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Family members of newly promoted partners were invited to the 2007 annual conference at the Ford Community & Performing Arts Center in Dearborn, Mich.

# The Golden Rule Works For Plante & Moran

Award-winning accounting firm promotes “We Care” culture and rewards to create loyal employees, low turnover

BY JENNY CROMIE

Every year, busloads of Plante & Moran employees converge on the soil of Dearborn, Mich., the night before the firm’s day-long annual conference—an event that takes more than six months to plan and a big production company to pull off. And for one day out of each year, the nation’s 12th-largest certified public accounting and management consulting firm sacrifices a day’s worth of billable hours at all 16 locations, and pays for bus trips, gas, hotel stays, food and entertainment so that more than 1,600 employees can join in the celebration.

It may seem like an astronomical tab for the Southfield, Mich.-based firm, but organizers say it’s a small price to pay for all the employees who have helped land the company on *Fortune* magazine’s 100 Best Companies to

Work For list for 10 years in a row. The conference, held in recent years at the Ford Community & Performing Arts Center in Dearborn, is truly a celebration of company culture, spirit and achievement. The daylong event helps reinforce the company’s culture, spirit and team-building atmosphere, and it also helps re-recruit employees, says Teresa McAlpine, director of communications. “It’s basically a way to refill everyone’s engine with the spirit of the firm.”

Every year, about nine to 15 newly promoted partners take center stage, give Academy Award-style acceptance speeches, and are recognized by managers, fellow employees and family members for their achievement. Employees also receive awards, including the firm’s highest honor—a Morrison Award, named after a former

## PROFILE

### Plante & Moran

**Industry:** Accounting

**Challenge:** To create a positive, supportive company culture that keeps employees happy, the firm’s turnover rate lower than the industry average, and the company at the top of *Fortune* magazine’s 100 Best Companies to Work For list.

**Solution:** A companywide annual conference and other outings, golden rulers to remind employees of the company’s code of conduct, annual employee awards and incentives, and programs that support the “We Care” credo at the firm.

**ROI:** A 12 to 14 percent annual turnover rate, compared to the industry average of 25 to 35 percent. Revenue that has tripled and a staff size that has nearly doubled in the past decade.

partner who embodied the company's spirit, principles and values. Each conference has a theme, and throughout the day, there are lighthearted skits, filmed "commercials" showing interviews with employees at some of the firm's remote locations, and other hijinks that help create a festive atmosphere. And at the conclusion of the day, everyone enjoys drinks and hors d'oeuvres at a post-conference reception.

But the annual conference is only one example of the many things that Plante & Moran does to create a work environment where employees tend to stay once they hire in to the firm. Clearly, something is working. In the past 10 years, the company has tripled its revenue and nearly doubled its staff size. And in an industry where annual turnover typically is 25 to 35 percent a year, Plante & Moran's is 12 to 14 percent, says Dan Essad, human resources senior manager. Public accounting is a field known for long hours and a career track that can take about 12 to 14 years to make partner, considered the highest title in a firm. "It's a very demanding profession, and if you're not creating an environment where people are being mentored and coached, and being cared for and feeling respected, it's easy for someone to say, 'This industry is too tough' or 'I'm just not cut out for it,' and people can fall off the wagon."

To combat the profession's high turnover rate, Plante & Moran uses a variety of tangible and intangible incentives—all driven by the firm's core value, "We Care," and a code of conduct that touts the Golden Rule as the foundation of all workplace and client interactions. New hires receive six-inch golden rulers with "We Care" embossed in the upper left-hand corner. "The golden ruler really represents 'Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you.' It's all about respect, it's all about caring," Essad says. And while the firm doesn't intrude on people's personal lives, it mobilizes quickly if needed. Earlier this year when a Toledo staff member was killed in a car accident, employees in the Michigan, Ohio and Illinois offices raised and donated thousands of dollars that went into a trust fund for the man's two children. "If you can be part of

an organization that truly cares about you, that's a lot of incentive to stay—especially if you've had a dose of it," Essad says. And even if employees haven't experienced it firsthand, watching how the firm takes care of others helps foster company loyalty. Plante & Moran is a big company, but many say it still has the feel of a small family firm because of the way it takes care of its employees.

The company also keeps turnover low by pairing new hires with a team partner who acts as a supervisor, mentor and career coach for the duration of the employee's career. New employees also are paired with buddies, who act as more informal mentors, but generally are closer in experience level than team partners. The mentoring



the firm for the past decade. Lamb recently returned to work after six months of maternity leave—three months longer than what is typically provided at U.S. companies. "That meant the world to me to have that extra time with my son," she says. Since returning, Lamb now works from home on Wednesdays, a schedule that allows her to balance work and her new role as a mother.

Plante & Moran has cracked the



Above: Firm partners and associates look forward to the annual golf outing at Fox Hills Golf & Banquet Center in Plymouth, Mich.

Left: Employees participated in a skit modeled after the television show *Deal or No Deal* during the firm's 2007 annual conference

work/life balance code with a number of family-friendly benefits and incentives. There's an employee-driven committee called PTA, short for Personal Tightrope Action Committee, that champions programs and perks to help employees achieve balance between their personal and professional lives. During the hectic tax season, there's on-site day care on Saturdays.

Recruiting for Plante & Moran is easy, Lamb says. The Golden Rule isn't just something that the firm talks about on its Web site, "it's actually something you see people practicing every day . . . I really don't think there's anyplace else I could recruit for because I do feel so passionately about the firm." ■  
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program helps employees in many ways, and allows them to openly discuss their career options, Essad says. And in many cases, mentors have successfully encouraged employees to explore and work in other areas instead of leaving the firm.

Carol Lamb, the firm's recruiting manager, was one of those people. She started as an intern in the audit department, but after becoming an associate, Lamb decided she wanted to explore other options. Her team partner allowed her to take a three-month break from the auditing department to allow her to work in campus recruiting. That experience, along with several others, has kept her at