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2009

BEST FIRMS TO WORK FOR



Structural Engineers
BUILDINGS CONFERENCE & EXPO

Nov. 5-6, Chicago

Taking care of their own

Structural Engineer honors the Best Structural Engineering Firms to Work For 2009

By Shanon Fauerbach, P.E., and Solomon Lieberman

Amidst a lethargic AEC industry, the best firm managers are putting more energy into cultivating office culture, building morale, encouraging communication, and refining other “softer” skills needed to make a team successful. “Right-sizing,” office

closings, position eliminations, and early retirement are the talk in management meetings, and leaders who have fostered an open, honest dialogue with staff are rewarded with a cushion to fall back on — such firms exemplify the Best Firms To Work For mentality. Sure, we’ll all face hard times and have

to make difficult decisions; but building core culture and focusing on your staff and their well-being is the safest bet to achieve long-term success.

Structural Engineer is pleased, once again, to honor the stellar firms that commit to creating great workplaces despite the economy or the chal-

Simpson Gumpertz & Heger, Inc., CEO Glenn Bell discusses a project with young staff members. Senior staff members mentor younger employees to develop skills and strengthen the company for the future.

Simpson Gumpertz & Heger, Inc.



The 2009 Top 15 Best Structural Engineering Firms To Work For

Rank	Firm	Number of Employees	Year established	Headquarters (Number of offices)	Website
1	Simpson Gumpertz & Heger	413	1956	Waltham, Mass. (6)	www.sgh.com
SGH is committed to its employees for the long-term; even during a tough economy, all staff received a raise in 2008.					

THE JUDGING PANEL



Barbara H. Irwin
President of
HR Advisors Group,
LLC, Herndon, Va.



Gerri King, Ph.D.
President of Human
Dynamics Associates,
Inc., Concord, N.H.



Bernie Siben, CPSM
Principal consultant
with The Siben Consult,
LLC, Austin, Texas

enges faced by their individual firm. Fifteen standout firms comprise our list, and three honorable mentions get nods. The charts on page 15 and page 16 showcase these winning firms.

Check out the online version of the article at www.gostructural.com, where the top firms are broken out by firm size. Congratulations to Simpson Gumpertz & Heger, the No. 1 large firm; PCS Structural Solutions, the No. 1 mid-size firm; and Barrish Pelham & Associates, Inc., the No. 1 small firm!

Additionally, four firms earn more accolades for their achievements with employee satisfaction, training, employee recognition, and recruiting program; see page 18 for this year's superlative winners.

Who applied

Thirty-two firms applied to the seventh annual Best Structural Engineering Firms To Work For ranking program. This is down from 63 participants in 2008; 42 firms that participated in 2008 did not participate in 2009, including 13 that were on last year's top 25 list. (The ranked list was larger last year since there were more participants.)

We believe the drop in applicants is associated with the downturn in the economy, which has forced firms to make difficult decisions — such as laying-off staff and cutting benefits — that affect employee satisfaction and the general workplace environment. Some firms felt that they weren't going to “win a prize” for a great workplace this year, no matter how carefully they made decisions, communicated with staff, and tried to make up for any negative impacts to their staff. Further, the usual reasons, such as new leadership and workload, were also factors that influence whether or not a firm applied.

Despite the hardship the industry is facing, 10 firms applied this year that did not participate in 2008 — a decision worthy of praise. Two of these are in the Top 10: RW Armstrong & Associates, and Douglas Wood & Associates, Inc. Additionally, all three honorable mentions, MacIntosh Engineering, BHB Consulting Engineers, and Nagamine Okawa Engineers Inc., did not apply in 2008.

The comparison of the 2008 and 2009 participants is important to underscore the fact that this ranking program is dynamic: Every year different firms are evaluated and compared

against one another, depending on firm participation. Firms come and go, for a host of reasons, and each year we take a new snapshot of which firms are achieving superior employee satisfaction and providing above average benefits and workplace practices.

At the top

The top three firms are characterized by excellence in six categories: culture, benefits, performance and recognition, compensation, professional development, and recruiting and retention. Responses from employee satisfaction surveys substantiated what we learned about the firms from a questionnaire completed by management, and the judges investigated further to be sure our top three were ranked appropriately. Below are details of what sets these three firms apart:

First place: Simpson Gumpertz & Heger (SGH) — With offices in Waltham, Mass.; New York; Rockville, Md.; Los Angeles; and San Francisco, SGH provides design, investigation, and rehabilitation services for structures and building enclosures. Its services are supported by several capabilities, including building envelope engineering, building science, field and laboratory testing, structural engineering, concrete technology, materials and science engineering, engineering mechanics, construction engineering, and preservation technology. About 80 percent of the firm's work is in buildings, in essentially all market sectors, and the balance is in infrastructure, defense, and science.

Following her review of the top three firms, judge Gerri King, Ph.D.,

had this to say about SGH: “Their commitment to motivation, training, and employee satisfaction is impressive. In their own words, they don’t think there is a silver bullet to motivating people so they’re committed to the underlying themes of high morale, respect, and continuous improvement. They are so committed that they have a full time Training Development Coordinator and a Dedicated Internal Communications Coordinator.” She added, “Employees clearly come first: They recruit women and minorities, offer flex time for all staff, and trust and listen to their staff. All information, including revenue data, is shared with everyone. It explains the excitement and enthusiasm reported by employees in the survey.”

Judge Barbara Irwin said, “SGH thrives on motivating and encouraging employees by providing a focused leadership model that leads by example. They want their employees to continue to learn and grow in their careers and therefore try to ensure that employees have opportunities to do so through-

out the organization. The organization thrives on promoting from within and has a culture where they continuously reinforce this concept.”

Judge Bernie Siben, CPSM, said, “Every firm ‘talks the talk’ about employees being their major concern, but everything SGH said and every comment their staff provided showed that they also ‘walk the walk.’ I loved the staff member who said ‘the items I have listed for improvements on past surveys have been addressed by the firm, and I am running out of items to list for improvement.’”

Siben added, “The staff’s enthusiasm about the firm amazed me, including comments that the firm is ‘always coming up with new and inventive ways to make coming to work easier and more fun,’ ‘great learning environment,’ ‘they strive to make all their employees successful,’ and many others.”

Conclusion

Thank you to all the firms that applied this year, as well as the employees

who took the satisfaction survey, and our judges. Further, special thanks to our friends at ZweigWhite who executed the Best Firms To Work For program on behalf of **Structural Engineer**. In addition to conducting the research for this program, ZweigWhite also provides strategic insight for firms that want to become a Best Firm To Work For, or to advance beyond their current position in the rankings — contact ZweigWhite for more details. ▼

Mark your calendar!

If your firm didn’t apply this year, or if you didn’t make the list, we encourage you to apply next year. To be sure you don’t miss out on the 2010 entry information, go to www.gostructural.com/bestfirm and click “complete this form” and we’ll email you when the 2010 applications are posted. One important note to newcomers: Rest assured that the names of firms that apply but do not make the list will not be revealed. Hope to hear from you in 2010!