

SUNDAY PLAIN DEALER

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2011 top workplaces  Number One | Small Business Category

Shedding light on Skylight's success as a workplace



SCOTT SHAW | THE PLAIN DEALER

Financial planners listen during an educational session June 2 at Skylight Financial Group. From left are Ryan McKean, Yevgenia Probst and Jim Jump.

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Plain Dealer Reporter

If you take a look at Skylight Financial Group in Cleveland, you begin raising chicken-and-egg-type questions.

The small financial-planning firm is growing like crazy, mainly with seasoned advisers whose existing clients are following them to Skylight.

At a time when most companies are doing little if any hiring, Skylight has boosted its headcount by nearly 50 percent — from 64 to 92 — in less than two years.

You wonder whether it's growing so rapidly because it's an energetic and exciting place to work, or whether it's an energetic and exciting place to work because it's growing so rapidly.

In any case, Skylight, for the second year in a row, has earned first place among small employers in Top Workplaces 2010. Privately owned Skylight, part of a Massachusetts-based franchise, opened in 1996. Skylight, of Cleveland, offers financial-planning services such as investment and insurance advice to consumers.

Dan Brennan, the company's chief marketing officer, said Skylight's repeat performance as a top employer is validation for the management that took over four years ago.

"What it says to us is the decisions that

we've made in previous years were the right ones, like providing flexibility in people's schedules and trying to be sure to recognize people for the contributions they make."

President and Chief Executive Officer Paul Fox is known for not wanting his employees to work long hours and rewarding workers with occasional afternoons off or three-day weekends with pay in the summer because it makes them happy.

He believes balanced employees, not overly stressed about managing both their work lives and family lives, are more productive employees. Fox also is known to take his employees out to dinners and ball games, or hire a relaxation coach and massage therapist to work with employees in the office.

Brennan, who retired as managing partner of Brennan Financial Group in Cleveland in 2009, thinks building an attractive employer also means demonstrating respect for people.

"At some companies, too many people manage by 'I gotcha.' They say, 'You didn't do it the right way and what's wrong with you?'"

"We want people to know it's OK to make a mistake, just not the same mistake over and over again," Brennan said.

"Management is a skill that has to be developed," he said. "We try to have an environment where everyone understands their roles, and their opinions are always taken

SKYLIGHT FINANCIAL GROUP

WHAT THEY DO: Financial-planning services, from investment advice to tax strategies to retirement and estate planning.

WHERE THEY'RE BASED: Cleveland.

INTERESTING FACT: The office traces its roots to the 1930s. The Skylight Financial name was started in 2000 as the company, an independent general agency of MassMutual, started comprehensive financial planning.

ONLINE: skylightfinancialgroup.com

into account."

Bernie Garrah, a financial adviser at Skylight for 10 years, said he's not surprised the company ranks high with workers.

He personally is proud to work for Skylight because the company gives back to the community. Inside the four walls, Skylight has an environment of collaboration and camaraderie.

"We check our egos at the door," he said. "It's how we do the right thing."

When one of his two assistants unexpectedly had to go on bed rest during her pregnancy, four colleagues emailed him and offered to help pick up her workload, even if it meant working a little harder.

The collegial atmosphere is part of what attracted Yevgenia Probst to Skylight. Probst, a certified public accountant by training, started as a planner at Skylight just in May. She previously worked for one of the Big Four accounting firms.

She interviewed at several companies and chose Skylight because she wanted to do comprehensive financial planning — not just taxes — and because she liked the collaborative environment at Skylight.

"People are so much more willing to help, even very senior people," she said.

Another new worker, Bill Crozier Jr., joined Skylight as a financial planner and investment adviser in March. With more than 20 years of experience in the industry, he said he was looking for a new company because "in my old firm, there was no room for growth at all. They didn't have experience helping producers grow."

"Skylight is just the opposite. They know what business development I need," Crozier said. "I wish I had made the change years ago."

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SMALL (50-149 local employees)

| Rank | Company | Founded | Ownership | Sector | Locations | Employees |
|------|---|---------|----------------|--|-----------|-----------|
| 1 | Skylight Financial Group/MassMutual | 1996 | Private | Financial Services and Insurance | 1 | 54 |
| 2 | WideOpenWest Cleveland LLC | 1999 | Private | Telecommunications and Cable | 2 | 66 |
| 3 | Cargill Salt | 1901 | Private | Food/Water Conditioning | 1 | 101 |
| 4 | Software Answers Inc. | 1994 | Private | Technology for K-12 School Districts | 1 | 51 |
| 5 | Metrics Marketing Group, a Precision Dialogue Company | 1998 | Parent company | Database Marketing and Interactive Services Firm | 1 | 54 |
| 6 | EnviroScience Inc. | 1989 | Private | Environmental | 1 | 50 |
| 7 | Aero-Instruments Co. LLC | 1925 | Private | Aerospace/Defense | 1 | 50 |
| 8 | Fathom SEO | 2005 | Private | Advertising and Marketing | 1 | 73 |
| 9 | Cornucopia Inc. | 1975 | Nonprofit | Nonprofit | 4 | 70 |
| 10 | Marcus Thomas LLC | 1937 | Private | Integrated Marketing Communications | 2 | 114 |
| 11 | Watteredge Inc. | 1949 | Private | Manufacturer - Industrial Goods | 1 | 103 |
| 12 | Thogus Products Companies | 1958 | Private | Consumer and Industrial Goods, Engineered Products | 1 | 82 |
| 13 | Walthall, Drake & Wallace LLP | 1944 | Private | Certified Public Accountants and Consultants | 2 | 52 |
| 14 | Middleburg Heights Community Center | 2000 | Government | Local Government - Services | 1 | 80 |
| 15 | Midwest Transatlantic Lines Inc. | 1981 | Private | Freight Import/Export | 1 | 53 |
| 16 | Minute Men Staffing Services | 1968 | Private | Staffing Temporary Help | 6 | 63 |
| 17 | Vocon | 1987 | Private | Services | 1 | 73 |
| 18 | Cedar Brook Financial Partners | 2005 | Partnership | Financial Advisers | 1 | 52 |
| 19 | Foundation Software | 1985 | Private | Technology | 1 | 66 |
| 20 | Roetzel & Andress - Cleveland | 1876 | Private | Legal | 1 | 61 |
| 21 | Rhein Chemie Corp. | 1987 | Private | Plastic and Rubber | 1 | 102 |
| 22 | IMS Co. | 1949 | Private | Specialty Distributor to the Plastics Industry | 1 | 53 |
| 23 | United Labor Agency | 1971 | Nonprofit | Workforce Investment and Job Placement | 3 | 60 |
| 24 | Marriott Cleveland East | 2005 | Private | Hotel | 1 | 90 |
| 25 | Cequent Consumer Products Inc. | 2002 | Public | Automotive Aftermarket Products | 1 | 54 |
| 26 | The Federal Metal Co. | 1913 | Private | Secondary Metal Processing | 3 | 90 |
| 27 | Zaremba Management Co. | 1921 | Private | Property Management | 18 | 83 |
| 28 | BCG & Co. | 1986 | Private | Certified Public Accountants and Consultants | 1 | 81 |
| 29 | The Reserves Network | 1984 | Private | Staffing Services | 8 | 65 |
| 30 | Alego Health | 2004 | Partnership | Vendor Serving Health Care Industry | 1 | 60 |
| 31 | Osborn Engineering | 1892 | Private | Engineering | 2 | 57 |
| 32 | KPMG | 1924 | Partnership | Accountancy | 1 | 72 |
| 33 | Lexi-Comp Inc. | 1978 | Private | Publishing | 1 | 139 |
| 34 | Gilbane Building Co. | 1873 | Private | Construction Management | 1 | 65 |
| 35 | Hitchcock Center for Women | 1978 | Nonprofit | Health Care | 2 | 54 |
| 36 | Bowden Manufacturing | 1952 | Private | Aerospace / Defense | 1 | 84 |
| 37 | 1-888-OHIOCOMP Inc. | 1997 | Private | Workers' Compensation Managed Care Organization | 2 | 96 |
| 38 | Howard, Wershale & Co. | 1990 | Private | Certified Public Accountants and Consultants | 1 | 79 |
| 39 | Heidtman Steel Products Inc. | 1954 | Private | Steel Processing | 1 | 78 |
| 40 | The Legal Aid Society Of Cleveland | 1905 | Nonprofit | Nonprofit | 4 | 88 |
| 41 | Ss. Robert & William Catholic Parish | 2010 | Nonprofit | Religion | 1 | 57 |
| 42 | Neighborhood Family Practice | 1980 | Nonprofit | Community Health Center | 2 | 86 |
| 43 | Education Solutions LLC dba Sylvan Learning Centers | 2007 | Private | Provider of Supplemental Educational Services | 9 | 113 |
| 44 | Phoenix International Freight Services Ltd. | 1979 | Private | International Freight Forwarder | 1 | 56 |
| 45 | Associated Estates Realty Corp. | 1964 | Public | Residential Property Management | 8 | 125 |
| 46 | Ohio Catholic Federal Credit Union | 1954 | Nonprofit | Credit Union | 6 | 66 |
| 47 | Skoda Minotti | 2001 | Private | CPAs, Business and Financial Advisers | 2 | 119 |
| 48 | Western Reserve Masonic Community | 2002 | Nonprofit | Health Care - Senior Living | 1 | 100 |
| 49 | Cleveland Corporate Services dba SmartEd Services | 1989 | Private | Interactive Technology | 1 | 116 |
| 50 | Lake County YMCA | 1866 | Nonprofit | Youth and Family Services | 4 | 51 |
| 51 | St. Edward High School | 1949 | Nonprofit | Primary/Secondary School | 1 | 110 |
| 52 | Prentke Romich Co. | 1966 | Private | Medical Devices and Products | 1 | 100 |
| 53 | The Equity Engineering Group Inc. | 2002 | Private | Engineering Consulting | 1 | 55 |
| 54 | Metro Toyota Scion | 1969 | Private | Auto Dealership | 1 | 118 |
| 55 | AdvoCare Group | 1996 | Private | Managed Care Organization/Disability Management | 1 | 81 |
| 56 | Clampco Products Inc. | 1971 | Private | Metal Products | 1 | 130 |
| 57 | Corporate Screening Services Inc. | 1987 | Private | Background Screening Services | 2 | 57 |
| 58 | I.D. Images LLC | 1994 | Private | Printing | 2 | 87 |
| 59 | Grant Thornton LLP | 1924 | Partnership | Certified Public Accountants & Consultants | 1 | 94 |
| 60 | Family Heritage Life Insurance Company of America | 1989 | Private | Specialty Insurance | 1 | 95 |

SOURCE: WorkplaceDynamics

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