

# BEST PLACES

See why 35 workplaces scored high marks in the 2018 survey.

● AkitaBox: Medium, 51-100 employees



KAIA CALHOUN

# TO WORK

By Maija Inveiss and Lawrence Andrea

# W

## When it comes to creating engaging, productive work environments, 35 Madison-area companies in this year's Best Places to Work survey rise to the top.

In fact, Madison Magazine's annual survey, conducted by Omaha, Nebraska-based Quantum Workplace, found that the top-ranked Madison companies scored highest in the category of trust in leadership.

Cassie Neary, who has managed Quantum's Best Places to Work program for the past 10 years, says this demonstrates that employees at these Madison companies believe their leaders are not only trustworthy but they also care about their employees and are moving their businesses in the right direction.

Zach Blumenfeld, the founder of CultureCon, a workplace culture conference that took place in Madison in June, agrees. He says trust is "one of the most vital aspects to any relationship in any organization," adding that it promotes a positive work culture, which, in turn, promotes success.

"Leadership really needs to set the example when it comes to culture," Blumenfeld says. "If there isn't that trust and transparency, you're really not going to have a successful culture."

Neary says personal engagement has increased in Madison since last year's survey, but it remains the lowest scoring category for Madison companies. This indicates employees are having trouble finding career development opportunities at their companies, she says.

The growth is likely due to attentive company leaders, Neary says, adding: "Employers were most likely working throughout the last year to make improvements."

In addition to reporting high levels of trust in leadership, the region made its biggest improvements in team dynamics.

"The only way to achieve sustained success is with an engaged, dedicated team," says Chuck Hulan, CEO of **The Douglas Stewart Co.**, which ranked fourth among large companies in 2018. "With input from the staff, management sets the goals and priorities for the year, and the company works toward those goals as a unified team."

Jason Potter, the founder and CEO of **Farwell Project Advisors**, which ranked 15th among small companies in this year's survey, has a similar view. He says, "Transparency and humility are keys to our trust building. Any employee can meet with any leader or senior team member and they will get direct, honest conversations with no drama."

For Blumenfeld, this bodes well for the future of Madison businesses.

"There are a lot of good things happening in Madison," he says. "I'm just excited to see [the city] continue to grow."

Out of 125 nominated businesses, 35 businesses are spotlighted in the categories of large, medium and small as best places to work in the Madison area. — **LA**

## FINALISTS AT A GLANCE

### SMALL

#### (1-50 Employees)

1. Aerotek
2. Madison No Fear Dentistry
3. The Digital Ring
4. goVirtualOffice LLC
5. Waterstone Mortgage Corp.
6. Talavant Inc.
7. Frazer Consultants LLC
8. Artisan Dental LLC
9. Cress Funeral & Cremation Service
10. National CooperativeRx
11. Bendyworks
12. Mennenga Tax & Financial Service
13. CenterX
14. Powderkeg Web Design
15. Farwell Project Advisors

### MEDIUM

#### (51-100 Employees)

1. AkitaBox
2. Singlewire Software LLC
3. Oregon Community Bank and Waunakee Community Bank
4. Iconica
5. Hiebing
6. Heartland Hospice
7. Steve Brown Apartments
8. Core BTS Inc.
9. WEA Member Benefits
10. CI Pediatric Therapy Centers

### LARGE

#### (101+ Employees)

1. Fairway Independent Mortgage Corp.
2. Zendesk
3. Widen Enterprises Inc.
4. The Douglas Stewart Co.
5. Promega Corp.
6. M3 Insurance
7. Nordic Consulting Partners
8. EatStreet
9. Agrace Hospice & Palliative Care
10. Baker Tilly Virchow Krause LLP

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### TOP-RANKED SMALL: 1-50 EMPLOYEES

## Managing Dreams

**Aerotek integrates employees' future goals into the work environment.**

As you enter **Aerotek's** office and look to the left, there is a space covered with pictures of employees with parents, significant others, children and dogs, and there's even a Buzz Lightyear meme that says, "Dad Jokes, Dad Jokes Everywhere."

At Aerotek, a recruiting and staffing agency with locations across the U.S., people know what motivates their fellow co-workers because of the "Why Wall," Bill Holland, director of operations, says.

The Why Wall is part of Aerotek's dream managers concept, which was created to help connect what the company does every day to individual employees' goals in the future. Holland says each employee is a dream manager and is tasked with helping co-workers reach their goals through working at Aerotek. Dream managers interact with employees daily, but once a week they meet to support them in achieving their dreams.

"I think once someone knows about how much you care about them as a human being, as a person, they'll run through walls for your company, for you as a manager, for you as a team because they enjoy it and they know you care," Holland says.

For Eric Saari, a practice lead who has worked for Aerotek for 11 years, the Why Wall keeps him motivated through good times and bad. His picture, the Buzz Lightyear meme, represents his biggest goal in life — becoming a dad.

"I'm not there yet, but [I'm working] to provide for a family," Saari says. "Having the opportunity to do that with a great company like Aerotek is what pushes me every day."

Elli Boschuetz, an account manager who has been with the company for five years, says the Why Wall lets others see another side of you, not just the work side. She says people shouldn't have to be someone different inside and outside of work — they should be able to be their full self at all times. Through the Why Wall, Aerotek breaks down that barrier.

"Knowing that stuff about someone, it means the world because that is their world," Boschuetz says. — **MI**



Aerotek's "Why Wall"



## TOP-RANKED MEDIUM: 51-100 EMPLOYEES

## Fostering Growth

**In three years as a business, AkitaBox grows quickly, adding new members to the team.**

In one year, **AkitaBox** has grown from about 30 employees to 80.

“We are moving so quickly and with such passion as a company that the second that you get in the front door, you’re ready to impact change and bring solid results to the company,” says Elle Jacobson, the marketing manager.

The Madison-based company, which launched in 2015, creates a software program to help facility operations and planning managers organize building information.

For Scott Tillema, the director of engineering, the workplace culture attracted him to AkitaBox. Tillema says when it comes to hiring, the company strives to find people who not only possess technical skills, but also fit into the culture and have good personality traits.

AkitaBox CEO Todd Hoffmaster says investing in employees and being transparent in the process allows the company to grow.

“We try to foster a culture of continuous improvement, continuous learning, of helping each other be as successful as we possibly can,” Hoffmaster says.

As a way to help employees get to know each other, Human Resources Whizbang Clara Buenzow says the company operates in a three-part culture funnel: knowing, connecting and believing or trusting each other.

Since co-workers care about each other, says customer success manager Allison Mortens, AkitaBox provides a professional workplace and a great personal support system.

“It makes it a lot more enjoyable to come to work every day and to put in some extra time as necessary when you really love the people you work with,” Mortens says.

—MI



KAIA CALHOUN

AkitaBox



Fairway's American Warrior Initiative provides service dogs to veterans through grants.

## TOP-RANKED LARGE: 101+ EMPLOYEES

## Putting Employees First

**Community programs help veterans and others with hardships.**

When **Fairway Independent Mortgage Corp.** moved into its new building in Madison last year, the company’s leadership wanted to make sure the space was large enough to accommodate not only employees but also their families.

Despite being a national mortgage lender — with headquarters in Madison, two corporate buildings in Texas and more than 500 branches across the country — the company promotes a unified work environment through interactive activities at its headquarters, says Julie Fry, executive vice president of human resources.

A wellness center, workout and meditation rooms, an outside patio and an on-site pub provide open spaces where employees can build relationships outside of the breakroom.

“We are a large company,” says Fry, “and in order to keep the family feel, we extend our activities to our employees’ families as well.”

Aside from social gatherings and spaces, Fairway offers employees opportunities to develop both personally and professionally.

The American Warrior Initiative brings awareness to the challenges facing active and former military members. Paula Wilcox, non-profit accounting manager, says in 2016 and 2017 AWI provided more than \$850,000 in grants, which funded service dogs, home upgrades, financial assistance and more.

As of August, the company has issued 537 individualized care packages through Fairway Cares, a nonprofit initiative launched in 2016 that helps support employees, family members and community members with terminal illnesses or other hardships. The company has also provided \$335,000 in financial assistance as of early September.

Mai Xiong, an administrative assistant who has been with Fairway for six years, saw how these programs can also benefit employees when she received a Fairway care package last year.

These efforts, along with the relaxed and social atmosphere, promote a sense of family and make work feel like home, she says.

“[At other companies], some people dread coming into work on a daily basis, but I actually don’t. I look forward to coming in every morning,” Xiong says. —LA

FAIRWAY INDEPENDENT MORTGAGE CORP./ AMERICAN WARRIOR INITIATIVE



1

## Fun for All

**CI Pediatric Therapy Centers**

“Our clinics offer innovative gathering spaces for all who come through our doors. We have therapy gym spaces where you might find a young child zip-lining through the room in the morning and a collaborative staff meeting in the afternoon. While the ball pits, trampolines and jungle gyms are primarily used in a therapeutic way with clients, it is certainly not uncommon for our employees to get good use out of this fun equipment for a quick brain break in their workday.” —Becky Lotto, director of clinics

## Innovative Gathering Spaces

**To create a positive work environment, companies offer creative places for employees to exercise, relax or hang out with co-workers.**

2

## Break a Sweat

**Promega Corp.**

“Invigorating spaces come both in the components of the space and the variety of space offerings. Key components of workspaces include abundant light (natural light whenever possible), a variety of art and comfortable, warm furniture. The variety of spaces gives employees the opportunity to work in a creative ‘third space,’ exercise, meditate or grab a bite to eat.” —Gayle Paul, director of human resources operations



PROMEGA CORP.; CI PEDIATRIC THERAPY CENTERS; HIEBING



3

## Customizable Environments

**Hiebing**

“In the latest remodel of our beautiful historic church, we created nearly a dozen unique spaces in and around the building, so we all can find inspiration in a variety of settings. Those who need a more private environment can find solace in the glass booths above the main level. If collaboration is key, there are tables in the terrace, couches along our aisles and even options for sitting outside if folks need fresh air to fuel their ideas.” —Dave Florin, president



# Innovative Gathering Spaces



THE DIGITAL RING

## 5

### Collaborative Layout

#### The Digital Ring

"The Digital Ring has made a lot of focused efforts in ensuring both our workspace and our workdays are fun and innovative. Besides our cubicles from Google, standing desks, foosball table, couches, collaborative layout and beer in the fridge, we've gotten pretty creative [coming up with] perks for the team." —Matthew Kemp, partner

## 4

### Top-Notch Perks

#### EatStreet

"We have kombucha, cold-brew coffee and Spotted Cow always on tap, an espresso machine and a fully stocked soda fridge. We also have a state-of-the-art pingpong table, shuffleboard, foosball, Nintendo 64 and multiple lounge areas and common spaces for co-working, socializing and games. Our office décor is an industrial, open-concept space with bright bursts of color and plenty of common areas to change up your routine and work in a different location to get those creative juices flowing." —Matt Howard, co-founder and CEO



EAT STREET



## Creating Positive Work Environments

Executives share how to make businesses great places to work.



Nordic Consulting Partners

BARRY SHERBECK

## COMMUNICATIONS AND RESOURCES

#### goVirtualOffice LLC

"We want our team members to take their careers seriously, deliver high-quality work and provide great customer service (both to external and internal customers) but also to enjoy coming to work. I believe it all starts with communication — early and often."

— Dirk Shimpach, CPA

#### Singlewire Software LLC

"[We] hire talented people and let them demonstrate their talents working for our clients. [Our managers] give them the tools they desire, facilitate strong communication and show them how their efforts help achieve Singlewire's goals."

— Brett Rimkus, CFO

#### Waterstone Mortgage Corp.

"We have a culture built on supporting each other, doing what's right above all else and having fun! We build trust through transparency, clear expectations, high standards and regular open communication."

— Ryan Smith, branch manager and loan originator

#### Nordic Consulting Partners

"To empower each of our owners, we share information openly and honestly, even when it's difficult. This builds trust and allows our team members to contribute their best and brightest ideas to help us further serve our clients and team members."

— Vicki Ryan, vice president of human resources

## INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

#### Frazer Consultants LLC

"Our workplace culture is unlike any other. We make sure that our employees feel right at home here in the office with music, natural light, snacks, drinks and co-workers who are more like family than colleagues. But we also work to improve our employees' skills through professional growth opportunities like conferences and classes, and a welcoming, collaborative environment where nobody is afraid to ask questions."

— Vance Vlasak, sales consultant

"Having that kind of respect and friendships with each other has resulted in an almost nonexistent turnover rate with our team members." — Dylan Thompson, Powderkeg Web Design

#### Powderkeg Web Design

"Our workplace culture is built on complete trust of each other's talents. This leads to amazing collaboration and ultimately a special end product for our clients. Outside of that, true friendships have been formed here. Most team members hang out socially outside of work numerous times throughout the month. Having that kind of respect and friendships with each other has resulted in an almost nonexistent turnover rate with our team members."

— Dylan Thompson, director

#### Cress Funeral & Cremation Service

"When people find a healthy challenge, while also feeling valued and understood, they tend to stay connected. Cress staff members believe that pausing to gather and remember the life of a loved one has the ability to facilitate healing and to change people's lives."

— Carey Cress-Fose, vice president

#### National CooperativeRx

"National CooperativeRx has a culture that emphasizes personal health and professional

growth. Each employee has their own office with a standing desk, the ability to work from home and the support to attend relevant educational courses in their field."

— Jen Dickman, communications manager

#### WEA Member Benefits

"We designed our office to provide employees a mix of private, semiprivate and open-environment options depending on their needs. Employees frequently fire up the grill and enjoy our private outdoor patio."

— Pranav Shah, general counsel

#### CenterX

"Actions speak louder than words. Every day, our managers demonstrate their empathy with their actions. We have no full-time managers. Managers share in the daily hard work answering customer phone calls, carrying the on-call pager, fixing a flakey PC, emptying a dishwasher. Speaking words of empathy shows co-workers that they are appreciated; acting out empathy builds strong, reciprocal trust."

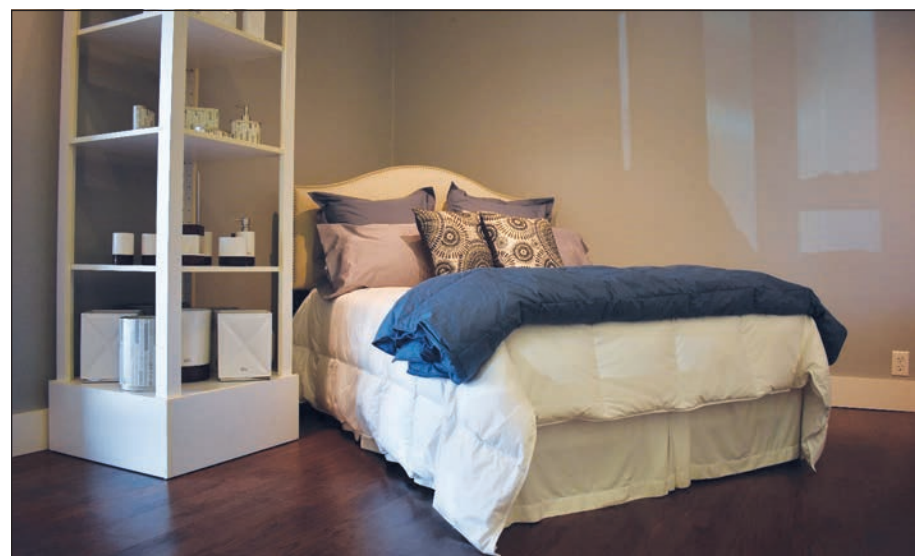
— Joe Reinardy, president



Powderkeg Web Design

POWDERKEG WEB DESIGN





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Artisan Dental LLC

## MANAGER EFFECTIVENESS

### Artisan Dental LLC

"When the leadership team consistently acts in a way that is in alignment with our mission and values, our team members sense authenticity and integrity, which lays the foundation for trust to flourish."

— **Scott Andersen**, director of stakeholder stewardship

### M3 Insurance

"We try to lead from the middle and not from the top as much as possible. People want to feel like they belong and that they are genuinely appreciated for their good work."

— **Mike Victorson**, president and CEO

### Widen Enterprises Inc.

"Building trust across teams and reporting relationships is done most effectively through openness. Openness is important for business because it helps people make more informed decisions in the moment."

— **Matthew Gonnering**, CEO

### Baker Tilly Virchow Krause LLP

"Managers often end up serving as a mentor to the employee — they offer advice, provide timely feedback and are truly invested in helping [employees] to grow within Baker Tilly. This relationship is vital for businesses... great mentors often play a large part in someone's desire to stay and grow within a company."

— **Linda Peterson**, director of human resources, Midwest

### Mennenga Tax & Financial Service

"[We] encourage employees to use their gifts and talents. If they are doing what they like to do, they will give exceptional client service."

— **Betty Mennenga**, co-owner

TARA KUHLOW PHOTOGRAPHY

## PERSONAL ENGAGEMENT

### Agrace Hospice & Palliative Care

"Agrace's culture is a culture of engagement that's built around listening to employees' needs, collaborating with them to build solutions and putting those solutions into action. By consistently applying that problem-solving algorithm, we create an environment where employees speak their minds, expect to be heard and real change happens."

— **Lynne Sexten**, president and CEO

### Steve Brown Apartments

"We enjoy celebrating each other's successes, we promote and support each other's unique contributions and talents, we embrace learning moments and change and we provide opportunities to grow personally and professionally."

— **Margaret Watson**, CEO

### Core BTS Inc.

"We celebrate and respect the diversity of backgrounds of our employees, their personal and professional experience and the wide variety of roles each contribute to our company."

— **John Samz**, regional vice president of sales

### Zendesk

"Businesses change and evolve as they mature and grow and the spirit of your culture should support not hinder that evolution. The culture should help you adapt and become a stronger organization. Senior leadership support is also critical!"

— **Jess Hannes**, senior director, product support

STEVE BROWN APARTMENTS



Steve Brown Apartments

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**“I am surrounded by talented individuals who care for others, who care about our clients and who care about the quality of the work they perform.” — Jim Pientka, Iconica**



## TEAM DYNAMICS

### Bendyworks

“We foster an environment of encouragement and collective learning. Our team wants to do its best, and we help each other do exactly that. Without that trust, a team won’t raise issues that need addressing, thereby decreasing job satisfaction and retention.”

— **Brad Grzesiak, CEO**

### Talavant Inc.

“We are convinced that we have been able to remain successful as a newer organization and experience very little turnover because we have 100 percent trust in our employees.”

— **Molly Gallmeier, vice president of business development**

### Iconica

“I am surrounded by talented individuals who care for others, who care about our clients and who care about the quality of the work they perform.”

— **Jim Pientka, president and CEO**

### Madison No Fear Dentistry

“We have a daily mission that involves earning trust between us, team members and the patients. We are supportive of timely conflict resolution between team members. This lightens the feel around the office.”

— **David Ducommun, president**

### Heartland Hospice

“Our mission is to enrich life. This not only means the patients, families and customers we serve, but each other ... I believe that when the team knows they are working for an organization that puts patients first, they find great value in their work.”

— **Ryan Klaustermeier, administrator**

### Oregon Community Bank and Waunakee Community Bank

“Trust in leadership is a key component to employee engagement. Do the right thing — we see this as ‘Feel Good Banking.’”

— **Steve Peotter, president and CEO**

**Maija Inveiss** is digital content editor and **Lawrence Andrea** was a summer intern at Madison Magazine.

ICONICA

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