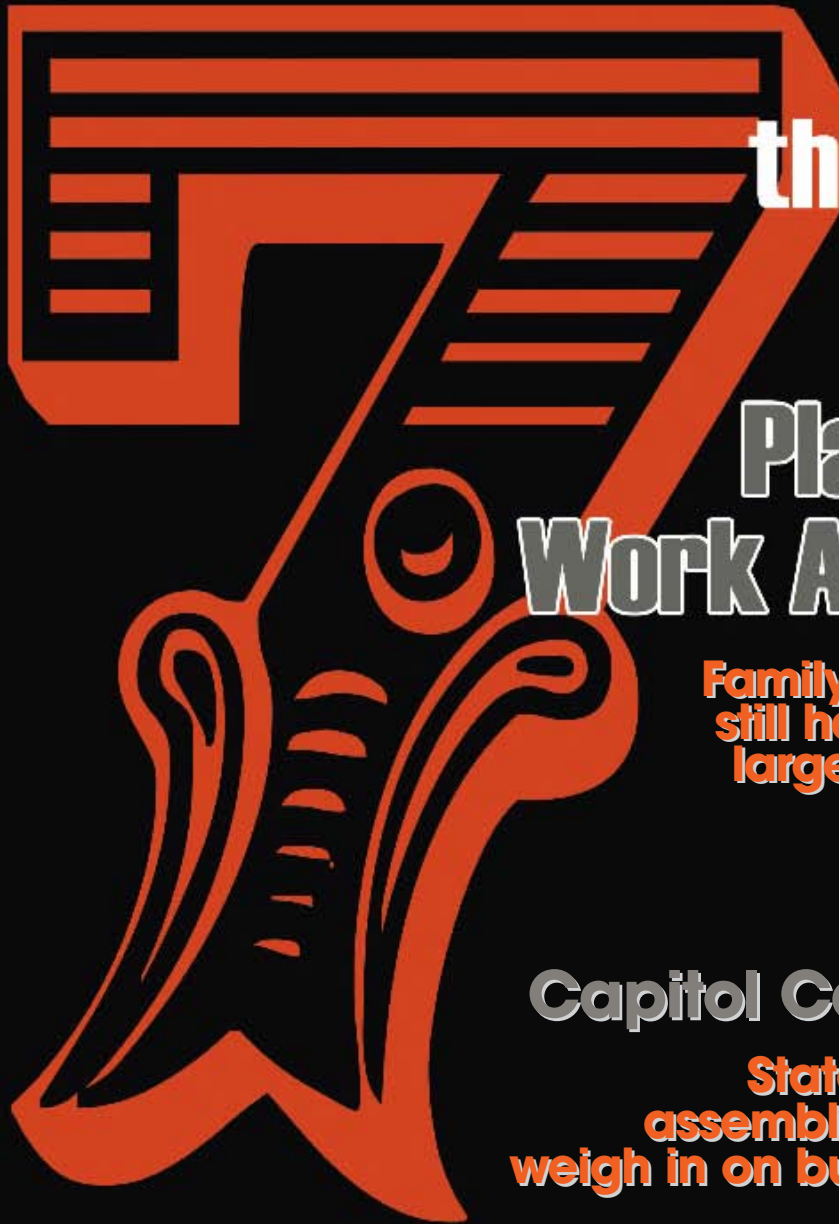


**new
North**



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BUSINESS COVERAGE FOR THE NEW NORTH



7th Annual

**Best
Places to
Work Awards**

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October 2008

10th Annual Best Places to Work

2008 honorees demonstrate
“family” doesn’t have to be
squeezed out of larger firms

STORY BY SEAN FITZGERALD



AS A SMALL, FIRST GENERATION family owned business grows in scope and scale across generations, who says that it needs to abandon its tight-knit family environment in favor of a myopic focus on the bottom line?

The tie that binds the three winners of the 2008 New North B2B Best Places to Work honors is the prevalent family atmosphere and unencumbered access to ownership that exists in mid- to large-size multi-generational firms. Among J. F. Ahern Co. of Fond du Lac, Miron Construction Co. Inc. of Menasha and Sadoff & Rudoy Industries of Fond du Lac, the latter has been around the shortest period of time – 61 years and three generations of ownership – while Miron has been operating for nine decades and J. F. Ahern has been around since President Rutherford B. Hayes oversaw the nation’s affairs from the White House in 1880.

All three employers remain family-owned, and even though each has added hundreds of employees in just the past few decades, each of our three 2008 award winners has managed to keep the family atmosphere central to its daily operations.

As with our past award winners, we’ve sat down with company leadership and with employees to learn what makes each firm a great place to work. We hope their unique workplace perks – particularly those bearing little to no expense – spark some ideas of how to make your business a workplace of choice.

J. F. Ahern Co.

J. F. Ahern Co. of Fond du Lac becomes only the second firm to win B2B's Best Places to Work Award on multiple occasions, following in the footsteps of 4imprint in Oshkosh, which has garnered the honor in three separate years.

When a previous winner submits a nomination in subsequent years, we evaluate not only the full scope of benefits, workplace amenities and environment the employer offers, but also what steps the company has made to improve upon the workplace climate since last receiving our award. Ahern met the challenge since winning the Best Places to Work honor in 2006, expanding upon an already impressive menu of opportunities for staff to improve themselves.

With the advent of a three-story, 55,000-sq. ft. addition to its corporate offices in 2007, the company was able to expand its workspaces for employees, increase the size of its on-site fitness area by more than three times its previous size, and improve the day lighting, openness and "greening" of its workspace.

Outside of its physical structure, the mechanical contractor recently launched its online Ahern Academy, an educational resource where the company's 1,000 employees can log in and receive training for a skill

directly related to their job, or for a skill that might allow them to expand their horizons in other areas. Training courses available through the Ahern Academy include opportunities to brush up on Microsoft Word or Excel skills, or improve business writing technique.

It's a unique complement to Ahern's already strong personal development program, which grants each employee up to \$200 a year for use toward classes on topics of interest to them such as cooking, golf, quilting or speed reading. A few employees have used this benefit toward their SCUBA certification, while another used it to learn to ride horseback.

"It's always been our philosophy to have our employees develop themselves outside of work as well as while they're at work," said Dan Haave, director of human resources at J. F. Ahern Co.

Ahern's newly expanded fitness facility is also open to spouses of employees and any children aged 12 to 18. Family members are encouraged to come in to use the nearly 2,000-sq. ft. facility day or night, Haave said, an amenity that recognizes an entire healthy family can help the employee remain on task and contribute toward keeping group health care costs low.

"We recognize that a large portion of the population that is getting unhealthy is the spouses and the children of the employees," Haave said.

Celebrating seven years of best practices in the workplace



2008

- Sadoff & Rudoy
- Miron Construction
- J. F. Ahern Co.



2007

- 4imprint
- Johnson Bank/Johnson Insurance



2006

- Building Service Inc.
- J. F. Ahern Co.



2005

- Marian College
- ImproMed Inc.
- Virchow Krause & Co.



2004

- 4imprint
- Agnesian Healthcare



2003

- FirstChoice Insurance
- Oshkosh Foundation
- Fond du Lac Area CVB



2002

- 4imprint
- Society Insurance
- RB Royal Industries

Ryan Van Thiel, manager of technical services at Ahern and a six-year employee of the company, classified it as a "top-class fitness facility," even though he admits to not using it as much as he should. Busy working toward his

MBA degree through the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh – of which Ahern contributes \$4,000 a year toward the cost of the tuition – Van Thiel said he's been pleased with his employer's effort to develop well-rounded staff.

"If someone takes the time to develop themselves, the company will recognize that and create (career) opportunities for employees," Van Thiel said.

J. F. Ahern pays about 85 percent of its employees' health insurance premiums, and

offers an additional \$300 wellness benefit to its employees located outside of Fond du Lac to use toward fitness club memberships or classes. The company's relatively young wellness program includes on-site annual flu vaccinations at no cost to the employee, and a no cost annual health risk assessment.

Believing its current employees are the best recruiting tool to identifying potential new employees, J. F. Ahern has long offered an employee referral program which provides incentives if a current staff member refers a job candidate. For those job seekers who are hired and become a good fit with the company after six months, both the new hire and the referring employee can earn as much as \$2,000 through the program. That was increased just a few months ago from a maximum of \$800. Haave said it still beats some of the exorbitant costs that can go into employee recruitment.

Lastly, Ahern extends about 40 percent of its annual profits back to employees in the form of its profit sharing program, 401(k) plan, and periodic bonuses. The company provides a 50 percent match on all employee contributions made to a 401(k) fund up to the first \$5,000 each year.

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