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WORK FORCE: Firms With Large Local Operations Land on Magazine's List

By Lou Hirsh

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Construction ranks among the nation's hardest hit industries for employment, with many firms still reeling from business volume that is down more than half from pre-recession levels.

Still, three contractors with longtime local operations managed to land on Fortune magazine's annual U.S. list of the "100 Best Companies to Work For," published in its Feb. 7 edition.

The highest-ranked construction firm is Redwood City-based DPR Construction, which employs approximately 500 office and field staff in its San Diego operations and placed 22nd on the list. It is also the highest-ranked company of any kind with a large local presence.

The 2011 ranking also includes PCL Constructors Inc., a Denver-based company that placed 38th and employs about 50 locally on projects including the expansion at San Diego International Airport.

Ranked 40th, Dallas-based Balfour Beatty Construction employs about 250 in its San Diego division, known as Barnhart Balfour Beatty.

The Fortune list, compiled with consultants at Great Place to Work Institute Inc., is based on responses from U.S. companies to employee surveys measuring factors such as workplace culture, perks and hiring practices.

Worker Friendly Practices

Company leaders interviewed recently said they chose to maintain worker friendly practices that had been instituted long before the recession, and were able to minimize layoffs despite the economic downturn.

“The mission includes the idea that everyone’s role is important to the success of the company,” said Peter Salvati, an executive vice president in the San Diego office of DPR Construction, who was among the team that started the company 20 years ago.

Salvati said the company eschews formal titles on its business cards, emphasizing collaborative decision-making in wall-free cubicles. There is no clocking in and out, and employees are given scheduling flexibility to foster a balance between work and life.

Instead of a written employee handbook, there is an online version where best practices are constantly updated. DPR also has wine bars in every office, used as central gathering spots for employee celebrations.

Its San Diego workers in 2010 moved into the company’s newly renovated, environmentally friendly office building at 5010 Shoreham Place, where the lobby features four custom-made surfboards, each listing one of the company’s four “core values” — integrity, enjoyment, uniqueness and “ever forward.”

DPR was started in 1990, and its moniker carries the first letters in the first names of founders Doug Woods, Peter Nosler and Ron Davidowski.

Plenty of Projects

Salvati said the company, which has 15 offices, saw its nationwide business volume in 2010 rise 16 percent to 17 percent from 2009, and it anticipates a 20 percent to 25 percent rise in 2011. DPR reported revenues of \$1.16 billion in 2009.

The company has maintained a steady stream of projects in health care and higher education, and is increasingly involved in the building of data centers for tech giants, including Facebook, Google and Apple Inc.

DPR’s current local projects include Palomar Medical Center West in Escondido; a build-to-suit research facility that owner BioMed Realty Trust Inc. will lease to Isis Pharmaceuticals Inc. in Carlsbad; and the Sulpizio Family Cardiovascular Center at UC San Diego’s Thornton Hospital.

At locally based Barnhart Balfour Beatty, known as Barnhart Construction before it was acquired in 2008 by a subsidiary of Balfour Beatty, company President Eric Stenman said the local culture has long been a good fit with the Texas company’s practices.

Seeking Feedback

The San Diego office has extended the firm’s nationwide use of information modeling technology to encourage internal collaboration on projects, and to build long-term relationships

with outside firms. The company does regular “employee engagement surveys” to get feedback on operations.

“They actually promote vacation time,” Stenman said. “They don’t want you to get burned out by the work you’re doing.”

The firm still sees a strong flow of military and education projects, and Stenman said it expects 2011 to be another rebound year before the local construction industry can ease back into a growth mode, possibly in 2012.

Qualcomm Inc. is the highest-ranked company with San Diego headquarters on the Fortune workplace list, coming in at No. 33, followed by Scripps Health at No. 37.

Companies on the list with a sizable local presence include San Francisco-based Genentech Inc., placing 35th, and Intuit Inc. of Mountain View, ranking 44th.

Placing first in this year’s Top 100 is North Carolina-based software maker SAS Institute Inc.