

INGRAM'S
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Best Companies to Work For

SMALL COMPANIES: WINNERS

McDOWELL, RICE, SMITH & BUCHANAN

“It’s performance that counts.” That kind of cut-to-the-chase incisiveness has defined the legal career of lawyer Pete Smith—and the success of the law firm where he’s chairman, McDowell, Rice, Smith & Buchanan. “The reason we are here is to provide our clients with the best experience possible,” says office administrator Sherry Newsom, in a spot-on channeling of her straight-shooting boss. “We are not as concerned about rules and policies, and restrictions and governance. Hard work and winning results are rewarded.”

To forge an effective, efficient operation, McDowell Rice leaves office matters in the hands of experienced administrative professionals, freeing the partner attorneys to focus on client matters. Workloads, areas of practice, and practice styles of attorneys are matched with legal assistants, creating an efficient, balanced workflow, and delivering higher levels of service at the best possible rates.

All of that pays the bills for the employee benefits essential to attracting and retaining talented attorneys at the Plaza-based firm, which has 80 employees overall. First, it pays the lion’s share of employee health-insurance costs, and in an impressive display of negotiating acumen, has hammered out reductions in health-care costs for this year and next. The firm pays 100 percent of employee life insurance, offers dental and short-term disability insurance, a cafeteria plan and participation in a 401(k) profit-sharing plan in which employees are 100 percent vested after only one year, with discretionary contributions from the firm of up to 3 percent of base compensation.

Discretionary cash gifts are awarded in December based on longevity, and unused vacation/sick/personal time is rolled over—with no cap. Additional benefits include floating holidays, Wednesday breakfasts, in-house training and lunch-and-learn sessions, paid professional membership dues, and, on occasion, spontaneous ice cream socials and pizza lunches, complementing the Starbuck’s Pike Place coffee served all day long.

The work environment, Newsom says, is professional, but flexible and personable. To accommodate personal and family needs, the flexible work schedules range from 7 a.m. starts to 6 p.m. wrap-up, employees are cross-trained for personal and professional growth and to assist with unpredictable work demands, and the internal support includes two IT directors, state-of-the-art equipment and software, an in-house trainer and a dedicated printer at each desk.