



## **A Winning Workplace**

*Kathleen Ryan O'Connor*

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**A small project management consulting company has earned national recognition for its commitment to staff development. In the process, it's attracting top talent and forming strong partnerships with its clients. So what makes a workplace great?**

If you see C. Richard Panico cruising down the highway on his Harley, don't assume he's some sort of knuckle-cracking tough. Far from it. These days he's making a profit — and earning accolades — by being one of the good guys.

Panico's company, Integrated Project Management Co., was recently named a Top Small Workplace by *The Wall Street Journal* and Winning Workplaces, a sought-after recognition that puts them in such company as King Arthur Flour, a noted employee-owned company that has been in business for 200 years. More than 400 private, nonprofit, and publicly held organizations applied for this year's honor, shared by 15 companies.

There's plenty unique about IPM, based in Burr Ridge, Ill. But first consider the stereotypical corporate evaluation. Little boxes are checked, skills are ranked and after a hearty pep talk, the review sits in your file until next year.

IPM employees have weekly one-on-one meetings with a manager, detailed evaluations and plans for future training and advancement. Managers spend 12 to 14 hours assembling each employee's review and the ratings cover not just performance, but also character elements such as dependability, fairness, loyalty, common sense, passion and the ability to elicit trust.

The process is designed to be encouraging, Panico says, and they have a rule that no criticism can show up on a review document that wasn't mentioned to the employee beforehand.

"If you say your employees are important and you are dedicated to feedback and growth but you aren't doing it in real time and reinforcing it," Panico says, "you are fooling yourself and I think you are misrepresenting that philosophy to your people."

That emphasis on values drew Adam Wojcik to IPM, which provides project management and consulting services to a broad range of industries, including the life sciences, food and beverage, healthcare, and consumer and industrial products.

The former Army field artillery officer, just back last spring from two tours in Iraq — the last as part of the surge in Baghdad — wasn't sure what to expect from his transition back into civilian life.

A few people suggested his experience commanding a radar detachment and other duties with the Army might make him an excellent project manager. "I think it was the understanding of how to deal with people in different situations under different amounts of pressure," he says.

A headhunter directed him to the IPM website, and Wojcik, a 30-year-old West Point graduate, recalls being wowed by the company's "mission and belief" statement with its emphasis on ethics and integrity. "(It was) the first thing that jumped out at me," he says. "It's just awesome."

So with the job-hunting advice to ask questions in mind, he asked everyone with whom he spoke during interviews if the statement was real.

"Every single person said in fact that's exactly how the company operated," Wojcik says.

And unlike companies that might only be looking for certain industry certifications that Wojcik hadn't yet achieved, IPM takes a more holistic view of the skill set needed to be successful.

"It's very easy for us to find people whose education and training fit the pragmatic needs of the role — but we view that as 50 percent at best," Panico says. "The other 50 percent is going to be drilling down into what's in their hearts."

IPM has a unique business model. Project managers work side by side with client teams through project completion and so-called soft skills such as interpersonal communication is critical. "In our business you aren't going to get a second chance with companies," Panico, 57, says.

Employees "learn the ability to inspire, to get people on the same page," says IPM's director of strategy and business development Chad Nikel.



Panico (pictured, right) says his experience as a top manager and executive at Johnson & Johnson was a great training ground.

"Everyone says high performance, but the bar gets lowered," he says. "I learned within J and J not to do that. I discarded the idea that 'good enough' is OK. It's not OK. Others may profess to say this but you dive deep into their culture and they also have a tendency to shoot the messenger" which leads to people to withhold or fudge information.

At IPM, if you lie it might get passed on to the client, he says. "It just snowballs. You lie once you get fired."

Deana Pape, 36, is a senior project manager based in St. Louis who has been with IPM for four years.

"I do feel very lucky to have found IPM," she says. "It's great to find employers who really truly care about their employees personally and professionally. It's work, sure, but it's great if your employer is concerned about your own professional development, and there is a value to clients as well. If I'm happy and more skilled, better value for the client."

While the fit was very easy for her, she says, it was a culture shock to always be asked what your dream job was or your "ideal this and ideal that."

"I thought it was just a 'getting to know you' kind of thing," but then you discover they've found a way for you to do it.

"Be careful what you ask for," she says with a laugh.

Mally Arad agrees. She's a regional manager for IPM with about 15 years in the life sciences industry, mostly as a project manager.

"The people are the company's intellectual properties, and I think the company recognizes that and treats us this way. We don't have products, we have people."

She too has an executive manager who mentors her. "It's a support system," says Arad, 39.

Mary Corbitt Clark, executive director of Winning Workplaces, the Evanston, Ill.-based nonprofit that runs the annual contest with *The Wall Street Journal*, says IPM caught their eye because they've done a great job at taking people with technical skills and teaching them how to become business partners with clients.

And their highly developed employee-training program is beyond the norm. Behind it is the recognition that "employees are their competitive advantage and they invest in that advantage," Clark says. "It's a formula for success."

They receive about 800 nominations each year and about half continue with the more in-depth application. Most are privately held companies and all have to agree to disclose some financial information.

*Part of the IPM team (left to right): Deana Pape, Adam Wojcik, Mally Arad and Chad Nickel.*



So what makes a workplace great?

One that invests in their employees health insurance and employee benefits, two big issues, but we also look at the culture, Clark says.

"Do they have a voice? Is it heard? Are they rewarded for their contribution to the business success? Does the organization encourage innovation and have a tolerance for risk?"

A lot of companies talk about how they need to innovate but their core competency is around quality and process improvement, which inherently doesn't encourage mistakes, she says.

Past winners who struck a chord with Clark include the Gentle Giant Moving Company, the brainchild of Larry O'Toole, an Irish immigrant who grew a small moving company into more than a dozen regional operations, she says, and gets some 90 percent of its business from repeat customers or referrals.

"One of the things I love is they all have clearly defined cultures and they are really good," Clark says of the businesses they honor. "These companies are redefining how business is being conducted."

### At A Glance...

#### **INTEGRATED PROJECT MANAGEMENT CO.**

**Focus:** project management service and consulting to life sciences, food and beverage, consumer and industrial sectors.

**Based:** Burr Ridge, Ill.

**Founded:** 1988

**Employees:** 78

**2007 Revenue:** \$13 million

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