



**Insights From *Fortune's*
'100 Best Companies to Work For'
5 Things Every Organization Can Learn**

By Tamara Snyder

Fortune's latest ranking of the "100 Best Companies to Work For" has many leaders asking, What's the secret? How can my organization become a top-rated employer of choice? Is there an app for that?

While there's no magic, one-size-fits-all formula for creating a company people can't wait to join, we at Edelman have observed the following five trends among this year's highest-rated organizations, and have included questions to help every employer reevaluate their own workplace:

1. A "family" culture inspires trust.

Law firm Perkins Coie has a "no jerks" environment. One of Zappos' core values is "create fun and a little weirdness." Regardless of the terminology, employees at top-rated companies consistently describe their organization as a family — not the dysfunctional kind that makes visiting an exercise in anxiety management, but a place where leaders and peers take care of one another.

A family culture starts with leaders who place building relationships with employees high on their list of priorities, setting an example for the rest of the organization. The CEO of Arthrex eats lunch with employees in the company cafeteria and invites them to vacation at his Montana ranch. At Kimley-Horn, the CEO takes new hires to lunch, and at Hyland, senior executives chauffeur staffers from the parking lot to the office in golf carts during an annual employee appreciation day.

Granted, the bigger the company, the harder it is for leaders and employees to interact personally. But many large organizations maintain a sense of family through its policies and by having leaders who support employees. American Express, for example, enables employees to work from home, operates wellness centers in each of its major U.S. locations and sponsors global employee affinity networks. Similarly, employees at Edward Jones' more than 11,000 branch offices voice tremendous respect for the company's leadership, who in return grant them autonomy to do their jobs and balance their personal and professional responsibilities.

Questions for every company to ask:

- What actions — big and small — do our leaders take to build trust with employees?
- How consistently do leaders across various business units

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- and locations model relationship-building behaviors?
- Is our culture reflected in policies that support employees?

2. Top employers demonstrate a willingness to invest in their people.

Google's napping pods may make headlines, but rest assured the company didn't capture the No. 1 spot yet again just because it provides a quiet place to sleep at work. Perks and benefits are, in fact, material symbols of something far less tangible: a company's willingness to invest in its relationship with employees.

There's ACUITY, whose 8 percent contributions to employees' 401(k) plans and 50-pound holiday gift boxes are generous by any standard. Wegmans stands out among grocery stores for offering tuition reimbursement to part-time employees. And Riot Games stands out from, well, just about everyone by giving employees unlimited paid time off. Such benefits vary by company, but the underlying message is the same: You are important to our organization.

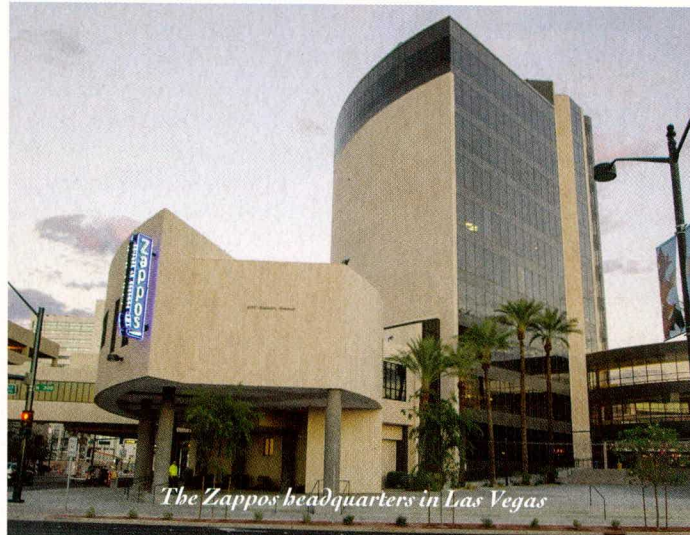
This investment also extends to development programs that train employees to propel the business — and their own careers — forward, such as KPMG's Business School and job rotations, Quicken Loans' 10-week new banker course and VMware's Global Speaker Series featuring Nobel laureates and TED Fellows.

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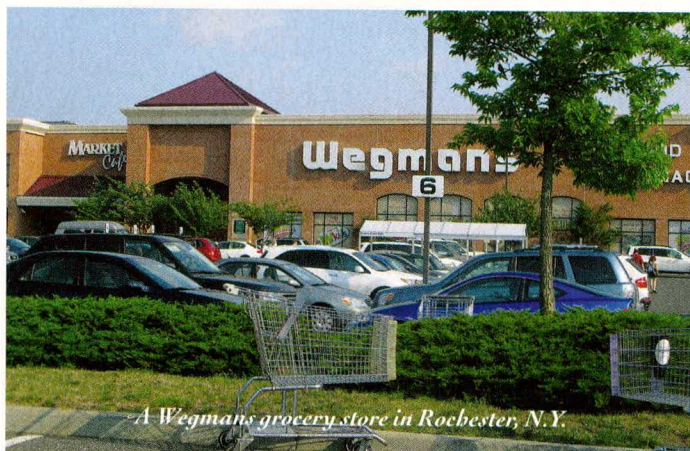
- To an outsider looking at the sum of our employee benefits, development and support programs, what story are we telling about how we invest in our people?
- Are employees aware of all the resources available to them? Do they take full advantage of them?
- Do we know what prospective and past employees are saying about our culture in exit interviews, on social media and on job-rating sites, and do we have a strategy for engaging with or responding to commentary?

3. Customer-facing employees are empowered to provide exceptional service.

From cashiers to call centers, front-line staff members are truly the face of an organization, wielding enormous influence over customers' opinions of the company and its brands. Many of the companies on this year's list, such as Nordstrom, Four Seasons and Zappos, are synonymous with spectacular service.



The Zappos headquarters in Las Vegas



A Wegmans grocery store in Rochester, N.Y.

This is largely the result of treating employees not as commodities but as powerful brand ambassadors, giving them license to exceed customers' expectations without micromanagement.

Kimpton Hotels, for example, actively encourages employees to express their uniqueness as human beings. This emphasis on individuality inspires staff to take a more personalized, creative approach to helping customers. Employees at QuikTrip can earn bonuses when mystery shoppers award them high marks for customer service.

Superior service also means listening to those who interact with customers on a daily basis.

Employees at CarMax say management seeks out their honest thoughts and feedback, turning the negative stereotype of a used car dealership on its head.

Questions for every company to ask:

- What mechanisms are in place for front-line staff to share customer feedback with management?
- To what extent are consumer insights, trends and research shared with employees?
- How well do we understand front-line employees' everyday reality, including their work routines and ways they take in information?

4. Companies share the rewards of success with employees.

Highly desirable employers instill a sense of collaborative ownership with profit-sharing, retirement plan contributions, employee stock purchase programs and other incentives that share the wealth with those who help earn it. One of the boldest examples is Hilcorp, where every employee receives \$100,000 in cash if the year's goals are met. Others, such as Burns & McDonnell, are 100 percent employee-owned; as shareholders, when the company does well, so do employees.

No matter how a company rewards employees, transparency is paramount. Communicating clear targets at the outset, establishing corresponding individual and team goals and regularly sharing updates on progress creates a sense of fairness and equity — and prevents unpleasant surprises if goals are missed.

Questions for every company to ask:

- How clearly do employees understand company targets, as well as those at the team and individual level?
- To what extent is the distribution of financial rewards tied to individual behaviors and company performance?
- Are we informing employees of our progress toward targets in order to prevent surprises if goals are missed?

5. Money motivates, but so does meaning.

Research consistently shows that employees want to work for something greater than a paycheck. This is particularly true for millennial employees, the socially conscious generation, who by 2030 will comprise 75 percent of the U.S. workforce. According to Net Impact, more than half of these younger workers would take a 15 percent pay cut for a job that makes a difference.

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At many organizations — think health care providers and nonprofits — a sense of purpose is obvious to the most casual of observers. For example, employees at Navy Federal Credit Union take pride in “serving those who serve their country.” Those at Mayo Clinic care for patients from all 50 states.

That said, making an impact doesn't have to involve saving lives: Employees at REI help customers explore their passion for the outdoors, while those at the Container Store are equally enthusiastic about simplifying people's lives indoors. Finally, the greater good behind CustomInk design-your-own-T-shirt business may not be immediately intuitive. But employees will tell you they bring meaning to life's most important moments — after all, T-shirts “transform a group into a team and elevate a gathering to an event.”

Questions for every company to ask:

- Have we clearly defined our reason for being beyond a healthy balance sheet? What is the greater good we create for customers, society and employees?
- How effectively do leaders link calls to action to a greater purpose?



The American Express headquarters in downtown New York City

- To what degree do employees — even those in non-customer-facing roles — see the impact of their individual contributions?
- How do we encourage employees to bring their own passions to their work?

Ultimately, every organization has a unique story to tell about its employee experience, and there isn't just one best approach. That said, an employer can establish trust by investing in its people, empowering them to do right by customers, promoting a supportive culture, instilling a shared sense of purpose and rewarding employees for making an impact. ■



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