

Chicago Tribune

# CHICAGO'S TOP WORKPLACES

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## It's not about the gravy

The best companies integrate perks and benefits into the culture

**TOP  
WORK  
PLACES**  
2013

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**INSIDE: Our exclusive list of the Top 100 places to work**

# Gravy's just a side dish



## Employees-first culture tops pay, benefits as key ingredient for happiness



**REX W. HUPPKE**  
*Workplace columnist*

I love gravy.

It perfectly accentuates things like turkey, mashed potatoes and the workplace.

What's that? No, I'm not suggesting cannibalism, though who among us hasn't wondered how that guy from the information technology department might taste smothered in a rich giblet gravy?

But when it comes to work, the gravy isn't the edible sort. It's the benefits we receive, beyond just a paycheck. Things like health care, dental plans and perks ranging from gym memberships to company-issued iPads.

They aren't the main course of our work lives. They're the things that enhance our experiences, giving us security and, in an ideal world, making life easier.

When you look at the Top Workplaces in Chicago, you'll find generous benefits across the board. Workers want that gravy on the potatoes they spend each day mashing, but, surprisingly, the Tribune's Top Workplaces survey shows that benefits are not the key ingredient to worker satisfaction.

Of the things most important to employees, "My benefits package is good compared to others in this industry" came in at the bottom, far

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Liz and Neal Smith cross the finish line with daughters Lauren, 3, and Madeline, 16 months, at a 5-kilometer run/walk in September hosted by Assurance, which gave medals, below, to participants. Liz Smith, president of employee benefits, has been with Assurance five years.

below things like “I feel genuinely appreciated at this company” and “My job makes me feel like I’m part of something meaningful.”

In another part of the survey, employees had to rate the importance of “My Pay & Benefits” along with the following work factors: connection, direction, execution, my work and my manager. Again, pay and benefits were at the bottom, with connection given the highest importance.

So, the benefits we receive from our companies aren’t the main course. But that doesn’t mean gravy isn’t important. (Though some cardiologist might disagree.)

To study the role benefits play in workplace satisfaction, I ventured to Schaumburg and spent a day at Assurance, a fast-growing insurance brokerage that ranked No. 2 among midsize companies on this year’s Top Workplaces list. The description of Assurance’s perks and benefits made it sound irresistible: up to \$2,000 annual company contributions to a health savings account, free Starbucks coffee, a “penthouse lounge with a Wii,” birthdays off and a “Wheel of Fortune”-like wheel that comes out quarterly and gives employees



a shot at cash prizes.

Before I left, my editor made me promise I’d come back. I unholstered my straw and got ready to drink in some gravy.

To be honest, I was skeptical. There’s a reason workers don’t rank benefits and perks high on their list of what’s important. These are bells and whistles.

But what I found at Assurance surprised me. The company has many avenues for keeping its employees happy and healthy.

There is a wellness program seamlessly integrated into day-to-day life, with workers encouraged

to participate in lunchtime walks and after-hours exercise classes, along with free annual health screenings, and weekly deliveries of fresh fruit and granola.

Volunteerism is encouraged, with an in-house committee that partners with different groups and charities, and each employee given a paid day off a year to volunteer at an Assurance event.

The company, which employs about 300, pushes continuing education, employing a full-time teacher who runs lunch-and-learn classes and arranges for all manner of presentations and course

work to help people advance their careers.

Recognition is also key, and employees or managers can give kudos via an electronic “high-five” system, the results of which are broadcast on monitors mounted throughout the building.

Marketing manager Stephanie Paulauskis described Assurance’s perk-heavy approach like this: “It’s like the employer is giving back as much as you’re giving in. I feel like they’re always trying to outdo us. Which is good.”

But how does a company keep these benefits from coming across as cloying or overly peppy?

“All these events and programs, they’re part of the daily schedule,” Paulauskis said. “You eventually find yourself on the bandwagon whether you want to or not. It’s just part of the culture.”

On the day I visited, a group of employees was volunteering at a nearby forest preserve, clearing buckthorn — it’s an invasive species of shrub and small tree — and tossing branch after branch onto a crackling bonfire.

Company President Dan Klaras

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was there, wishing he hadn't worn shorts, given the falling ashes and patches of poison ivy. He said that when he joined the company eight years ago, he and Assurance's leadership team recognized the truth behind this simple formula: Happy employees = happy customers.

"That's when we really made it a part of the core mission of the company," Klaras said. "This is insurance, and people don't usually think of an insurance company as very exciting. We wanted to change that."

Along with fun and engaging stuff — and good health care and retirement planning — he lumped in "career pathing" with the benefits employees receive.

"Right away when somebody gets here, there's someone talking to them about where they're going," Klaras said. "What do you need? It's education. It's mentorship. That's what helps people move forward."

Liz Smith, president of employee benefits, made it clear that the company has an intentionally broad definition of benefits.

"A lot of employers lose the opportunity to promote benefits beyond just insurance," she said. "We've taken advantage of making benefits about more than just insurance and really integrating it into the whole company. We really studied how to deploy it throughout the whole organization. I think it's subtle."

I think she's right. The employees I spoke with there, in keeping with what the Top Workplaces survey found, said that at the end of the day, the work is what matters most. But the perks, the team-building and educational opportunities, the focus on volunteerism and good health, those are the things that fortify their contentment.

And company officials say they're getting a strong return on their investment. Along with improved employee retention, an Assurance study of the implementation of its health care and wellness plans found that the company saved nearly \$1.7 million over a five-year period while spending only about \$180,000.

"At the end of the day, all we want are engaged employees, and by every measure we're getting that," Smith said.

That's when I realized what Assurance is doing right. It's stirring the gravy into the mashed potatoes so you get some with every bite.

## How employees feel about their workplaces

Of the more than 70,000 employees who took this survey, the vast majority said the biggest factors in evaluating their workplaces were feeling connected and the direction the company was taking, far outweighing issues with pay and benefits — or even issues with their immediate supervisor.

Survey statement	Percentage importance to Chicagoand employees
"I feel genuinely appreciated at this company."	68%
"I believe this company is going in the right direction."	66%
"I am confident about my future at this company."	66%
"My job makes me feel like I am part of something meaningful."	64%
"I have confidence in the leader of this company."	64%
"Senior managers understand what is really happening at this company."	60%
"This company operates by strong values and ethics."	59%
"At this company, we do things efficiently and well."	58%
"This job has met or exceeded the expectations I had when I started"	58%
"My manager cares about my concerns."	56%
"New ideas are encouraged at this company."	54%
"I feel well-informed about important decisions at this company."	54%
"My manager makes it easier to do my job well."	53%
"My manager helps me learn and grow."	52%
"I get the formal training I want for my career."	50%
"There is a lot of frustration at my workplace."	49%
"My pay is fair for the work I do."	46%
"I have the flexibility I need to balance my work and personal life."	45%
"My benefits package is good compared to others in this industry."	34%

NOTE: The more important the statement, the closer it is to 100%.

SOURCE: WorkplaceDynamics

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Peggy Vahle, account manager at Assurance, works on her volunteer project, clearing buckthorn from the nearby Busse Woods Forest Preserve. At Assurance, volunteerism is encouraged.

"We've made a commitment as an organization to make all of this a priority," Smith said. "We don't want it to be a one-hit wonder. We want it embedded."

Brenda Ellington Booth, a

clinical professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, said it takes consistency for companies to succeed at building employee-first cultures.

"The key to having that model is this notion that it needs to make sense, it's not a flavor of the month, it's an integral part of their

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strategy," she said. "The company has a strategy and they're looking at employees as an integral part of that strategy. In publicly held organizations, for example, CEOs come and go, there are mergers and acquisitions, so it can be really difficult to sustain that. It takes work, and it takes dedication."

But an employee-first approach, compared with models that are customer-focused or based on operational excellence, consistently yields good results.

"Companies that have these people-first philosophies, they have a high degree of trust among employees," Booth said. "Numerous studies show that people-first models deliver above-average returns. But it requires a discipline from the organization, the discipline to stick to it."

After seeing the success of Assurance's approach — a success mirrored by other companies on the Top Workplaces list — I have to wonder why more companies don't go all-in on a benefits system that truly helps employees in myriad ways.

Most of the things Assurance does are not high-cost. Something like the volunteer program not only enhances employee content-



NANCY STONE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Lindsay Malone, marketing events coordinator at Assurance, prepares for a noon walk.

ment, it gives the company a public relations boost. And I'm sure the wellness program cuts down on health care costs.

Above all, it seems like the right

way to run a business. If you care about your employees in an authentic way, you're going to foster loyalty, innovation and hard work.

Don't just tease us now and

again with a taste of gravy. Find a way to blend it in so we can walk away from every bite satisfied.

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