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Best Places to Work: Life at the top

The top organizations in *Modern Healthcare's* inaugural Best Places to Work in Healthcare competition provide multiple reasons for employees to come, stay

By Ed Finkel

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A challenging but realistic workload, a sympathetic and motivational supervisor, a strong team atmosphere, decent working conditions, above-average pay and benefits—most employees share the same list of desires when it comes to finding a job, perhaps in a different order depending on their priorities.

- [SEE The Best Places to Work](#)

The employers who landed on *Modern Healthcare's* first Best Places to Work in Healthcare ranking, conducted in conjunction with Best Companies Group of Harrisburg, Pa., provide most if not all of these qualities, in somewhat different quantities depending on their institutional priorities.

- [SEE the full link here for the list of the 100 Best Places to Work in Healthcare](#)

The 1,160-employee, 64-bed Waynesboro (Pa.) Hospital topped the list, and healthcare providers dominated the list overall: 162-bed Indiana (Pa.) Regional Medical Center ranked second; 254-bed St. Francis Medical Center in Cape Girardeau, Mo., ranked fourth; and 385-bed King's Daughters Medical Center in Ashland, Ky., ranked fifth, with three others in the top 10.

FGP International in Greenville, S.C., a career placement firm with 57 employees—perhaps not surprisingly, given its business focus—ranked highest among suppliers, and it was third overall. Other suppliers in the top 10 included Awarepoint Corp. of San Diego (eighth) and Geonetric of Cedar Rapids, Iowa (10th).

Fewer payers ranked on the list, with Amerigroup Corp., a 4,352-employee firm in Virginia Beach, Va., placing 48th overall, and HealthPartners of Bloomington, Minn., next at 63rd.

Sizes of employers ranged dramatically, from the 25-employee Advanced ICU Care, St. Louis, (which placed 26th) to the 69th ranked Beryl Cos. of Bedford, Texas, which

employs a veritable small city of 42,417 to staff call centers and offer Web-based feedback to customers of healthcare organizations.

The aggregate survey results showed few dramatic differences among employers chosen for the ranking of 100 vs. those who weren't. Only five quantifiable questions showed differences of more than 5% (See chart at left).

John Challenger, chief executive officer of Chicago-based global outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, says there's no one answer to what's most important for employers to stress, but he shared several thoughts.

"It's crucial that the workplace have a strong culture, that it gives employees meaningful work, that it values and recognizes them for their accomplishments, that it promotes strong relationships across company lines, up and down the management chain, and across intergenerational lines and other kinds of cultural barriers," Challenger says. "People want a fair environment, where people who are the most productive are rewarded."

While those qualities would be critical anywhere, Challenger cites certain criteria that he figures healthcare employees would be especially interested in, such as continuing education, programs to reduce stress in the workplace, top-notch information technology infrastructure and an emphasis on work-life balance.

"Ongoing support of education to stay up with developments in the field is really crucial," Challenger says. Healthcare workers "often deal with highly charged emotional situations in their daily work; giving people the means to relieve that stress is important. Depending on the setting, access to good technology and strong medical information systems are important to people—to be in an environment that provides the kind of healthcare technology and service people can be proud of."

Employee surveys conducted by Careerbuilder.com, which has a team focused on healthcare, have shown that transparency, flexible schedules, reputation and opportunities

for career advancement are among the critical criteria when evaluating potential employers, says Jason Ferrara, senior career adviser.

"Seventy-five percent of people expect their employer to be open and honest," Ferrara says. "Their expectation is that their employers offer some type of flexible schedule, which ranges from certain days of the week off to hourly flexibility to 'Can I take my lunch at a nontraditional time?' ... Career advancement is always something that's important—either a career path or further education."

Healthcare employers need to pay closer attention than those in other sectors to such concerns, if only because of the economy, Ferrara says. "Healthcare is still vibrant and

still needs people,” he says. “If you’re in a financial services firm, you’re probably less worried about flexible schedules and more worried about keeping the lights on.”

Top employers in each of *Modern Healthcare*’s three categories cite many of the same qualities as Challenger and Ferrara in describing what they do to attract and retain the highest quality employees (the top finishers in each category, Waynesboro Hospital, FGP International and Amerigroup are profiled separately on pp. 22, 24 and 26, respectively).

Second-ranked Indiana Regional Medical Center has doubled its revenue in the past 10 years while raising its Press Ganey patient-satisfaction scores from the 20s to above the 90th percentile, says Steve Wolfe, president and CEO.

“We started out early with patient satisfaction,” says James Kinneer, Indiana Regional’s vice president of people and organizational development. “How do we make it a better place for patients? How do we make it a better place for employees? Those two things coming together have helped us create that climate.”

Wolfe recalls his first day on the job, when he met with the hospital’s labor attorney about an upcoming labor election that Indiana Regional lost by single digits. “It was a very tough time getting to our first contract,” he says, recalling a “public meeting with a couple hundred angry people who said we were not negotiating in good faith.” If measured, employee satisfaction would not have been high then, Wolfe wryly notes.

Management has worked hard on employee communications, inviting a nonmanagement representative from each department to monthly question-and-answer sessions from which they take back information to their departments, Kinneer says.

“The communications piece opens up the doors to everything else,” Kinneer says. “What do people need to do their job? What do they like? Beyond that, we’ve worked very hard at aligning awards and recognition with key success factors. We set very challenging goals to hit in terms of patient satisfaction. It’s engaged employees and gotten them excited. They see that, ‘If I put forth effort, there’s a reward.’ ”

Kinneer says that Wolfe has shifted the organization away from a traditional, hierarchical leadership style toward more of a servant-leader, participative style. “We’ve gotten plenty of feedback that we’ve empowered people to a higher level,” he says. “That’s a major (satisfier), when we look at employee comments.”

Employees feel they can approach senior leadership with requests, Kinneer says, even if they can’t always get what they want. He recalls one employee who wanted a raise, more staff and a more responsive supervisor. Management said “no” to the first two, but “we were able to switch their reporting relationship to someone who was able to pay more attention to them,” he says.

Staff hired at fifth-ranked King’s Daughters Medical Center are vetted during interviews to see if they share the organization’s values, embodied in the hospital’s mission, “To

care, to serve, to heal,” and if they understand the right balance among the center’s five key priorities: customer, quality, community, finance and culture. “We look for those behaviors in potential applicants,” says Ryan Finch, service excellence supervisor.

Larry Higgins, vice president of human resources, says that people—rather than facilities or technology—are what differentiates King’s Daughters. “We have a cheerful, talented group of high achievers,” he says. “When we hire people, they can feel it when they walk through our organization. It’s not that we put it in a printed brochure. It’s our daily reality. ... It’s a culture of success.”

Human Resources Director Tim Holbrook mentions several specific reasons why employees at King’s Daughters might be cheerful, from 18-month interest-free loans to purchase home computers, to a 120-child on-site day-care facility, to bonuses for referring candidates for highly sought-after positions.

“We focus heavily on recognizing our team members for their contributions,” says Mona Thompson, King’s Daughters’ vice president of patient services. “We train our leaders that the most powerful form of recognition is immediate verbal recognition in front of the team members.” To augment that, “Each leader has a tackle box of nominal-value amenities that they can use as a thank-you gift to someone who has gone above and beyond.”

“We’re doing a lot to educate our leadership team on the concept of servant-leadership,” Higgins adds. “The leader is here to meet the needs of their team members.”

The medical center recognizes work-life balance in a variety of ways, ranging from organizing outings to amusement parks and college football games to providing valet parking for staff members in the third trimester of their pregnancies, Thompson says.

The hospital also uses prime parking spaces to show its commitment to the environment by designating some for carpoolers only. “Not only does (carpooling) save money, but it promotes building relationships,” Finch says.

Fourth-ranked St. Francis Medical Center puts its money where its mouth is when talking about financial and patient-service excellence. The hospital has paid out \$32 million in gain-sharing bonuses during the past six years whenever Press Ganey scores climb above the 80th percentile and the center simultaneously overshoots its quarterly financial goals. “It has truly aligned patient satisfaction and the hospital’s financial performance,” says St. Francis President and CEO Steven Bjelich.

“If we don’t have patient satisfaction, it doesn’t make any difference if we’ve gone above our financial budget. We do not get” the bonus, says surgical project director Dottie Worley, a 40-year employee of the hospital. “The medical center is very driven to stay on the top, both with our employees and our patients.”

St. Francis prides itself on financial transparency, placing “key indicator” boards outside

each department that keeps employees abreast of financial performance, patient satisfaction and other statistics.

“Whether it’s good or bad, we share” information, Worley adds. “Where we are with our budget, where we are with our Press Ganey.” A monthly letter is also sent to every employee’s home keeping them updated, in case they missed it in the hallway.

The hospital shares its strategic plan with employees and asks department staff to sign off on the blueprints for major construction projects affecting their daily work life, Bjelich says. “They truly are integrated into the decisionmaking process,” he says.

The organization tries to create an environment where employees feel free to share their thoughts in other ways, conducting periodic surveys in conjunction with the firm Management Science Associates. The last of those surveys, conducted in spring 2006 and completed by 1,500 employees, showed that St. Francis ranked in the top 10% in 15 out of the 16 categories that Management Science measures.

This feedback loop is furthered by senior management continuously making the rounds, Bjelich says. “I do it because I get a great sense of what’s going on in the organization,” he says. “You’ve got to be disciplined about it. It’s beneficial.”

Rob Grayhek, who began as a staff nurse nearly 14 years ago and has risen to manager of trauma and disaster services, appreciates the educational opportunities that St. Francis provides. “We look at our employees as customers,” he says. That attitude carries through to supervisor feedback, which Grayhek describes as “educational, not punitive.” He adds, “I’m sure you’re familiar with, ‘If you mess up, you’ll know about it. If you do good, you did your job.’ Here, we celebrate those successes, whether it’s passing the Joint Commission (standards) or meeting those satisfaction goals. That raises morale.”

Co-workers at St. Francis have the opportunity to show their love for one another through an Employee Caring Fund, which provides emergency financial assistance for those who experience tragedies like a house fire, Bjelich says. More than \$600,000 has been donated during the past several years, he says.

Eighth-ranked Awarepoint Corp., the second-highest supplier on the list and a wireless technology manufacturer, appeals to potential and current employees in several ways, starting with its “cutting edge” products, says CEO Jason Howe. “They love what we’re doing. Technology folks love to get into what they’re going to be doing day-to-day,” he says. “From a sales perspective, it’s an attractive market segment because you can make a lot of money here.”

Second on Howe’s list of selling points is salary. “I pay in the top 10th percentile. Period,” he says. Awarepoint’s chief financial officer earns \$250,000 and salespeople make between their base of \$125,000 and a maximum of \$300,000, he says. Plus, the company offers stock options.

Howe says he works to be an “open-door CEO” by holding weekly Friday meetings at which he provides the good news and the bad news. “The company knows how much money we have at all times. The company knows exactly what our risk factors are,” he says.

Awarepoint has a track record of promoting internally, Howe says, with two former receptionists who have become the director of marketing and sales operations coordinator. “I like to get people out of their comfort zones,” he says. “I pay for continuing education. I pay for classes. I have reimbursement programs.”

Geonetric, ranked 10th overall and third among suppliers, is another technology company that invests heavily in continuing education, says CEO Eric Engelmann. “We’re a little bit obsessed with training here,” he says. “It’s very important that we’re pushing the envelope on technical growth. The technology I learned 10 years ago is obsolete. We spend an incredible amount of time, multiple thousands of hours per year. For a small company with 60 people, that’s a big investment.”

The second-ranked payer and 63rd ranked organization overall, HealthPartners places a great deal of emphasis on making sure employees understand their mission, “To improve the health of our patients, our members, and the community,” says Liz Swanson, vice president of human resources. An employee survey showed that 92% of those who responded valued that mission, felt strongly about it, and saw how their role connected.

“We ask line-of-sight questions: ‘Do you know how what you do contributes to the mission? Do you have confidence in your leaders?’ We have very high and increasing marks. It’s because we’ve put together a very tightly knit communication process.”

Beyond that central focus, HealthPartners tries to provide competitive pay and core benefits along with additional features like educational assistance, Swanson says. The company tries to build work-life balance by offering flexible schedules where possible, a benefit that’s perhaps won greater support because of its 80% female workforce, she says. “That’s a nice advantage, as an employer, to have a female perspective.”

The organization’s leaders work to make themselves visible and accessible and to solicit employee feedback, Swanson says. “We work very hard at having an open, honest dialogue.”

HealthPartners works to recognize and reward employees on key “foundational elements” of workplace culture, which “helps us communicate to our employees that these are things that matter to us,” Swanson says. They include promising themselves and their

co-workers that they will be reliable, dependable and meet their responsibilities.

“We make it clear, from Day One, that these are the things that are most important to us,” Swanson says. “It’s never easy to give 100% when the person next to you isn’t.”

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Best Places to Work: Focusing on the basics

Pa. hospital is modern 'Mayberry'

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Hospital officials say a favorable staff-to-patient ratio, friendly, team-oriented culture, a transparent and accessible leadership group, and a strong investment in employee development are among the keys to recruitment and retention for Waynesboro (Pa.) Hospital, which is first on the list of *Modern Healthcare's* inaugural Best Places to Work in Healthcare.

"An employee said to me, the other day, 'This is like a modern-day Mayberry,' " says Christine Miller, vice president for human resources. "That individual has been here for about five years and still feels like it's a pretty great place to be. We just try to do the basics and do them well."

When recruiting candidates, 64-bed Waynesboro always points out its staff-to-patient ratio and an emphasis on interpersonal relationships, says Miller, who recalls another conversation she had recently. "I was talking with somebody, and they were saying, 'One of the great things about working here is, we're not assembly-line medicine. We're able to connect with people and make sure they're cared for as an individual.' Our staffing levels make people feel like they can do the job they wanted to do."

The hospital encourages employees to treat their fellow employees as customers, just as they would patients, which helps engender a friendly environment, Miller says. "We try to take people on tours during the interview process," she says. "People are amazed by how friendly everybody is. They see a stranger in the hallway and people say 'Hi.' We make people feel welcome."

The team-oriented culture comes into play during particularly busy periods, says Ken Shur, chief operating officer. "When our census gets high, people without being asked will step in and help out. That's part of the culture. It's hard to quantify that."

Waynesboro tries to focus on the basics when it comes to benefits, Miller says, paying an above-average share for healthcare premiums, providing four weeks of vacation to start, and contributing an automatic 3% of salary to an employee's retirement account,

matching up to another 3% at 50 cents on the dollar.

“We don’t put emphasis on those niche benefits, like somebody picking up your dry cleaning,” Miller says. “We go for those core benefits that are important to people, like healthcare, and time off and retirement. We take somewhat of a paternalistic approach to the retirement. Even if a person is not saving themselves, we do it on their behalf.”

Miller mentions one benefit that she notes could be considered more of a “niche” offering: an employee-assistance program that brings counselors on-site twice per month as well as educational sessions throughout the year.

Waynesboro also sends massage therapists “roving around the hospital” once per month for anyone who could use a stress reducer. “We try to take stuff to the employees,” Miller says. “We realize it’s difficult for them to get away.”

Although the hospital tries to pay people competitively, Miller says the leadership team believes that poor relationships with supervisors are what prompt most employees to leave a job. Subordinates participate in job interviews with supervisory candidates to help ensure a comfort level, and Waynesboro provides management orientation training that encourages a constructive relationship, she says.

“We’ve moved away from language that focuses on discipline (to) focus on what you can do better,” Miller says. “That way, people don’t get defensive.”

This leadership development also shows a commitment to promoting from within, Shur says. “Staff gets a very positive signal,” he says. The relatively high percentage of female managers probably stems partly from this philosophy, Miller says, noting that most have been promoted from within their departments. “I don’t think there’s been any master plan” to promote women, per se, Shur says. “We hire the best folks we can find.”

Waynesboro and its parent organization, Summit Health, work to recruit nurses through “grow your own” programs at local nursing programs, supporting two faculty positions, and a program that pays licensed practical nurses their regular salary as they work toward an RN degree. “Your full-time job is to get that degree,” Miller says.

The leadership team attempts to make the rounds of the hospital, holding meetings periodically—including some during off-shifts—and sharing the organization’s financial performance, Shur says.

“We’re very visible,” Shur says. “Employees feel very comfortable stopping us and asking questions. ... We get great questions from staff because it’s clear they understand the industry. We’re very open about how we’re doing financially.”

Waynesboro offers a full-service gym through its parent organization, medical and dependent-care flexible spending accounts, and wellness programs focusing on everything from smoking cessation to healthy eating to walking programs. The hospital’s

educational- assistance programs provide up to \$2,500 per year for tuition reimbursement as well as loans of up to \$15,000.

“We put a tremendous amount of money into the organization,” Miller says. “We try to provide (loans) to people in a situation that’s going to help support the hospital. But we pretty liberally apply that to folks.”

The hospital began a “Biggest Loser” contest modeled after the television show that provides prizes to those who lose the most weight, although even those who simply maintain their weight were recognized, Miller says.

A monthly Service Excellence award recognizes achievements aimed at patient satisfaction; one recent winner “cut through red tape” so that a grandmother could hear important test results before she was scheduled to join her family on vacation in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. “She sent a postcard back,” Shur says. “It’s the kind of thing that happens here on a regular basis.”

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Best Places to Work: Doing as they say

Recruiting firm recruits good workers

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FGP International should have a pretty solid notion of what makes a great workplace: the company's business centers on recruiting candidates for executive positions in a variety of industries, including healthcare. And 57-employee FGP makes good on that intuition, placing third in the overall Best Places to Work in Healthcare ranking and first among suppliers.

Chuck Drake, division manager of healthcare recruiting, worked as a chief financial officer before joining Greenville, S.C.-based FGP six years ago and says he remembers what he didn't like about recruiters in the past. "Very seldom did I take calls from recruiters because I didn't much care for them. A lot of recruiters threw stuff up against the wall to make it stick," he says. "We try to find out, right upfront, if this is going to be a good fit—not a wish fit."

The company takes much the same approach to its own employees, says Mary VanSyckel, senior consultant for FGP, seeking those with the right blend of strong work ethic, high degree of integrity, and willingness to pursue individual and team goals simultaneously. "Those are the principles we operate by here," she says. "Those seamlessly translate into how we work with our clients and our candidates."

Healthcare recruiter Blake Coleman, who focuses on pharmacy directors, laboratory directors and radiologists, says he came from a sales background and had strong feelings against taking a position that would be 100% commission-based. "A lot of it was the culture itself. I didn't feel like they were trying to sell me" on the job, says the three-year employee. "If anything, it seemed like they were trying to talk me out of it. They really want people who want to be here."

The flip side of the position's commission-based nature, Coleman says, is that his salary is not capped. "I've given up the dream of being a professional athlete," he says. "This is competition to me. I enjoy that aspect of it."

Healthcare recruiter Kathy Wilson, who arrived six months ago out of the mortgage industry and focuses on RN directors and chief nursing officers, cites the generous vacation time and "accolades" as what attracted her to FGP. "The willingness of your

counterparts and management to help you, and yet the freedom to run your own business within a business, was very appealing to me,” she says.

Candidates hired at FGP spend the first three weeks, probably 110 hours, in training, says Drake, who leads a 10-person team. “They’re learning our data system. They’re being fed from a fire hose about their niche. They’re being introduced to people who can serve as a resource for them. The last thing we want to do is cut somebody loose in their sector without them understanding what they’re doing.”

FGP’s 40% turnover rate stems from the nature of the business, Drake says. “Sometimes, they can stick it out until they see the light at the end of the tunnel, and sometimes they can’t,” he says. “Sometimes, we realize after watching somebody for 90 days, we made a bad decision in hiring them: They’re not crisp on the phone, or their knowledge of the space they’re working in is not good enough to be a winner.”

The bottom line is the bottom line, he says. “We eat what we kill. That could have a lot to do with the turnover percentage: If you’re not killing anything, you’re not eating anything, and you’re going hungry.”

As such, in addition to the emphasis on early training, FGP works to provide as relaxed and team-oriented an atmosphere as possible, Drake says. Company President John Uprichard, who has four children under age 10, sets an example by working hard from 8:30 to 5:30 and then going home. “He is the lifeblood of this company,” Drake says. “God bless him. I would stay later if I were him.”

“How many places can you work where the president walks into your office and says, ‘Hey, how are you doing? How’s your home life? Did you watch some football?’ ” Coleman says. “In our business, you’re supposed to be on an island by yourself. That’s not the culture we’ve developed here. Not everyone is going to succeed in a business that’s 100% commission. It’s sad but true. But I tell you what: You’re going to have every opportunity to do that with FGP.”

Coleman praises Drake for furthering that possibility with an open-door attitude. “He doesn’t try to hold onto any knowledge he’s gained. He shares it. He wants everyone to beat his numbers.”

The company holds team-building competitions, for instance, drawing two names at random every holiday season, with the winners able to distribute \$1,000 to whatever charity they want. “It’s the concept of paying it forward,” VanSyckel says. “We all enjoyed hearing about that, how they improved some kids’ and some families’ lives.”

FGP’s Reach for the Beach competition rewards top-performing employees with an all-expenses-paid weeklong trip to the Caribbean that five people won last year, Drake says. “It’s something that everybody looks forward to,” he says.

“It’s all-inclusive. It’s fantastic,” Coleman says. “You get to pick one of five locations. It’s

a stretch goal. Is it attainable? Yes.”

Coleman and Wilson cite other stress reducers, from a scooter people can ride up and down the hallway to a soccer ball for kicking around, as well as parking-lot cookouts in the summer and costume contests at Halloween.

“They give you lots of ways to make it fun,” Coleman says. “In the recruiting business, the highs are as high as you can get, but the lows are as low as you can get. You can work on something for three months, and then it vanishes. That can be tough. Without the love and support we have here, a lot more people would crash and burn.”

What do you think?

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Best Places to Work: Survey says ...

... Amerigroup workers will respond

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Amerigroup offers employees some nice extras, including a 529 college savings plan, the possibility of telecommuting and pretax flexible spending accounts for healthcare and child care. But Jim Carlson, Amerigroup's president and chief executive officer, believes his organization's central appeal to existing and potential employees lies in the company's very mission: to work with states that have privatized Medicaid services for people with disabilities and the elderly.

"The people we take care of are perhaps our nation's neediest citizens," Carlson says. "When that's the nature of your work, you tend to attract people who come here because they take great pride—it is meaningful to them to take care of the people who need the rest of us more. We call it our enviable social charter."

Amerigroup, Virginia Beach, Va., ranked 48th on the list of Best Places to Work in Healthcare, and it ranked highest among payers. One measure of the company's hold on its employees is that biannual employee surveys receive a whopping 90% response rate, Carlson says. "Our outside consultants say they've never seen" that type of response rate before, he says. "Most draw the connection between their jobs and their personal values."

To support both those who want to help others and those who need their help, Amerigroup provides additional paid time off, over and above vacation days or personal days, for employees who wish to participate in volunteer activities. With a workforce of more than 4,000 people, 20% of whom are doctors, nurses or social workers, Amerigroup also has created a disaster-response team to deploy to hurricane-ravaged areas and the like.

"All of this gets woven together: what the company does, the kind of people who come here, and what the company does to support them," Carlson says. "New employees see that difference and want to be part of it." The company does preapprove the volunteer time off, he adds. "We have to make sure their volunteer activities are something consistent with what the company wants to accomplish."

The company also gets involved with, for example, efforts through Habitat for Humanity.

One local event in Amerigroup's home, the Tidewater region of Virginia, brought 160 employees to do "everything from swinging hammers to serving food," Carlson says. "It's not just the company time off, it's also the logistical support to organize people."

When responding to a disaster like Hurricane Katrina, it's difficult to provide basic services to people, Carlson says. "Imagine how hard that is for somebody in a wheelchair. You can't get to the highest floor in your house, you have no electricity for your lift, and the water's rising. We can target our activities to people who are in harm's way. When (Hurricane) Gustav threatened ... part of our disaster-response folks were in Memphis, where people with disabilities had been evacuated."

Some 600 out of the company's employees participate in the March of Dimes, and Amerigroup gooses that participation in creative and fun ways, selling tickets to those in attendance "that allow you to wear your jeans to work," Carlson says. "Somebody could have my office for a day. Those are things that create a lot of esprit de corps."

Amerigroup's commitment to its mission plays out in other ways. For example, more than 70% of the company's employees, and more than 30% of its management, are African-American, which Carlson says is about double the national average. "We have a disproportionate percentage of people we serve in minority communities," he says. "We pride ourselves in having a workforce that mirrors the people we take care of." The company participates in an array of diversity fairs.

As a 14-year-old company that has seen its workforce double in the past three years, Amerigroup works hard on talent management to be able to retain and promote existing employees, Carlson says. The company reimburses up to 80% of tuition up to \$2,500 per calendar year for employees with at least a year of service.

"We're putting an awful lot of emphasis on skills development as a recognition of that explosive growth rate," Carlson says. "We're, if anything, investing more in training" as time goes on, he says. "We're doing everything reasonably possible to help the people who are already here grow their skills, so they can be the leaders and executives of tomorrow."

Few Amerigroup employees telecommute in the traditional sense. But many of them are in the field working out of the Amerigroup members' residences, whether they be homes, assisted-living centers or other adult communities, Carlson says.

"Their value to the members is pretty astonishing," Carlson says. "They get to be known and familiar. ... Some of these people are very frail; they're in their mid-80s, living independently. We have people who are often seen as family members. They get a hug at the door. That's not something you think of with an insurance company."

The company would like to reduce its turnover rate, which was 29.5% for its last fiscal year, but Carlson notes that it's typical for a business with a significant call-center component. "While we're not comfortable with it, we understand that's the driver of it,"

he says, in addition to the array of military bases in the area that often brings families in and out in a short time.

As it grows, Amerigroup would like to add features such as an on-site day-care center or an on-site walk-in health clinic, Carlson says.

Amerigroup does offer a number of other benefits currently: an employee-assistance program through Cigna Behavioral Health that provides up to five visits per year for those with life issues on their minds, on-premises gyms in several corporate locations, and health fairs and other activities that are part of a corporatewide wellness initiative called "Healthy Lifestyles."

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