

Structural Engineering & DESIGN

2010 Best Structural Engineering Firms To Work For

By Jennifer Goupil, P.E



Forell/Elsesser Engineers, Inc., interns Jamie Pobre and Joanna Huey with Chuck Staley of Hunt Construction at the UC Berkeley Student Athlete High Performance Center.



Every year, Forell/Elsesser employees lace up their running shoes to participate in the JP Morgan Corporate Challenge in San Francisco to raise money for the YMCA of San Francisco. In 2008, the firm finished first in the co-ed division, and in 2009, senior engineer Lindsey Maclise finished first in the female division.



Navigating a rocky sea of industry-wide layoffs and pay cuts last year, the 2010 Best Structural Engineering Firms To Work For emerge triumphant from under the banner of professional development and employee benefits. These firms know that making the investment in their staff's growth and happiness will pay off tenfold after the storm. Structural Engineering & Design honors the firms that are rising to the occasion to offer employees just what they need to partner with management during these tough economic times.

The participants

Structural Engineering & Design created a top 10 ranking (see table) and awarded honorable mentions to four firms: Clark Western Design, Jaster-Quintanilla, Walter P Moore, and Reaveley Engineers + Associates. Spanning centuries, this year's applicant firms have been in business anywhere from seven to 117 years.

This year's firms report their average median tenure for management employees to be 12.5 years and 4.9 years for non-management employees. While 46 percent of participating firms reported an average annual growth between 1 percent and 19 percent during the last three years, 19 percent of firms reported a growth of 20 percent or more. Twenty-six percent of firms reported an average annual decline.

This cross-section of growth, or lack thereof, led 50 percent of firms to conduct layoffs and 42 percent of firms to freeze salaries in 2009. That being said, 84 percent of firms gave an average of 63 percent of their employees salary raises last year. Additionally, as many as 92 percent of firms distributed bonuses to their employees.

While significant, monetary compensation is just one way for management to show its appreciation for staff. Maintaining a variety of employee benefits and training programs also proved crucial to employee satisfaction and professional growth last year.

Almost 77 percent of firms offer a 401(k) program for all permanent employees and as many as 92 percent of this year's participants offer either partial- or full-tuition reimbursement for design/technical or business school classes. Sixty-nine percent of

Collaboration is the key to any successful project. In-house senior review meetings are important to Forrell/Elsesser Engineers' project delivery and are conducted regularly at major project milestones.

firms offer a company car or car allowance and 65 percent of firms offer flexible spending accounts for childcare expenses. One firm owns vacation cabins in four locations for employee use, while another offers discounted technology purchases.

All 26 applicant firms offer in-house training by firm employees as well as outside seminars, conferences, or technical skills classes in software, business skills, and/or site-safety education. In an effort to minimize training expenses, 22 percent of firms said they conducted more peer-to-peer training last year. However, staying true to staff needs, 22 percent said they actually increased their training budget in 2009 in an effort to increase staff knowledge during this slower work period.

Check out “Best Firms To Work For ranked by size” , where the top firms are broken out by firm size. Congratulations to Simpson Gumpertz & Heger, the No. 1 large firm; Degenkolb Engineers, the No. 1 mid-size firm; and Forell/Elsesser Engineers, Inc., the No. 1 small firm!

The process

The application period for the Best Structural Engineering Firms To Work For list began in January. Firms completed an online form known as the Corporate Survey and invited their staff to complete an Employee Survey. Firms were told to achieve a 20-percent minimum response rate for the anonymous survey. Next, the Corporate and Employee Surveys, which make up the two equally weighted components of the grading process, were evaluated and subsequently ranked the firms. Information about the top three firms was reviewed by a judging panel, who determined their final ranks. For a more detailed description of the application and grading process, go to www.bestfirmstoworkfor.com.



The 2010 Best Structural Engineering Firms To Work For

Honorable Mention (HM) Firms are in alphabetical order

| Rank | Firm | Number of Employees | Year established | Headquarters | Website |
|------|---|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|--|
| 1 | Forell/Elsesser Engineers, Inc. | 40 | 1960 | San Francisco | www.forell.com |
| | "We work in a truly collaborative environment in which virtually the entire company is willing to help out on any given topic and foster our continuous learning." | | | | |
| 2 | Barrish Pelham & Associates, Inc. | 14 | 1945 | Sacramento, Calif. | www.barrish.com |
| | "Our flexible working hours, tuition reimbursement program, and leadership mentoring allow our employees to grow not only personally, but professionally as well." | | | | |
| 3 | PCS Structural Solutions | 39 | 1965 | Tacoma, Wash. | www.pcs-structural.com |
| | "At PCS Structural Solutions, eight out of our 10 principals started at PCS, and our staff average tenure is 12 years — a proven 43-year history of providing service and making decisions our unique way." | | | | |
| 4 | Simpson Gumpertz & Heger | 392 | 1956 | Waltham, Mass. | www.sgh.com |
| | "Since first engaging in the Best Firms competition six years ago, we have gleaned lessons from staff surveys, benchmarked our practices against others, formed a Best Firms staff working group, and implemented improvements across the board." | | | | |
| 5 | Douglas Wood & Associates, Inc. | 15 | 1993 | Coral Gables, Fla. | www.douglaswood.biz |
| | "Without exception, our associates are proud of their abilities and proud of the results of their work." | | | | |
| 6 | KL&A, Inc. | 34 | 1994 | Golden, Colo. | www.klaa.com |
| | "People who work here feel not only like they've arrived somewhere great, but that they are headed somewhere better." | | | | |
| 7 | Bracken Engineering, Inc. | 14 | 1996 | Tampa, Fla. | www.brackenengineering.com |
| | "With a professional reputation that consistently exceeds client expectations, leadership that genuinely cares for employees, and employees willing to go above and beyond, we feel we belong among the Best Firms To Work For." | | | | |
| 8 | Degenkolb Engineers | 142 | 1940 | San Francisco | www.degenkolb.com |
| | "What makes us successful with our clients has also made us a truly great place to work: integrity, professionalism, and a focus on the needs of others." | | | | |
| 9 | BHB Consulting Engineers | 22 | 2002 | Salt Lake City | www.bhbengineers.com |
| | "The training programs at BHB are second to none and include weekly lunch seminars." | | | | |
| 10 | RW Armstrong | 567 | 1961 | Indianapolis | www.rwamstrong.com |
| | "We have been able to embrace and build upon the diversity we've created and extend the 'small company/family feeling' to all our offices...even those on the other side of the world." | | | | |
| HM | Clark Western Design | 23 | 2003 | West Chester, Ohio | www.clarkwestern.com |
| HM | Jaster-Quintanilla | 128 | 1984 | Austin, Texas | www.jqeng.com |
| HM | Reaveley Engineers | 42 | 1972 | Salt Lake City | www.reaveley.com |
| HM | Walter P Moore | 318 | 1931 | Houston | www.walterpmoore.com |

Best firms ranked by size

Firms on the top 10 list range in size from 14 to 567 employees. While these firms share the same fundamental business model, firms of different sizes can offer their staff unique qualities, and gain advantages and disadvantages, dependent on their size. Therefore, we break out up to three top firms in each firm-size category to give firms a standing among like-size firms. Congratulations to the following firms that earned a spot on these three lists:

TOP 3 SMALL FIRMS (<50 employees)

1. Forell/Elsesser Engineers, Inc.
2. Barrish Pelham & Associates, Inc.
3. PCS Structural Solutions

Superlative spotlight

The following superlatives celebrate the noteworthy individual successes of firms for specific achievements, independent of their overall ranking:

- ⌘ **Best Employee Survey Score**
Douglas Wood & Associates, Inc.
- ⌘ **Best Professional Development Program**
Forell/Elsesser Engineers, Inc.
- ⌘ **Best Collaborative Environment**
Forell/Elsesser Engineers, Inc.
- ⌘ **Best Employee Recognition Program**
Barrish Pelham & Associates, Inc.
- ⌘ **Best Recruiting & Retention Program**
PCS Structural Solutions

TOP MEDIUM FIRM (50-199 employees)

1. Degenkolb Engineers

TOP 2 LARGE FIRMS (≥200 employees)

1. Simpson Gumpertz & Heger
2. RW Armstrong

The Judges

Larry Gard, Ph.D.
Psychologist and
Senior Consultant
Gard Executive
Consulting, LLC
Chicago



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



Nancy Usrey,
FSMPS, CPSM
Principal Consultant
Partners Usrey
Rowlett, Texas

The Top Three

First Place — Fifty-year-old **Forell/Elsesser Engineers, Inc.** (www.forell.com), headquartered in San Francisco, is this year's Best Structural Engineering Firm To Work For, rising from fourth place in 2007. With 40 employees including nine owners, one of whom was added last year, Forell/Elsesser Engineers specializes in structural and seismic engineering, BIM, and risk studies for new and retrofitted construction in all market types.

Forell/Elsesser Engineers are challenged to look for out-of-the-box solutions to their project load, which often includes some of the most unique conditions and structural problems out there today.



Sacramento, Calif.-based, second-place Barrish Pelham & Associates, Inc., knows that happy employees result in happy clients.



BPA staff ranked in the Top 10 at the Sacramento Business Journal's A+Employer Awards 2009.



In 2009, PCS Structural Solutions' Tacoma office designed and moved into a new building. The space expresses the personality of the firm, and includes intriguing cantilevers, recycled framing, exposed structure throughout, and a nine-hole mini golf course!

“The employees are engaged in the firm’s success,” said Judge Nancy Usrey, principal consultant with Partners Usrey in Rowlett, Texas. “They show a willingness to pitch in, learn, educate, and help the firm achieve a higher level of expertise ... It is obvious that everyone wants to be there and enjoys working with their team.”

Forell/Elsesser Engineers made a number of improvements to their benefits and training programs in 2009 including: adding a health savings account and a high-deductible healthcare plan, 401(k) enhancements, changes to the performance review, compensation programs, and instating F/E University program meetings, which include in-house weekly lunchtime technical education programming.

“Collaboration, friendliness, and respectfulness underlie their culture,” said Judge Gerri King, Ph.D., president, social psychologist, and organizational consultant at Human Dynamics Associates, Inc. (www.gerriking.com) in Concord, N.H. “It is the way to achieve results that satisfy clients, while ensuring employee retention.”

Additionally, Forell/Elsesser Engineers led the implementation of the Integrated Skills Development Program this year, which gives architecture, construction management, and structural engineering students a chance to participate in a rotating internship with three different engineering firms.

“[Forell/Elsesser Engineers] is growing the next generation of engineering professionals through their Integrated Skill Development program, which offers interns a unique and rich interdisciplinary training experience,” said Judge Larry Gard, Ph.D., consulting psychologist and founder of Gard Executive Consulting, LLC (www.gardexec.com) in Chicago. “Comments from staff are particularly enthusiastic regarding the firm’s truly collaborative atmosphere, thoughtful selection of employees who are a good fit, ample opportunities for advancement, and genuinely caring management.”

Second Place — Maintaining its second-place ranking from last year, **Barrish Pelham & Associates, Inc.** (BPA, www.barrish.com) was established in 1945. With 14 employees, including three owners, BPA’s project experience resides in new construction, modernization, and seismic retrofit projects, with a specialty in public school facilities.

With summertime BBQs, dart tournaments at the lunch hour, annual triathlons, and company holiday events, BPA has championed the “work-life-can-be-fun” management approach.

“The firm seems to have adopted the most modern approach to the workplace environment: ‘employees first’ rather than the usual ‘customer first.’ They appear to understand that happy employees result in happy clients,” King said.

BPA has achieved this by “focusing on preserving offerings and benefits from the glory days of 2000 through 2008,” said firm President Steven Pelham. “Our efforts in both areas have been well received and appreciated by the staff. In spite of firm-wide salary reductions, we had no voluntary staff turnover in 2009.”

It is policies and management practices like these that have bred genuine loyalty among BPA’s staff. “To [BPA’s] credit, the firm reviews salaries several times per year, is very generous with vacation time, and according to their employees, they are extremely fair and consistent with regard to policies and decisions,” Gard said.

Additional BPA benefits include flexible working hours, a tuition reimbursement program, and leadership mentoring.

“Barrish Pelham offers a remarkable amount of time off (median paid time off is 24-39 days), no medical deductible, and significant investment in employee training,” Usrey said. “Balancing the needs of the employees and the needs of clients generates an impressive feeling of loyalty to the firm on the part of the staff.”

Third Place — Up from fourth in 2009, but no stranger to the top three, **PCS Structural Solutions** (www.pcs-structural.com), is headquartered in Tacoma, Wash., and operates another office in Seattle. The 55-year-old firm employs 39 professionals, including 10 owners, and focuses its business on K-12 education, healthcare, institutional, commercial, and residential markets, as well as historic building

preservation, mid-high rise, and seismic studies.

“PCS offers many opportunities for individual growth while also challenging employees to help the firm succeed and improve the quality of their work experience,” Usrey said. “Individual Operating Plans for employees, supervisory training by an outside consultant, and work sharing between offices help employees expand their potential.”

Developed by each employee, from administrative positions to the CEO, PCS’s Individual Operating Plans (IPOs) include two or more annual personal goals, which are tied directly to the firm’s strategic initiatives. Reviewed periodically throughout the year, the IPOs afford PCS staff members a greater sense of ownership and participation in the firm’s vision and growth.

New this year was PCS University, which includes live, recorded, and webinar instruction on engineering, marketing, BIM, and general business principals in the form of both bachelor- and graduate-level courses. For those employees who missed a class, PCS’s intranet provides access to recordings, serving as an extra resource for current and future staff members.

PCS moved into its new LEED Platinum headquarters this year, which includes a cantilevered or floating conference room and a 20-foot-tall auditorium with two 10-foot-tall BIM screens, designed to aid staff in project work and maintain a healthy environment throughout.

The result? PCS reports an average tenure of 12 years. “For 10 years, they have prioritized a ‘people-oriented management structure’ over a ‘client-oriented management structure’; they were ahead of their time,” King said. “They are very clear about their mission and vision: Refocus, Connect, Excel, and Celebrate. Not only are those worthy strategic goals, they are actually understandable and memorable.”

Conclusion

The 2010 Best Structural Engineering Firms To Work For weather today’s economic forecasts by providing both professional and personal staff development while maintaining a commitment to employee benefits. We wish the top three and all the participating firms good luck in the coming year! Special thanks to the four judges who made this year’s ranking a true success.

Mark your calendar!

If your firm didn’t apply this year, if you didn’t make the list, or even if you are a ranked firm, you are encouraged to apply next year. To be sure you don’t miss out on the 2011 application information, sign up today for our Contact List at www.bestfirmstoworkfor.com/2011. We’ll notify you directly via e-mail when the 2011 applications are posted online. 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 see you on the list in 2011!

For more information visit, www.bestfirmstoworkfor.com.