

Grandville, Michigan

Berends Hendricks Stuit

Tom Stuit is surprised. He's surprised that his employees could keep the nomination of his agency, Berends Hendricks Stuit, a secret from him, and that 35 of the 110 employees took the time to rate the agency. Those employees helped the agency garner the award for Best Agency to Work For in the Midwest.

He says about his team: "It's an affirmation of what we've tried to create here, and that's an organization built around a bunch of good people. We're all stakeholders." To Stuit, partner at the agency, it's all about having a great team and great people. The reasons the Berends Hendricks Stuit team is so strong — the hiring process and the focus on the people who work there.

As hiring processes go, the Michigan-based agency has one of the more exacting methods. First there are the series of interviews with the candidate. Then the candidate is tested. Using a testing service that the company has built a 20-plus year relationship with, the agency screens the candidate to make sure the job fits the person.

"In addition to our responses and thoughts from the interview process, do they have the skills necessary for the particular job? If you have a technical person who's sitting in a position that requires a lot of customer contact, that may not be the right position. You need the right balance of detail orientation, energy, empathy, and communications skills."

"We all have different gifts," says Stuit. Once the candidate is matched to the right job, the agency commits. "Once we make that commitment, we're pretty strong about keeping it."

As a result, the agency sees little employee turnover. Part of that could be the agency's process of giving two reviews per year to every employee. Every April and October, the staff sit down with management and have conversations about the company, the financial successes, and the employees' per-

formance. "It's a chance to share where the agency is, to share our financial successes, to talk about educational opportunities, and we do look at where their book is in relationship to others," says Stuit. He says the goal is to get employees to where they're "comfortably challenged" by their workload. Compensation is based on the amount of work each person can handle. "We have some who can handle a large book and some who can handle a medium book. That's okay. As long as they do it well. We don't want to push people beyond their capacity."

Why two reviews annually instead of one? "Because our people are our most valuable asset," says Stuit matter-of-factly. "It's all about the people. If you have good people, it happens. That's the skill the owners bring to the table — hiring the right people. To take 15 minutes to half an hour with every employee twice a year, what's the big deal? They're working for us eight hours a day, five days a week."

That's important to the independent agency, which has annual revenue of \$15.5 million. The growth has been consistent since the agency's genesis, and Stuit says it's due to the people who commit to doing their best to make it grow.

The company began in 1939 as a family agency run by two families.

When Stuit joined 34 years ago, he was one of five employees. In 1985, the merger with Hendricks Mayer and Berends Stuit created the agency's current structure, which is one of the largest independent agencies in the west Michigan area.

Since 1985, there were a few smaller acquisitions, but the majority of the company's growth has been organic. The heyday of growth came in the late 90s and early 2000s. It's slowed recently, but the agency is still on an upward trend. "We've grown every year we've been in existence," says Stuit. "We've always increased our revenue."

Part of that success is because the company focuses on what Stuit calls its bread-and-butter core business, which is insurance.

"We don't go off on tangents," Stuit says. "We won't do other things, and we're careful about what we consider."

Currently, the company is looking at a perpetuation plan. All three primary shareholders are in their early 50s, with Stuit being 60 years old. Throughout the process, Stuit says the staff knows that the goal is for them to remain independent. "We have a lot of people invested in our organization," he says.

That focus on the team is apparent in what the company offers employees. There is a generous retirement plan, and an 8 percent profit sharing in addition to a generous 401(k) match. "We have foregone sometimes some of our bonuses in order to get a nice investment



(Left to right) Jerry Niewick, Thomas Stuit, Steve Olson

in our retirement plan," says Stuit.

"We have responsibilities to more than just ourselves," he adds. "There are a whole bunch of families involved in this operation. They're all dependent on us. If we do well, we'll all do well." ■