

We surveyed nearly 100 employment experts and insiders to find the nine best places to work in southeastern Wisconsin. But there's more to learn here than just where to send your resumé. by Stephen Filmanowicz with Tim DeRoche

K.W. MUTH COMPANY INC.

Business: Auto parts: interior dash absorbers and floor mats. **Local work force:** 289. **Typical hiring needs:** Engineers, production employees. **Pluses:** Extensive reimbursement programs for education, fitness, home computers and GED completion. Profit-sharing plan shares 30 percent of company profits. **Minuses:** Non-union status means a slightly lower pay scale. **Outlook:** Employment has hovered around 300. New products, including horse-stall mats made from recycled car tires, may mitigate the effects of the U.S. auto industry slump. **Address:** 2821 Muth Court, Sheboygan.

The K.W. Muth Company believes in education — even when that education could lead to the loss of a valuable employee. Muth supplies up to \$1,000 for tuition and books per semester to employees for any type of training or education. Last year alone, that tab ran to \$70,000.

Scott Griesbach, a production operator

who's been with Muth for more than five years, has used the money to study law enforcement at Lakeshore Technical College. Yes, Griesbach admits that he hopes to leave the firm within the next few years. And no, that doesn't disqualify him from Muth's educational program. "It's paid for my whole education so far," says Griesbach. Not all employees have been so ambitious; the program has paid for courses ranging from karate to cake decorating.

On-the-job training takes the Muth philosophy one step further. About 66 percent of all employees have taken a course in team problem solving. The course prepares employees to participate in PRIDE teams (Problem-Resolving Individuals Dedicated to Excellence), groups of about 10 workers who get together for an hour a week to identify and eliminate safety risks or sources of waste. To date, no PRIDE suggestion has been rejected.

A low turnover rate — less than 1 percent a year — indicates that employees are happy in their jobs. Gail Krueger, a machine operator, credits the high morale to the emphasis on learning. Because workers learn how to perform several tasks, she notes, "They're able to schedule us on different jobs every day, so it doesn't get boring."

After restructuring led to productivity downslides in the mid-1980s, the company asked its employees to suggest changes, a move that led to the firm's rejuvenation. Since then, Mike Muth, chairman and chief executive officer, has put his employees first: "We want to create an environment in which our people can improve the quality of their lives. Our employees' level of education will to a great degree determine their future quality of life." —T.D.

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The Best Places to Work

LEESON ELECTRIC CORP.

Business: Industrial electric motors. **Local work force:** 625. **Typical hiring needs:** Production, engineering, administration, marketing, electrical and mechanical design, data processing. **Pluses:** A family atmosphere and perks, including good insurance options and the only on-site day-care center in Ozaukee County. **Minuses:** Rapid growth makes it harder to keep up with staffing and to implement new programs. **Outlook:** The company continues to pursue new segments of the motor markets. In 1991, Leeson hired for 92 new positions. **Address:** 2100 Washington St., Grafton.

According to President Christopher L. Doerr, Leeson Electric considers more than experience and physical ability when hiring new employees: Interviewees must demonstrate "their ability to fit into the family."

Joyce Anheier did just that when she came to Leeson in 1983. Then 55, Anheier hadn't worked in 34 years, but needed to find a job following her husband's death. After several larger firms turned her down, "Leeson took a chance on me," she says. When at one point she couldn't work because of a back injury, Anheier called a 1-800 number for company-funded counseling. "My company supported me," she says.

Life at Leeson can be literally a family affair. Julie Monroe and her husband both work at Leeson; their 3-year-old son attends the company's day-care center, which looks after 47 children at the relatively inexpensive rate of \$70 per week. Monroe reports that the Job Posting Program, which allows employees to bid for open positions in the company before outsiders are called in, gets workers out of "daily ruts."

Leeson management also stresses an open-door policy. "An employee can go right to the president if they have a problem," says Anne Wagner, assistant director of human resources. "And they do."

Employee loyalty suggests that Doerr and his brother, Daniel L. (both sons of Lee Doerr, chairman of the board), have effectively translated family ownership into a familial concern for Leeson employees. Of workers who leave Leeson, 85 percent do so because they are retiring or moving out of the Milwaukee area. —T.D.

SC JOHNSON WAX

Business: Chemical products for the home and workplace. **Local work force:** 2,700. **Typical hiring needs:** Management, production, engineering, chemistry, marketing and sales, customer service and office support. **Pluses:** Great benefits include day care, recreation facilities and a health plan that pays 100 percent of costs, with no limit, after a deductible and co-payment. An informal atmosphere and management also draw accolades. **Minuses:** Some employees complain about bureaucracy. Can be a bit paternalistic. **Outlook:** Work probably will continue to be stable. New technology and better management should contribute to current trend of sales growth. **Address:** 1525 Howe St., Racine.

Like many of Milwaukee's most progressive employers, Racine-based SC Johnson Wax is nonunion. According to Dick Mrochinski, human resources development manager of the Worldwide Innochem division, there's an attitude at Johnson Wax that "unions are a result of bad management." The company tries to eliminate the need for unions by communicating with the employees themselves. It usually works.

To increase employee input, management circulates surveys approximately every three years. In the mid-1980s, survey results suggested day care, so a center was started in the wing of a church. Last summer, the center moved to Armstrong Park, where children can use recreation facilities that include miniature golf, a swimming pool and racquetball courts. Johnson Wax pays about 40 percent of the center's total budget; user fees make up the rest. Parents can drop their kids off in the morning and Johnson Wax will take them to school and pick them up in the afternoon. Other perks include extravagant company parties and the opportunity to rent a cottage at the Lighthouse Resort in Minoqua for just \$150 per week.

While many big companies have faltered in implementing autonomous work teams, Johnson Wax is committed to 100 percent participation within two years. Rick Hetland, a team member in the personal-care area, gives the effort high grades. After a comprehensive cross-training program presented problems, his team changed course, limiting the amount of skills for which any one employee is responsible. "We were allowed to make those changes," he says.

Hetland's team reflects Johnson Wax's success at retaining workers (with a turnover rate of less than 5 percent annually). Of 23 members on his shift, only one employee has been at Johnson Wax less time than Hetland, who's been there almost 22 years.

Johnson Wax keeps employees involved through a profit-sharing program in its 75th year and annual company meetings.

Despite a somewhat less-than-open nature (company officials tried to "supervise" our interviews with employees) and a change-inhibiting bureaucracy, employees feel rewarded enough to return the favor. A few years ago, they bought Chairman Samuel C. Johnson a sculpted globe that lit up wherever Johnson products were sold. "People were spending hundreds of dollars on this globe," says one Johnson alum. "People could even have the money withheld from their checks." —T.D.