

Its version of financial planning brings the right insurance and investment strategies together.

Founded: 1952

Sector: financial services

Local employees: 240

9. Crest Beverage LLC

Crest, which joined Reyes Beer Division in 2009, services the largest craft beer market in the country, selling 17 million cases to about 4,700 customers annually.

Founded: 2009

Sector: distribution, logistics and freight

Local employees: 337

10. La Jolla Institute For Immunology

It's a nonprofit medical research institute dedicated to increasing knowledge and improving human health through studies of the immune system.

Founded: 1990

Sector: research

Local employees: 386

11. Insulet Corporation

A medical device company dedicated to simplifying life for people with diabetes and other conditions through its Omnipod product platform, which provides an alternative to traditional insulin delivery methods.

Founded: 2000

Sector: medical devices

Local employees: 174

12. TrellisWare Technologies Inc.

It improves and changes the design and performance of communications and signal processing systems to military and commercial markets.

Founded: 2000

Sector: engineering/defense

Local employees: 197

13. TaylorMade Golf Company

It sells clubs, balls and gear such as gloves and golf bags.

Founded: 1979

Sector: consumer goods

Local employees: 453

14. Corelation, Inc.

It drives innovation in credit union core processing.

Founded: 2009

Sector: custom software development and consulting

Local employees: 250

15. Marsh McLennan Agency

It provides business insurance, employee health and benefits,

SEE **PAGE 12**



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FROM **PAGE 11**

retirement, private client insurance solutions to organizations and individuals.

Founded: 2009

Sector: Insurance consultants and brokers

Local employees: 386

16. Edward Jones

The firm's 18,800 financial advisers work directly with more than 7 million clients to understand what is important to them — from college savings to retirement — and then create personalized investment strategies to help them meet their goals and partner with them for the long-term to help them stay on track.

Founded: 1922

Sector: financial services

Local employees: 192

17. CGI

CGI is an IT and business consulting services firm.

Founded: 1976

Sector: IT consulting

Local employees: 225

18. Mission Healthcare Services Inc.

With more than 40 branches across 7 states, Mission Healthcare provides personalized care to 5,000 patients daily in the comfort of the home.

Founded: 2009

Sector: home health care services

Local employees: 240

19. Symitar

A division of Jack Henry & Associates, it provides core data processing and ancillary technology solutions for U.S. credit unions.

Founded: 1976

Sector: vertical industry software products and services

Local employees: 318

20. Mirati Therapeutics Inc.

Mirati Therapeutics is a clinical-stage biotechnology company whose mission is to discover, design and deliver breakthrough therapies for patients with cancer.

Founded: 2013

Sector: biotechnology

Local employees: 280



SAN DIEGO COUNTY WATER AUTHORITY

The San Diego County Water Authority depends on the skill and dedication of their employees to provide a reliable water supply that supports the region's economy and quality of life.

21. San Diego County Water Authority

The San Diego County Water Authority sustains a $253 billion regional economy and the quality of life for 3.3 million residents through a multidecade water supply diversification plan, major infrastructure investments and forward-thinking policies that promote fiscal and environmental responsibility.

Founded: 1944

Sector: government

Local employees: 231

22. Buffini & Company

Its business coaching and training programs have helped more than 3 million professionals in 37 countries improve their business, increase net profit and enhance their quality of life.

Founded: 1996

Sector: business coaching and training

Local employees: 181

23. USE Credit Union

It offers financial products and services.

Founded: 1936

Sector: nonprofit organization — financial industry

Local employees: 177

24. Sleep Data

Trained professionals such as respiratory therapists who offer comprehensive sleep apnea care.

Founded: 1995

Sector: hospitals and health systems

Local employees: 279

25. Arcturus Therapeutics

It uses its proprietary technology to address the major hurdles in RNA development, namely the effective and safe delivery of RNA therapeutics to disease-relevant target tissues.

Founded: 2013

Sector: preclinical drug delivery and RNA medicines

Local employees: 155



GIFT CARDS, LUNCHES, RAISES KEEP MORALE BOOSTED

The Guild Hotel has competitive pay and benefits, but also gives special recognition for workers

BY LORI WEISBERG



ARIANA DREHSLER

Bartender Zach Sheldon makes a drink at The Guild Hotel, which has about 60 employees and continues to hire.

Be it a birthday, work anniversary or a special occasion like customer service week, The Guild Hotel in downtown San Diego doesn't miss an opportunity to acknowledge its employees with catered lunches, gift cards, the occasional whimsical game, or a good old-fashioned shout-out for a job well done.

Just two years old, the 162-room boutique hotel on Broadway is unique in its own right, occupying a nearly century-old Army Navy YMCA building that that once welcomed millions of service men and women passing through the city.

The last year and a half has been an extraordinarily challenging time for the hospitality industry, which in the early months of the pandemic, saw business plummet. While leisure travel has bounced back significantly since then, hotels — including The Guild — are now struggling to hire enough workers to adequately staff their labor-intensive operations.

Still, where The Guild at one time had fewer than a dozen employees at the height of the pandemic, it now has rebuilt its staffing to 60 and is continuing to fill vacancies. Not only is it offering signing bonuses of harder-to-fill positions like housekeepers and line cooks, it also has raised its hourly rates for both existing staff and new hires, said General Manager Onal Kucuk.

Tipped workers earn $16 an hour, which is $2 above the current minimum wage, Kucuk said, although the local and state minimum wage will jump to $15 an hour beginning Jan. 1. For all other workers, hourly pay at The Guild starts at $18 and goes up to $22, Kucuk said. The hotel also offers a health and benefits package that includes coverage for medical, dental and vision care, and workers are entitled to participate in a 401(k) retirement plan that includes a company match.

As important as the pay and benefits are, though, the Guild seeks to go above and beyond by regularly promoting a collegial atmosphere in myriad ways, says Connor Haigh, people and culture manager for the hotel.

"We love to over-celebrate our team members," he said. "When someone has a 'workaversary,' everyone gets a notification, which lists who is being celebrated, and because we do have a smaller team, it encourages organic celebrations on the property, like taking them out for lunch, saying happy birthday. We will also provide a Starbucks gift card because everyone loves coffee in the hospitality industry."

It's that sort of company culture that likely contributed to the Guild landing the Union-Tribune's Top Workplace award for small companies this year.

"If you're looking for the core reason for this (recognition), it's beyond the monetary values," Kucuk said. "It starts with a culture we decided to create, from recruitment to onboarding. During the pandemic, what kept us going was really finding a purpose and working toward that purpose."

Comments by workers, compiled in a survey by Energage for the Top Workplaces initiative, suggest that the the hotel's focus on its employees is paying dividends.

"I love what I do and to be at a location that feels that they appreciate all of their workers and work hard to keep their guests and employees happy is what I look for in a company and The Guild exceeds that, and all the managers and head staff help us feel equal," wrote one individual.

Said another, "I feel I belong literally to the Guild family. There is genuine care and kindness amongst everyone here. We come together when times are at their toughest and that's what makes me feel that everyone will be (is ready) to support each other whenever the need arises without hesitation."

Haigh ticked off a number of initiatives the hotel launched over the last several months to show its gratitude for the employees. Among them:

• During customer service appreciation week several weeks ago, The Guild catered lunch each day of the week, tailored to the staff's varying culinary tastes, from Greek and Chinese cuisine to Italian.

• For housekeeping appreciation week in September, lunch was also provided each day, but as a bonus there was a bingo game that included a major

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1. The Guild Hotel

The Guild, a Marriott San Diego Tribute Portfolio Hotel, is a reimagination of the iconic, historic Armed Services Building with a YMCA history in downtown San Diego.

Founded: 2019

Sector: hotels

Local employees: 60

FROM **PAGE 13**

prize for the winner — 16 hours of vacation time added to the employee's bank of paid time off (PTO). Everyone else, including those who did not show up for the game, received four hours of additional PTO.

• As a reward for especially hard work in May when the staff was smaller than it is now, Haigh turned to gift cards yet again. "The hotel had really killed it in May. We were smaller then, maybe 40 people, and I went out and bought $100 gift cards for everyone — from Target, Ralphs, Amazon, and had my GM write a little note on a Guild-branded card," Haigh said. "I told people to come meet me in the board room, they'd come in, we'd have snacks and beverages and I'd hand them the card personally and said thanks for all of your hard work."

• Yet another initiative, which will be starting soon, is what Haigh calls a "shout-out card" that will give employees an opportunity to single out other workers they believe deserve special recognition. Those cards, Haigh said, will then be used to select an employee of the quarter and one for the entire year. There will be a plaque honoring the workers as well as some sort of financial reward, he said.

It makes perfect sense, Haigh said, to promote fun and camaraderie in the workplace given the long hours employees are spending away from home.

"Why not do it?" he said. "We're all at work more time than we're not and making sure you're having fun with your team members is important. We focus a lot on respecting each other and trying to celebrate as much as possible."



ARIANA DREHSLER

Emily Switchulis, front desk agent, and Tuong Nguyen, assistant front office manager, work at the front desk of The Guild Hotel downtown.

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LEADERSHIP AWARD

COLLETTE GRAY

President and CEO of Integral Senior Living

BY ROB NIKOLEWSKI

To understand the leadership priorities of Integral Senior Living, one must understand the company's culture because after talking to President and CEO Collette Gray, it's clear that culture is at the heart of the Carlsbad-based business that manages assisted living and memory care properties in 23 states.

In 2012 — "before culture was cool," Gray says — at an annual leadership meeting, about 70 of the company's executive directors and members of its regional team brainstormed and produced 12 simple principles and philosophies.

These "culture keepers" include phrases such as "Have fun and work hard" and "Work smarter, not harder." The company, known as ISL for short, looks to identify and reward its community teams who best exemplify those principles.



EDUARDO CONTRERAS U-T

"Our culture is something we pride ourselves on. It's our secret sauce."

This interview with Gray, who has been with ISL for 11 years, has been shortened for space and clarity.

What makes your company different? Our culture and our people. Our culture is something we pride ourselves on. It's our secret sauce, if you will. Anyone here at anytime can rattle off what their favorite Culture Keeper is and what it means to them. People have mission statements oftentimes but you don't know it. Your associates don't know it. It doesn't mean anything, it doesn't resonate. With our Culture Keepers, our executive directors are the ones that came up with that. They're little sayings that people use on a daily basis.

It seems that culture bleeds right into your leadership philosophy. It does. Our culture is in everything we do. Every other week I send out what we call a Friday Fish Fact because we incorporate the Fish! philosophy into our culture as well. (From the Seattle Pike Place Fish Market, Fish! is a business technique aimed at creating happy individuals in the workplace).

I think it speaks to my leadership style. I believe in fostering an environment where people feel comfortable communicating with one another for the betterment of the business. It's not top down. I don't make decisions in a vacuum. I involve people. But it doesn't take us, you know, three weeks to decide something. We execute very quickly. But it's not just one person making the decision. We really rely on one another.

Which of the 12 steps do you find yourself quoting the most? Two of them — "Want to come to work everyday" and "Take something ordinary and make it fun." I think we all have to work so if we have to work, let's make it fun and not feel like a job. It's not taking yourself too seriously. Being in an environment where you do want to come to work every day because you like the people you work with, you have made friends with them, you like the environment you're in — that's what keeps people. That's our "different and better" story.

What attracted you to the senior living sector? My grandmother, who helped raise me. I was really close to her and had a hard time when she passed away. I started volunteering at an assisted living community near my home, which at the time it was in Las Vegas, and I started calling bingo and just fell in love with the industry. I can't imagine doing anything else. You get back what you give. It's just incredibly rewarding.

rob.nikolewski@sduniontribune.com





THE LIST

149 or fewer employees in San Diego County

1. The Guild Hotel

The Guild, a Marriott San Diego Tribute Portfolio Hotel, is a reimagination of the iconic, historic Armed Services Building with a YMCA history in downtown San Diego.

Founded: 2019

Sector: hotels

Local employees: 60

2. Harris & Associates

It improves communities and creates better places to live through resilient, sustainable planning, design and construction solutions.

Founded: 1974

Sector: engineering

Local employees: 52

3. Kidder Mathews

A commercial real-estate firm offering expertise in industrial, office, retail, investment, multi-family, technology, life sciences and corporate services.

Founded: 1967

Sector: commercial real estate services

Local employees: 77

4. Coffman Engineers Inc.

It specializes in civil, corrosion control, electrical, mechanical, survey and other services.

Founded: 1979

Sector: multidisciplinary engineering firm

Local employees: 76

5. RWM Home Loans

RWM Home Loans, which is licensed in 13 states, offers loan programs that can close in less than 17 days.

Founded: 1994

Sector: mortgage lending

Local employees: 140

6. Los Robles Healthcare

It offers at-home caregiving and home-health services.

Founded: 2000

Sector: hospice

Local employees: 52

7. Manscaped

It sells grooming kits for men.

Founded: 2016

Sector: consumer goods

Local employees: 100



HARRIS & ASSOCIATES

Engineering firm Harris & Associates has made the list of top workplaces four years in a row.

8. Red Door Interactive

It uses data, technology and industry talent to implement smarter marketing practices, ultimately driving more revenue for its clients.

Founded: 2002

Sector: marketing and advertising

Local employees: 77

9. Voit Real Estate Services

Throughout its 50-year history, the firm has completed more than $50 billion in brokerage transactions encompassing more than 47,500 deals.

Founded: 1971

Sector: agents/brokers

Local employees: 54

10. J Public Relations

It's a global communications firm specializing in public relations, content creation and social media.

Founded: 2003

Sector: public relations and communications

Local employees: 53

11. MyCase

It provides legal firms with management software that helps with document management, reporting, billing, invoicing and collecting payment.

Founded: 2010

Sector: legal management software

Local employees: 84

12. STN Digital

STN Digital is a social-first marketing agency. Its expertise is with launching brands and building highly engaged audiences.

Founded: 2013

Sector: marketing and branding

Local employees: 54

13. John Stevenson Plumbing, Heating & Air

It offers a home plumbing repair and install services, including kitchen and bathroom plumbing repair, water heater repair and install, and general plumbing services.

Founded: 1991

Sector: plumbing

Local employees: 56

14. Windward Life Care

Clients facing health and mental health challenges, including Alzheimer's, other dementias and Parkinson's disease, benefit from its combined staff's expertise and integrated model of care.

Founded: 2004

Sector: home health care services

Local employees: 100

15. Sequoia Consulting Group LLC

Sequoia partners with life sciences organizations from startups to big pharma to provide leadership, guidance and expertise.

Founded: 2013

Sector: biotechnology

Local employees: 101

16. Integral Senior Living

It manages independent, assisted living and memory-care properties throughout 23 states.

Founded: 2001

Sector: senior living

Local employees: 63

17. Serving Seniors

It helps poor and homeless seniors with meals, housing and health and social services.

Founded: 1970

Sector: human and social services

Local employees: 77

18. Infinium Spirits

Infinium specializes in sales, marketing and logistics for brands such as Templeton Rye, the official whiskey of the San Diego Padres; Skrewball Peanut Butter Whiskey, the official whiskey of the San Diego Gulls; Seagram's Vodka; and Corralejo Tequila.

Founded: 2005

Sector: beer, wine and spirits wholesale distribution

Local employees: 61

19. Optima Office

Optima fills the gaps in other companies' accounting departments at a fraction of the cost of internal hiring. Its team has expertise in benefits, compensation, payroll, employment law, employee relations and workers' comp.

Founded: 2018

Sector: accounting

Local employees: 69

20. Rock West Composites

Rock West can supply a tube for a DIY project or a custom component with strict engineering requirements. It services multiple markets including aerospace, defense, science, research, energy, marine, medical devices, sporting and consumer goods, and industrial applications.

Founded: 2006

Sector: composite engineering and manufacturing

Local employees: 86

21. The Raymond Group

Its knowledge of metal studs, drywall, plaster, cast product and many other specialty finishes can be used to build structures and spaces.

Founded: 1936

Sector: construction

Local employees: 121

22. Cognella Inc.

It creates teacher-driven, student-centric higher-education course materials in print and digital formats under three imprints: Cognella Academic Publishing, Cognella Custom and Cognella Active Learning.

Founded: 1997

Sector: publishing

Local employees: 60

23. OneTrust Home Loans

OneTrust's services include standard residential loan options like conventional, FHA, VA, USDA and Jumbo.

Founded: 2013

Sector: mortgage lending

Local employees: 52

24. TargetCW

It offers payrolling, staffing, international services, 1099 compliance and audit solutions for temporary workers and contractors.

Founded: 2010

Sector: payroll and staffing

Local employees: 138

25. MadCap Software Inc.

From authoring, publishing and translation, to cloud-based project and content management, to contribution and review in the cloud, one can streamline content delivery and manage the entire content development lifecycle with MadCap Software.

Founded: 2004

Sector: mass market software

Local employees: 84

26. Doctible

Doctible is a software solutions provider to small- and medium-sized health care providers across the U.S. It helps doctors, dentists, chiropractors run their businesses more efficiently while improving the overall patient experience.

Founded: 2014

Sector: vertical industry software products and services

Local employees: 59

27. Evotek Inc.

With technology offerings in data center and cloud, Evotek is equipped to enable customers with the industry shift from traditional IT computing to secure, multi-cloud.

Founded: 2014

Sector: value added reseller

Local employees: 80

28. TGG

It helps companies maximize income, understand their cash position and improve visibility into future performance.

Founded: 2005

Sector: outsourced accounting and business advisory

Local employees: 50

29. PenChecks Inc.

PenChecks provides outsourced partner solutions for benefit payment distributions, default and missing participant IRA programs, uncashed check solutions and abandoned plan services.

Founded: 1994

Sector: retirement distribution

Local employees: 60

30. PBO Advisory Group

PBO delivers strategic business consulting, outsourced accounting services and day-to-day operational support to startups, emerging, public, private, government and nonprofit organizations.

Founded: 2012

Sector: financial services

Local employees: 60

31. PeopleConnect (formerly The Control Group)

To provide personal data management tools that enable users to connect with others, stay informed about people in their lives and protect themselves from safety risks and identity theft.

Founded: 2012

Sector: software development

Local employees: 71

32. The San Diego Foundation

Its causes include helping residents recover from crises like COVID-19 and devastating wildfires. It has also provided more than $36 million in scholarships to thousands of students pursuing higher education. To date, it has granted more than $1.2 billion to the nonprofit community.

Founded: 1975

Sector: charitable giving

Local employees: 61

33. Scout Distribution

It distributes craft alcohol throughout San Diego and Orange counties.

Founded: 2018

Sector: wholesale distribution

Local employees: 78

34. CBIZ

With more than 100 offices and 4,200 associates in major metropolitan areas and suburban cities throughout the U.S., CBIZ delivers financial and employee business services to organizations as well as individual clients.

Founded: 1996

Sector: business services

Local employees: 140

35. Hilton San Diego Gaslamp Quarter

The hotel has an outdoor pool, fitness center, terrace and restaurant.

Founded: 2000

Sector: hospitality, entertainment, recreation and travel

Local employees: 67

36. Alastin Skincare

Alastin is a physician-dispensed skincare brand with scientifically proven and clinically tested products.

Founded: 2015

Sector: life sciences

Local employees: 107

37. Recon Environmental

It provides environmental planning and habitat restoration services to public and private sector clients throughout the Southwest.

Founded: 1972

Sector: environmental consulting

Local employees: 51

38. Cidara Therapeutics

Cidara is developing long-acting therapeutics designed to improve the standard of care for patients facing serious diseases.

Founded: 2013

Sector: biotechnology

Local employees: 86

39. United Rentals Inc.

It provides construction, industrial and homeowner equipment for rent as well as underground construction tools, temporary power, climate control, fluid solutions, disaster recovery and on-site tool management.

Founded: 1997

Sector: rental and leasing

Local employees: 65

40. CSC

It is the property tax and business license compliance software developer for corporations, including law firms and financial institutions.

Founded: 1899

Sector: legal and financial services

Local employees: 66

41. Kura Oncology

Kura is committed to realizing the promise of precision medicines for the treatment of cancer.

Founded: 2014

Sector: biotechnology

Local employees: 58

42. Coyne & Associates Education Corp.

Coyne provides ABA-based intervention services to young children with autism or other developmental delays.

Founded: 1999

Sector: early intervention for infants and toddlers

Local employees: 129

43. Corcoran Global Living

Corcoran Global Living serves the California and Nevada markets with nearly 70 offices.

Founded: 2020

Sector: agents/brokers

Local employees: 102

44. Spinal Elements Inc.

It's a designer, developer and manufacturer of surgical solutions for spinal disorders.

Founded: 2013

Sector: medical device

Local employees: 130

45. Rainbow Municipal Water District

It distributes safe drinking water to agricultural, residential and commercial customers in an 82-square-mile service area that includes the unincorporated communities of Rainbow, Bonsall and parts of Vista, Oceanside and Fallbrook.

Founded: 1953

Sector: special district delivering water distribution and wastewater collection services

Local employees: 56

46. ChromaCode

It merges data analytics and biochemistry strategies to improve patient results by delivering comprehensive diagnostics, enhancing physicians' access to information by making clinically-actionable data readily available and reducing health care costs by delivering high-quality, low-cost Dx tools.

Founded: 2015

Sector: biotechnology

Local employees: 112

47. The Hartford Insurance Group

Its focus includes property and casualty insurance, group benefits and mutual funds.

Founded: 1810

Sector: insurance

Local employees: 50

48. NextGen Leads

NextGen is a technology-first online marketing and lead-generation company.

Founded: 2014

Sector: marketing and branding

Local employees: 77

49. Anderson

It's a direct and digital marketing firm delivering ROI by helping clients to build better, more profitable relationships with their customers.

Founded: 1985

Sector: direct marketing

Local employees: 117

SEE • PAGE 18



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San Diego County Water Authority

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TOP SMALL WORKPLACES

FROM **PAGE 17**

50. Anaergia

It produces clean energy, fertilizer and recycled water from waste stream for the municipal, industrial, commercial and agricultural markets.

Founded: 2009

Sector: renewable natural gas

Local employees: 52

51. American Council on Exercise

It's a health and fitness certification, education and training organization with more than 90,000 certified professionals who hold more than 100,000 ACE certifications.

Founded: 1985

Ownership: nonprofit

Sector: nonprofit exercise professional and health coach certification

Local employees: 86

52. Flores Financial Services Inc.

It provides accounting, human-resources and payroll solutions for businesses.

Founded: 1982

Sector: accounting

Local employees: 100

53. SelectQuote Insurance Services

It provides life, auto, home, Medicare insurance.

Founded: 1985

Sector: insurance broker

Local employees: 74

54. Fuse Integration Inc.

It builds communications, networking and computing solutions that improve the sharing of information, video, text and voice among warfighters distributed throughout the airborne, maritime and ground environments.

Founded: 2010

Sector: aerospace — defense

Local employees: 72

55. Wilson Turner Kosmo LLP

Its primary practice areas include product liability defense and warranty litigation, employment law, business litigation and class actions.

Founded: 1991

Sector: law firm

Local employees: 88

56. Erickson-Hall Construction Co.

It offers services in preconstruction, general contracting, construction management, design-build, design assist-build, lease-leaseback and program management.

Founded: 1998

Sector: building construction

Local employees: 88

57. Springs Charter School

Springs Charter Schools, which was created and is operated by parents, develops a personalized learning program for each student.

Founded: 1996

Sector: primary/secondary school

Local employees: 95

58. J.R. Filanc Construction

It's a general engineering and design-build contractor that constructs, renovates and expands water and wastewater treatment, biosolids management and waste-to-energy facilities.

Founded: 1952

Sector: heavy construction and civil engineering

Local employees: 125

59. Wintrust Financial Corp.

It provides traditional commercial and community banking services, wealth management guidance, mortgage origination, commercial insurance premium financing, short-term accounts receivable financing and certain administrative services such as data processing of payroll, billing and treasury management services.

Founded: 1991

Sector: investment management

Local employees: 113

60. Rivo Holdings LLC

Its services include sales, marketing, customer care, customer reengagement, compliance, analytics, underwriting, administration support, recruiting, training, quality insurance, asset recovery, software development and contract negotiations.

Founded: 2008

Sector: financial services

Local employees: 133

61. Duane Morris LLP

It's a law firm with more than 800 attorneys in offices worldwide.

Founded: 1904

Sector: law

Local employees: 60

62. Proficio

Its approach to threat detection leverages a library of security use cases, Mitre Att&ck framework, AI-based threat-hunting models, business context modeling and threat intelligence platform.

Founded: 2010

Sector: information technology — cybersecurity

Local employees: 115

63. Shopcore Properties

It leases and manages more than 50 shopping centers in 19 states.

Founded: 2016

Sector: retail real estate portfolio

Local employees: 54

64. The Ken Blanchard Companies

It offers management training to more than 150,000 people per year.

Founded: 1979

Sector: management training, L&D, consulting

Local employees: 135

65. Namm California Inc.

North American Medical Management California, part of OptumCare, develops and manages provider networks, offering services to assist physicians and other providers in their managed care and business operations.

Founded: 1994

Sector: health care

Local employees: 126

66. Castle Breckenridge Management

It offers management services for homeowner associations, condos, townhomes, mobile homes, commercial properties and industrial parks.

Founded: 1991

Sector: management for HOA, condo and mobile home communities

Local employees: 64

67. PKL Services Inc.

It provides domestic and international aviation maintenance, training, logistics and administrative support through experienced personnel.

Founded: 2003

Sector: aviation maintenance, training and logistics

Local employees: 132



EMPLOYEE SURVEY DETERMINES TOP WORKPLACES

BY BOB HELBIG

As employers take extraordinary steps to meet the needs of workers and customers during the pandemic, the Top Workplaces awards are recognizing those efforts.

Survey feedback from employees is the sole basis for determining Top Workplaces. And that feedback serves as the ultimate test of how employers are responding in the age of COVID.

To nominate an organization for the 2022 program

Go to sandiegounion tribune.com/nominate

"If COVID taught us anything, it's that asking questions and listening to employees is critical to navigating this new world of work," said Eric Rubino, Energage CEO. "More than ever, you need to be more intentional about your culture."

This marks the ninth year The Union-Tribune has partnered with Philadelphia-based Energage to rank the Top Workplaces in San Diego County. The foundation of the program is a scientific survey of employees who rate their workplace culture. The feedback also gives companies insights about what makes them unique.

Surveying began in May, when news articles and promotions encouraged nominations for Top Workplaces consideration. In all, 3,063 employers in the county were invited to have their employees take the survey. Any organization was eligible to participate, provided it had at least 50 employees in San Diego County. Employers could be public, private, nonprofit, or governmental. There is no cost to enter.

Combined, the companies surveyed for the 2021 program employed 26,426 people in San Diego County. Of employees who received questionnaires, 16,135 responded, either on paper or online. For 2021, 100 employers earned recognition as Top Workplaces.

The employee engagement survey of 24 questions gathers responses regarding issues relating to workplace culture:

Alignment — where the company is headed, its values, cooperation, effective meetings

Coaching — managers care about concerns, are helpful, encourage employee development

Connection — employees feel appreciated, work is meaningful, working at full potential, feel informed

Engagement — productivity, retention, recruiting

Leadership — confidence in company leaders

Performance — execution, open-mindedness, innovation, clued-in leadership

The Basics — pay, benefits, work/life flexibility, training, expectations

Employers that score high enough are recognized as Top Workplaces. Employers are ranked within size groups to accurately compare results. Energage determines special award winners based on standout scores.

Wonder why a particular company was not on the list? Perhaps it chose not to participate, or it did not score well enough in the survey. Energage sometimes disqualifies employers based on questionable results detected through statistical tests it runs to ensure organizations are accurately administering the survey.

Helbig is the media partnerships director at Energage.

SPOTLIGHT AWARDS

These workplaces were chosen based on standout scores for employee responses to specific survey statements

Future Forward
I believe this company is going in the right direction: **ClickUp**

Great Mentors
My manager helps me learn and grow: **Corinthian Title Company**

Innovation
New ideas are encouraged at this company: **STN Digital**

Gettin' It Done
At this company, we do things efficiently and well: **Harris & Associates**

Pursuing Purpose
My job makes me feel like I am part of something meaningful: **Serving Seniors**

Top Down Awareness
Senior managers understand what is really happening at this company: **MD7**

Integrity
This company operates by strong values: **Booz Allen Hamilton**

Crystal Clear
I feel well-informed about important decisions at this company: **Panda Restaurant Group**

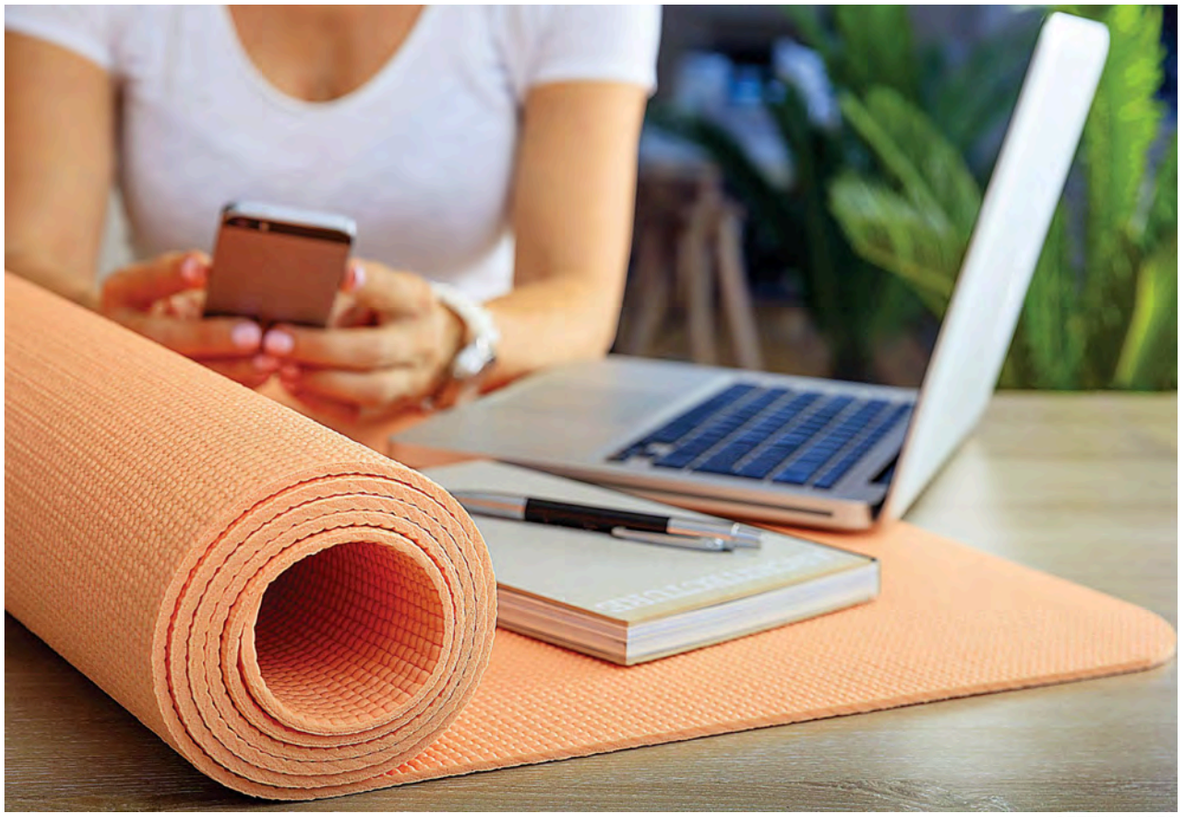
Appreciation
I feel genuinely appreciated at this company: **The Guild Hotel**

Work Hard/Play Hard
I have the flexibility I need to balance my work and personal life: **Guild Mortgage Company**

Professional Development
I get the formal training I want for my career: **Crest Beverage LLC**

Peak Incentives
My benefits package is good compared to others in this industry: **EVOTEK, Inc.**





GETTY IMAGES

Higher productivity and lower absenteeism have driven businesses to improve wellness initiatives.

FINDING WHAT WELLNESS MEANS FOR WORKERS

To encourage work/life balance, save on health care costs, companies provide wider variety of perks related to fitness, health

BY HANG NGUYEN

Infinium Spirits gives employees up to $600 a year for wellness purchases such as a stand-up desk or Peloton bike, both for the home.

Voit Real Estate Services also offers as large a stipend that can be used for diet programs like Noom or Lindora, 5K entry fees or running shoes.

STN Digital offers free healthy office snacks such as protein bars and fruit.

As health care costs continue to rise, local companies are dangling more perks to encourage employees, who they realize have varying views on fitness, to be healthy. Higher productivity and lower absenteeism have also traditionally driven businesses to implement improved wellness initiatives.

According to a survey by Willis Towers Watson, employers expect their costs for medical and pharmacy benefit expenses to go up 5.2 percent next year, even after taking cost management initiatives into account. That's higher than the actual 2.1 percent increase in 2020. Last year's increase was the smallest in decades as many people put off nonemergency care and embraced telemedicine during the pandemic, Willis said.

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TOP WORK PLACES 2021 The San Diego Union-Tribune

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Hence the company wellness incentives. "We want them to balance their work life with staying healthy," said Jessamyn Wilkinson, director of marketing for Voit. Fit employees mean savings in medical benefit costs to Voit, which pays 75 percent of their benefits. Wilkinson added: "Also, when our team members are healthy, it is reflected in their work production and their overall attitudes. We have less absenteeism and less turnover and our teams can see that we care about them."

Broadening wellness scope

Red Door Interactive, a small marketing and advertising agency in San Diego, recently modified its wellness program. Prior to the pandemic, Red Door paid a portion or all of a gym membership based on usage.

But earlier this year, it expanded its decade-plus old gym benefit after workers felt it was limited. Now, it offers $30 a month ClassPass membership to use for the gym as well as on-demand video classes, guided meditations, nutritional classes, saunas, acupunctures, massages, facials, manicures and even hair services.

"We made sure to keep in mind that well-being means something different to each individual," said Amy Carr, executive vice president for Red Door.

Infinium agrees. "Well-being is not a one-size-fits-all approach," said Binali Mesri, vice president of business development and human resources for Young's Holdings, which owns Infinium. "We wanted a well-being initiative that was all about employee choice on what works for them to manage their physical and mental health."

Small San Diego businesses Infinium and Kuro Oncology give employees $50 and $75 each month, respectively, for wellness expenses. Kuro started doing this in 2020 and Infinium in 2018. Infinium employees use it for things like ski passes, personal trainers, toll roads and train passes. During the pandemic when gyms closed and folks worked remotely,



THE WASHINGTON POST

Companies are trying to help employees eat healthier. This past June when Infinium Spirits opened its offices for employees to come back, it made the shift to healthy snacks.

Infinium added new wellness categories like at-home gym equipment, child online learning tools and food-delivery subscription fees.

"It's the little things that can decrease stress and thereby promote mental well-being," Mesri said. "If well-being means that some employees are less stressed because they don't have to meal plan, then that's significant. It's the same with train passes and toll roads."

The wellness program at Cognella, a small San Diego publishing company, has also evolved. About a decade ago, its health approach started with signing up for team sports like softball or soccer through recreational leagues. Now, employees earn points quarterly by participating in wellness activities through the company or on their own. Once a minimum number of points are earned, workers are eligible for a drawing for cash prizes.

Healthy bites

Additionally, companies are trying to help employees eat healthier. STN, a small marketing and branding company in San Diego, doesn't stock its fridge and cabinets with candies or sodas. Instead, they're loaded with things like protein bars and fruit.

Likewise, Infinium has LaCroix sparking waters as a soda alternative. Its other free snacks are granola bars, cheese and nuts, yogurt and hummus. This past June when it opened its offices for employees to come back, it made the shift to healthy snacks.

"Even before COVID, we have always offered our employees snacks," Mesri said. "But we wanted to offer more than just sugary snacks and cookies at our workplace. Our employees work hard and healthy snacks can provide employees with energy, improved concentration and an improved mood during the day."

Gym perks

Companies also hope free and convenient gyms entice employees to exercise. MadCap Software, a small San Diego business, has offered an on-site gym since moving to a larger office near Westfield UTC in April 2019.

CSC TCI, a property tax and business license compliance software developer, has been in a location with a fitness center for three years. It offers free instructor-led classes at the center for employees, "our most important asset," said Scott Strauss, CSC TCI president. He said the company encourages exercise to increase productivity, relieve stress and manage weight.

About four years ago, STN began offering complimentary gym memberships at 24 Hour Fitness. It has since added a ClassPass that includes yoga and cycling classes.

"I'd personally go insane without working out consistently weekly," STN CEO David Brickley said. "It serves as a version of therapy

Nguyen is a freelance writer.

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INCENTIVES AIM TO EASE READJUSTMENT TO OFFICE

Many companies offering flexible schedules, help with child care, catered lunches, free snacks

BY HANG NGUYEN



EDUARDO CONTRERAS U-T

Ziggy the labradoodle hangs with his owner Theresa LeBlanc during work at STN Digital in San Diego. Employers are trying to ease the transition back to the office with perks like this one.

Child care subsidies. Dogs at the office. Daily catered lunches.

While many companies are not requiring a return to the workplace, local companies offer these perks to make coming into the office a nicer and easier experience.

The office will likely look different in the future due to the impact of the pandemic, but it probably won't go away. Roughly two-thirds of 133 executives surveyed by PwC at the end of last year believe that people should be in the office at least three days a week to maintain a distinctive company culture once COVID is no longer a concern.

Even employees who prefer the convenience of working from home also see the value of the office. Nearly 90 percent of the 1,200 employees polled by PwC said the office is important for collaborating with team members and building relationships.

So many companies try to make coming into the office easier. In September 2020, Dr. Bronner's, the soap maker based in Vista, increased its child care subsidies from $5,000 a year to $7,500. Dr. Bronner's employees use the child care subsidies through Tootris, a San Diego-based company that connects parents and child care providers in real time.

"In our employee surveys, we continue to hear that child care is one of the top stressors for our team members who are parents," said Lilia Vergara, human resources director. "We offer the benefit to help parents to have the peace of mind that their children are in a safe and healthy environment while they are at work."

CBIZ said some recent fun events involving food — such as its Reunion Barbecue, taco trucks and happy hours — have helped to entice more workers to return to the office and bond with teammates.

Kura Oncology, a small biotech company, allows employees to choose remote and in-person work options, based on their comfort level and personal situation. It has no set date or details on future changes to the current plan.

It treats workers in the office well. It stocks its kitchen with snacks. Every weekday, it orders individual lunches from places like Tender Greens, Jersey Mike's, Luna Grill and Board and Brew for all employees working at the office.

Buying these catered lunches allows employees to "have one less thing to worry about," said Kelly Kennerly, executive director of human resources. "It's a perk that employees really value."

CSC TCI has new on-site dining options for its San Diego office: Crafted Culture and Leap Coffee. Crafted Culture's menu lists edamame hummus, smoked salmon avocado Caesar salad, and tomato and crab melt. At Leap Coffee, folks can order an Americano, Croque madame or a turkey sausage breakfast sandwich.

"We want to ensure our employees not only work in a nice office environment but also enjoy coming to work every day," said Scott Strauss, president for CSC TCI, a property tax and business license compliance software developer.

He added that CSC offices remain an important part of its company community and are safely open for employees who are comfortable working from the office.

STN Digital, a small marketing and branding company in San Diego, isn't forcing its workers to come back. The company has transitioned to a setup where no one has assigned desks, which are more spread out. Workers just reserve a spot whenever they would like to come in. Of its 75 employees, roughly half are local residents. Of those, half come in regularly.

For those folks, CEO David Brickley wants them to feel relaxed at the office. Brickley has allowed dogs in the office for the past four years. He's a fan of the concept. His French bulldog Zoey comes with him to the office every day.

There's a sign-up system that allows one dog per workday. "Especially in apartment living, people feel guilty leaving their dogs at home," Brickley said. "Also, people feel comfortable having their best friend working alongside them."

MadCap Software, another small San Diego business, also permits employees to return to work voluntarily. It too offers employees who come into the office the same perk as STN.

Canines have always been allowed at the office, said Zeporia Fitzpatrick, human resources business partner. She says, "Allowing employee pets into the workspace is an additional incentive that creates a fun, welcoming experience for all."

Businesses know employees like working from home. But it may surprise some how much they do. A recent survey of about 3,000 employees from big firms like Google, PayPal and LinkedIn by Blind, an anonymous professional network, showed that roughly two-thirds prefer working from home permanently over a $30,000 pay hike.

Yet most companies don't see





full-time remote work as the new norm, according to 275 Deloitte clients surveyed earlier this year. Including those businesses that have already returned, nearly 90 percent plan to be back in the workplace either fully or in a hybrid model this year.

MD7, a wireless communications company in San Diego, offers a dependent-care spending account. It pointed out that a new law raised the pretax contribution limit from $5,000 to $10,500 this year.

"The dependent-care spending account is one way employees can take care of their families," said Tom Leddo, chief strategy officer. "In addition, it is tax advantageous and a smart benefit, whether team members use it while working from the office or otherwise."

For those choosing to return to the office, PeopleConnect, formerly The Control Group, a small software development company in San Diego, offers daily lunches and unlimited snacks. By comparison, for those still working remotely, it provides a $100 snack credit and routinely sends out GrubHub coupons for Zoom team lunches.

In 2019, Aya Healthcare, a large health care staffing company in San Diego, began allowing employees to put away tax-free money to help with commuting costs in major cities. They're allowed pre-tax payroll deductions of up to $270 a month to use for public transportation rides or passes, or parking fees.

Aya says it's not currently encouraging workers to come into the office. Once it's safe for employees to return, it plans to encourage a hybrid model of working from home and in the company office.

San Diego-based Kura offers company-paid parking for workers driving to its Boston office, which has a garage that charges a $410 monthly fee. Also, employees can receive up to a $270 reimbursement per month for taking the train or subway to work.

Nguyen is a freelance writer.

IDENTITY THEFT PROTECTION BENEFIT

Companies see it as tool to recruit, retain workers as well as helping bottom line

BY HANG NGUYEN

Companies are recognizing that employees value identity theft protection.

Here's why. Losses from identity theft cases jumped 42 percent to $712.4 billion in 2020, according to Aite Group. Also, identity theft and fraud reports received by the Federal Trade Commission rose 45 percent to 4.8 million last year.

So Insulet Corp. and Kidder Mathews are part of a growing number of businesses that offer identity theft protection as a benefit to its employees. Companies consider it a competitive edge to recruit and retain workers as well as help its bottom line.

Insulet, a medical devices company that has more than 2,000 global employees including about 175 in San Diego, began offering the identity theft protection benefit about five years ago.

"A person can spend over 100 hours of time resolving ID theft on their own without any help," said Dan Manea, senior vice president and chief human resources officer for Insulet. "Most of the work is handled during traditional business hours, which can significantly impact employee productivity."



GETTY IMAGES

Identity theft losses jumped 42 percent to $712.4 billion in 2020.

The coverage Insulet offers through Allstate gives employees professional assistance in resolving the matter in addition to insurance in the event the employee is financially hurt by identity theft.

Allstate lists on its website that about one-third of Fortune 500 companies depend on it for identity and privacy protection.

This benefit is paid by Insulet and free to benefit-eligible employees. Employees can pay to add their family members to their coverage at a group-discounted fee.

Employees at Kidder Mathews, a commercial real-estate services company with 900 U.S. employees including nearly 80 in San Diego, also lets workers add immediate family members to their plan. The firm, which was founded in 1967, has been offering this benefit since 2000.

Kidder Mathews employees' personal info are being watched for fraud in several ways. They are alerted if ID Watchdog detects easy-to-open loans, such as payday loans, opened in their name. Dark Web Monitoring scans websites, chat rooms and other forums known for trafficking stolen personal and financial data. The USPS National Change of Address Registry is also checked to help detect theft sooner in case thieves reroute mail to a new address.

Karen Benoit, executive vice president of marketing, said Kidder Mathews offers this benefit to employees to "make it easy and affordable for them to protect themselves from fraud and help protect them from the worst financial situations."

Nguyen is a freelance writer.



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