

# TOP WORK PLACES 2020

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## *Rising to the top*

Is your company soaring to success? Take a look at the annual Top Workplaces survey, which spotlights East Tennessee companies that have been ranked highly by their employees.



# Knoxville's Top Workplaces shine even brighter in 2020



**Joel Christopher**  
Executive editor  
Knoxville News Sentinel

It's always a blast to read about the Top Workplaces of Greater Knoxville, but this year it's downright inspiring to learn the stories of the many places doing extraordinary work in challenging times.

Take Pilot Company. One of Forbes' top 10 largest private companies, Pilot had to protect the health of 28,000 employees worldwide while also keeping America moving as the largest supplier of fuel in North America.

"During this time of crisis Pilot has not wavered in taking care of its employees and its guests," one employee wrote in the comments section of the Top Workplaces survey, explaining that the company stayed deeply con-

nected even during the work-from-home experience.

To collect data and comments like this, we enlisted Energage, a nationwide leader in measuring employee satisfaction. Energage surveyed more than 8,700 employees and received responses from 5,917 people at 48 companies in the Knoxville area. Those respondents answered questions about compensation, workplace culture, company leadership, coworking and more.

The extensive survey paints a nuanced picture of a place, including the places that consistently do it best. In order to qualify as a Top Workplace, we required a minimum response rate from employees based on a company's size.

In the Knoxville area, the places that qualified shook out this way: three large Top Workplaces that employ 500 or more people in our region; 12 midsize Top Workplaces that em-

ploy 100 to 499 employees here; and 20 small Top Workplaces that employ 99 or fewer employees locally.

From the biggest to the smallest Top Workplaces, there was a shared sense of purpose.

"Every day I get to make an impact," said an employee of The Trust Company of Tennessee. "I am able to educate and influence others in a way that promotes growth in people. I love my job because we truly care about our clients and their well-being, not just their financial well-being."

That's exactly what makes Knoxville's Top Workplaces. They inspire. They uplift. They improve the lives they touch.

And among those leaders, there is an elite group among our Top Workplaces, the 11 companies with a commitment to workplace culture so strong they've been among Knoxville's Top Workplaces all four years of our survey.

They are:

- **LARGE** — Pilot Company; First Horizon

- **MEDIUM** — Pinnacle Financial Partners; SmartBank; and Harper Auto Square

- **SMALL** — Cannon & Cannon; Kramer Rayson; Coulter & Justus; LBMC; The Trust Company of Tennessee; and Denark Construction

This is the fourth year Knoxville News has enlisted Energage to conduct a Top Workplaces survey in this market.

Energage is a nationwide leader in measuring employee satisfaction. Last year alone, Energage surveyed more than 2.6 million employees at more than 7,500 organizations. Overall, the company has been at it since 2006, and has surveyed more than 22 million employees at more than 60,000 organizations.

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# Employees choose Top Workplaces through survey



**Bob Helbig**  
Energy

Who determines Top Workplaces? The best judges: the employees who work there.

For the fourth year, the News Sentinel and Knox.biz have partnered with Philadelphia-based Energage to rank the Top Workplaces in the Greater Knoxville area. The process is based on a scientific survey of employees who rate their workplace culture. It also gives company insights about what makes them unique.

“In times of great change, it is more important than ever to maintain a connection among employees,” said Eric Rubino, Energage CEO. “When you give your employees a voice, you come together to navigate challenges and shape your path forward based on

real-time insights into what works best for your organization.”

The process began in January, when the News Sentinel began news coverage and promotions welcoming people to nominate companies as Top Workplaces. Energage also reached out to companies in the region. Throughout the process, 503 employers in the region were invited to have their employees take the survey. Any organization was eligible to participate, provided it had at least 35 employees in the region. Employers could be public, private, nonprofit, or governmental. There is no cost to enter the Top Workplaces program.

Combined, the companies surveyed in 2020 employed 8,700 people in the region. Of those employees who received questionnaires, 5,917 responded, either on paper or online. For this year’s winners list, 35 employers earned recognition as Top Workplaces and were ranked based on their employee survey feedback.

The employee engagement survey



of 24 questions gathers responses regarding issues relating to workplace culture:

- Alignment – where the company is headed, its values, cooperation, effective meetings

- Coaching – managers care about concerns, are helpful, encourage employee development

- Connection – employees feel appreciated, work is meaningful, working at full potential, clued in to each other

- Engagement – productivity, retention, recruiting

- Leadership – confidence in company leaders

- Performance – execution, open-

mindedness, innovation, clued-in leadership

- The Basics – pay, benefits, flexibility, training, expectations

Employers that score high enough are recognized as Top Workplaces. Employers are categorized by size, and they are ranked within those size groups, to accurately compare results. Energage also determines special award winners based on standout scores on specific survey topics.

Did you look over the list and wonder why a particular company was not on it? It might be because it chose not to participate, or because it did not score well enough in the survey process. Energage occasionally disqualifies employers based on questionable results detected through statistical tests it runs to ensure organizations are accurately administering the survey.

*Want your organization to participate in the 2021 program? Just go to [topworkplaces.com/nominate/knoxville](http://topworkplaces.com/nominate/knoxville) to submit a nomination.*

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# Top Workplaces receive awards in special categories

Each year, in addition to making the Top Workplaces cut, Energage awards companies who excelled in specific areas, according to the anonymous surveys filled out by their employees.

## Special Award for Leadership

*"I have confidence in the leader of this company."*

Winners:

**Jimmy Haslam, Pilot Company**  
**Mike DiStefano, Pinnacle Financial Partners**

**Suzanne Crisp, Executive Building Solutions**

Pilot Company was founded in 1958 and today has 1,500 employees in the Knoxville area and 28,000 worldwide. It has been ranked a Top Workplace all four years. Pilot is the overall winner in the large business category.

Pinnacle Financial Partners was founded in 2000 and has 129 employees in the Knoxville area and 2,500 nationwide. It has been ranked a Top Workplace all four years.

Executive Building Solutions was founded in 1994 and has 48 employees in the Knoxville area, where it is headquartered. It has been ranked a Top Workplace for two consecutive years.



Jimmy Haslam



Mike DiStefano

## Special Award for Direction

*"I believe this company is going in the right direction."*

Winner: **First Utility District of Knox County**

First Utility District of Knox County was founded in 1954 and has 100 employees. It has been ranked a Top Workplace three consecutive years.



Suzanne and Guy Crisp are photographed at Executive Building Solutions in Knoxville on Thursday, May 28, 2020. BRIANNA PACIORKA/NEWS SENTINEL

## Special Award for Managers

*"My manager helps me learn and grow, my manager makes it easier to do my job well, my manager cares about my concerns."*

Winner: **Harper Auto Square**

Harper Auto Square was founded in 1981 and has 329 employees across eight area locations. It has been ranked a Top Workplace all four years since the program in Knoxville began.

## Special Award for New Ideas

*"New ideas are encouraged at this company."*

Winner: **First Horizon**

First Horizon was founded in 1864 and has 700 area employees across 25 locations. It has been ranked a Top Workplace all four years.

## Special Award for Doers

*"At this company, we do things efficiently and well."*

Winner: **21st Mortgage Corporation**

21st Mortgage Corporation was founded in 1995. It has 850 employees across two area locations.

## Special Award for Meaningfulness

*"My job makes me feel like I am part of something meaningful."*

Winner: **Gallaher & Associates**

Founded in 1973, Gallaher & Associates has 57 employees in the Knoxville area. It has been ranked a Top Workplace for two consecutive years.

## Special Award for Values

*"This company operates by strong values."*

Winner: **Cannon & Cannon Inc.**

Founded in 1996, Cannon & Cannon engineering has 48 employees in Knoxville. The company has been ranked a Top Workplace all four years.

## Special Award for Clued-in Senior Management

*"Senior managers understand what is really happening at this company."*

Winner: **Cornerstone of Recovery Inc.**

Founded in 1989, Cornerstone of Recovery Inc. has 250 employees in the Knoxville area.

## Special Award for Communication

*"I feel well-informed about important decisions at this company."*

Winner: **LBMC**

Founded in 1984, LBMC has 71 employees in the Knoxville area. This is the fourth consecutive year the business has been ranked as a Top Workplace.

## Special Award for Appreciation

*"I feel genuinely appreciated at this company."*

Winner: **Axle Logistics**

Founded in 2012, Axle Logistics has 78 employees in the Knoxville area. This is the second consecutive year the company has been ranked a Top Workplace.

## Special Award for Work/Life Flexibility

*"I have the flexibility I need to balance my work and personal life."*

Winner: **Leidos**

Founded in 1969, civil and defense contractor Leidos has 336 employees in the Knoxville area. It is headquartered in Reston, Virginia, and has 36,000 employees nationwide.

## Special Award for Training

*"I get the formal training I want for my career."*

Winner: **SmartBank**

SmartBank was founded in East Tennessee in 2007 and has 153 employees across nine locations in the area. It has 500 employees nationwide and has ranked as a Top Workplace all four years in Knoxville.

## Special Award for Benefits

*"My benefits package is good compared to others in this industry."*

Winner: **Kramer Rayson LLP**

Law firm Kramer Rayson LLP was founded in 1948 and has 49 employees in two locations in the Knoxville area. It has appeared on the Knoxville area Top Workplaces list all four years.

# Top Workplaces Special Awards

Chosen based on standout scores for employee responses to specific survey statements

## LEADERSHIP

*I have confidence in the leader of this company*

**Jimmy Haslam, Pilot Company** (Large)

**Mike DiStefano, Pinnacle Financial Partners** (Midsize)

**Suzanne Crisp, Executive Building Solutions, Inc** (Small)

## DIRECTION

*I believe this company is going in the right direction*

**First Utility District Of Knox County** (Midsize)

## MANAGERS

*My manager helps me learn and grow; My manager makes it easier to do my job well; My manager cares about my concerns*

**Harper Auto Square** (Midsize)

## NEW IDEAS

*New ideas are encouraged at this company*

**First Horizon** (Large)

## DOERS

*At this company, we do things efficiently and well*

**21st Mortgage Corporation** (Large)

## MEANINGFULNESS

*My job makes me feel like I am part of something meaningful*

**Gallaher & Associates** (Small)

## VALUES

*This company operates by strong values*

**Cannon & Cannon, Inc.** (Small)

## CLUED IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT

*Senior managers understand what is really happening at this company*

**Cornerstone Of Recovery, Inc.** (Midsize)

## COMMUNICATION

*I feel well-informed about important decisions at this company*

**LBMC** (Small)

## APPRECIATION

*I feel genuinely appreciated at this company*

**Axle Logistics** (Small)

## WORK/LIFE FLEXIBILITY

*I have the flexibility I need to balance my work and personal life*

**Leidos** (Midsize)

## TRAINING

*I get the formal training I want for my career*

**SmartBank** (Midsize)

## BENEFITS

*My benefits package is good compared to others in this industry*

**Kramer Rayson LLP** (Small)

Panda Express is honored to be recognized as one of the

# Top Workplaces in Knoxville



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# TOP WORKPLACES

## LARGE COMPANIES (500 OR MORE EMPLOYEES)

	Company	Founded	Ownership	Sector	Workers in Region	Years Ranked
1	Pilot Company	1958	Private	Convenience Store / Gas Station	1,501	4
2	First Horizon	1864	Public	Banking	700	4
3	21st Mortgage Corporation	1995	Private	Financial Services & Insurance	851	1

## MIDSIZE COMPANIES (100-499 EMPLOYEES)

	Company	Founded	Ownership	Sector	Workers in Region	Years Ranked
1	Pinnacle Financial Partners	2000	Public	Commercial Bank	129	4
2	First Utility District Of Knox County	1954	Public	Water & Wastewater Utility District	100	3
3	SmartBank	2007	Public	Banking	153	4
4	Harper Auto Square	1981	Private	Auto Dealership	329	4
5	Leidos	1969	Public	Civil, defense, health ...	336	1
6	Cornerstone Of Recovery, Inc.	1989	Private	Alcohol and Drug Addiction	250	1
7	Panda Restaurant Group	1973	Private	Restaurants	161	1
8	TIS Insurance Services, Inc.	1945	Private	Risk Management Insurance Consultants & Brokers	154	2
9	Edfinancial Services	1988	Private	Servicing student loans for students and families	383	1
10	World Acceptance Corporation	1962	Public	Consumer Finance	114	1
11	Tennessee Cancer Specialists, PLLC	2004	Private	Healthcare	216	1
12	KaTom Restaurant Supply	1987	Private	Wholesale Distribution	182	1

## SMALL COMPANIES (99 OR FEWER EMPLOYEES)

	Company	Founded	Ownership	Sector	Workers in Region	Years Ranked
1	Executive Building Solutions, Inc	1994	Coop/Mutual	Janitorial Building Maintenance	48	2
2	Cannon & Cannon, Inc.	1996	Private	Engineering	48	4
3	Kramer Rayson LLP	1948	Partnership	Law	49	4
4	Coulter & Justus, PC	1993	Private	Certified Public Accountants	56	4
5	Axle Logistics	2012	Private	Third Pary Logistics	78	2
6	LBMC	1984	Private	Certified Public Accountants & Consultants	71	4
7	The Trust Company of Tennessee	1987	Private	Investment Management	74	4
8	Gallaher & Associates	1973	Private	Security & Protection	57	2
9	Realty Trust Group	2000	Private	Real Estate - Other	39	1
10	Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury	1836	Government	State Government	50	3
11	Pipe Wrench Plumbing, Heating & Cooling, Inc.	1998	Private	plumbing and hvac	57	3
12	ERISA Services, Inc.	1981	Private	Third Party Administrators for Retirement Plans	41	1
13	Freeman Webb Inc.	1979	Private	Property Management	60	2
14	SHADES of Development	1995	Non-profit	Afterschool Care	63	3
15	Promat, Inc	1991	Private	Manufacturing & Wholesale Distribution	57	3
16	Allied Toyota Lift	1971	Private	Forklift Sales, Service & Rentals	68	1
17	Rand Commercial Real Estate	2013	Partnership	Integrated Development, Construction, & Management	39	1
18	Denark Construction, Inc.	1985	Private	Building Construction	49	4
19	PCS	1996	Private	Information Technology	35	1
20	Graybar	1869	Private	Electrical Distribution	64	1

# Here's what appreciation really means



**Doug Claffey**  
Energage CEO

When it comes to feeling appreciated at work, what matters most to employees? If you answered “pay,” think again. Research shows pay is low on the list. Think of it this way: If you are paid well but treated lousy, it’s not going to make you give your best every day.

Energage surveyed more than 20 million employees across 60,000 organizations over the past 14 years. We’ve learned that what matters to employees — what truly motivates them — is feeling appreciated. Across all U.S. sectors and populations, appreciation ranks as one of the most important workplace culture drivers.

When we look at survey data from employees in the greater Knoxville area, appreciation rates among the

most important factors to employees. The only factor that consistently rates ahead of it is whether employees feel their organization is headed in the right direction.

It’s important to note there is no definition for appreciation in our survey. We don’t tell employees how — or in what ways — they should gauge their feelings about it. They use their own definition, and even more, employees know it when they feel it. And they can also readily distinguish between what’s authentic and what’s simply lip service.

Just as there is no single definition of how employees should feel appreciated, there is no single way for organizations to express it. Some use reward and recognition systems. This form of appreciation tends to focus on outcomes, and it’s often linked to financial awards. Other recognition systems are tied to organizational events, such as service anniversaries.

The simplest and sometimes the most effective form of appreciation is giving positive feedback or praise.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

“Thank you for your effort” or “You’re doing a really good job” goes a long way, whether delivered in person, electronically, or in a handwritten note.

Within an organization are different types of appreciation, because each has a unique message and meaning:

- Peer to peer: Coworkers thank others either within or outside their own team. This is especially important when teams are geographically dispersed or don’t see each other regularly.

- Manager to employee: Managers are most familiar with their employees’ roles. Employees like to know their manager understands and values their contributions.

- Senior leadership: This level is typically more general, relating to group efforts. But senior leaders can also highlight extraordinary effort. Above all, it demonstrates they see and recognize individual and team contributions.

Appreciation matters because it goes a long way with employees to improve motivation, job satisfaction, self-esteem, and retention. Cultivating a culture of appreciation helps employees feel good about the work they do, and it’s the glue that holds teams together.

*Doug Claffey is founder of Energage, a Philadelphia-based research and consulting firm that surveyed more than 2 million employees at more than 7,000 organizations in 2019. Energage is the News Sentinel’s research partner for Top Workplaces.*

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Mona Harvin of Executive Building Solutions cleans the glass doors at the FirstBank building in Downtown Knoxville on Wednesday, June 17, 2020. SAUL YOUNG/NEWS SENTINEL

# EXECUTIVE BUILDING SOLUTIONS TASKED WITH KEEPING BUSINESSES CLEAN DURING A PANDEMIC

**Brenna McDermott**

Knoxville News Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

It's been an interesting year to be in the janitorial services business.

Executive Building Solutions was wrapping up its flu season protocols when the world began to see the spread of a new virus. Executive Building Solutions owner and CEO Suzanne Crisp attended a training session in February with the CDC on new sanitization protocols to learn about that virus and how to protect her 80-some customers and employ-

ees in East Tennessee.

The coronavirus, at one point a distant concern, became a pandemic and a challenge for each and every business in our community as it spread across the United States. The challenge is ongoing and has led to an increased urgency for cleanliness and sanitization.

In the weeks that followed that CDC training, Suzanne Crisp and COO Guy Crisp, along with their 48





employees, developed a personalized action plan for each customer with guidelines on how to handle a possible exposure to the virus, assembled a team that could respond in mere hours to an exposure and implemented additional technologies and services to keep their clients feeling safe and secure. That meant bringing in a disinfectant fogger to sanitize all the nooks and crannies, going over surfaces with a UV light to detect contamination and providing cleaning items like hand sanitizer to clients who had run out.

In short, the pandemic has challenged the Crisps to provide added structure for EBS' clients and reassurance to its essential workers who go into businesses each and every day to keep them clean.

"It's changed how the customers look at the cleanliness of their facilities, how much more important it becomes in a short period of time," Guy Crisp said. "A lot of times, some customers, building maintenance is not really a top priority because it's not revenue generating. It's a liability, not an asset. So sometimes it got pushed to the bottom rung. Well with the COVID-19 outbreak it made it priority one."

Now the company, ranked the No. 1 small-size business in the Knoxville area's annual Top Workplaces awards, is preparing for a future where cleanliness is more essential than ever, yet businesses might soon occupy less square footage as employees work from home and leaders hesitate to open back up. That's a challenge for janitorial services like Executive Building Solutions.

This is the second consecutive year Executive

Building Solutions has been designated a Top Workplaces award winner. It's a program presented by Knox.biz and Knox News in partnership with Energage.

While EBS was founded in 1994 under a different name, the Crisps are now sole owners of Executive Building Solutions. The company offers pressure washing, flooring and carpet care, window cleaning, construction cleanup, general building maintenance and more for churches, financial institutions, offices and schools.

It also specializes in medical and lab janitorial cleaning. EBS is a member of the U.S. Green Building Council.

Suzanne Crisp started out working as a part-time janitor for the company back in the '90s, eventually becoming senior vice president before becoming a partner.

"I'm excited to see the customer's reaction the next day when they come in and everything looks sanitized and clean," she said. "It makes you proud. A lot of people (say), 'Well, you're a janitor'. No, we're not. We're more than that. We give people peace of mind when they come to work that everything's clean, sanitized."

The company added about 10 employees in the past year and hopes to continue to grow by adding another dozen in the near future.

"We're a large enough company to service any of the needs of our customers, any size account, yet still small enough that we still play a large role in the day-to-day operations," Guy Crisp said.

## ALL ABOUT EXECUTIVE BUILDING SOLUTIONS

**Industry:** Janitorial Building Maintenance

**Headquarters:** Knoxville, Tennessee

**Founded:** 1994

**Knoxville area employees:** 48

**Fun Fact:** Executive Building Solutions is family owned and operated

**For Fun:** EBS presents monthly, quarterly and yearly awards to its employees

**Perks:** Family atmosphere, regular recognition

**Executive Building Solutions in Knoxville on Thursday, May 28, 2020.**

BRIANNA PACIORKA/NEWS SENTINEL



**Ryan Conley, the main supervisor at Executive Building Solutions, dust mops in the lobby at the FirstBank building in Downtown Knoxville on Wednesday, June 17, 2020.** SAUL YOUNG/NEWS SENTINEL

That means visiting customers and employees on site, and maintaining the family atmosphere their employees have come to value.

They focus on building a team that is honest, trustworthy and loyal.

"Without long-term stability and loyalty, you can't grow a company," Guy Crisp said. "I hate to use the adage 'brick by brick,' but it's true. You have to build a foundation and you've got to maintain that foundation."

Sydney Smith started out working evenings as a janitor in 2014 while she finished school. She is the full-time receptionist today but still works cleaning shifts, which are flexible and a good way to make extra money.

She said the company offers her flexibility, companionship, and a united approach to their customer-oriented work.

"We all have the same ideal: dedication, trying to focus on the job and not as much the mess," Smith said.

Janitors, Suzanne Crisp said, are still stereotyped as being uneducated or remedial. Often their employees are highly educated, responsible and passionate. Customers often embrace EBS cleaners

**A lot of people (say), 'Well, you're a janitor'. No, we're not. We're more than that. We give people peace of mind when they come to work that everything's clean, sanitized.**

**Suzanne Crisp** Executive Building Solutions CEO

into the fabric of their own company cultures.

"I still think the janitors get looked over as essential," Suzanne Crisp said. "So we've really (told) our employees, let them know we're proud of them."

### **2nd Place: Cannon & Cannon Inc.**

This consulting, engineering, and field surveying company may be small, with 55 employees, but they've been going strong since 1996. Cannon & Cannon Inc. provides extensive experience in multiple service sectors including field surveying, public utilities, storm water and environmental, transportation and public works, site development, and

construction phase services.

Cannon & Cannon is a woman-owned business and is certified by the National Women's Business Enterprise Certification. The company has full-time offices in Knoxville and Memphis, Tennessee, as well as Bowling Green, Kentucky. Cannon & Cannon has been named in the Top Workplaces poll for the past four years.

### **3rd Place: Kramer Rayson LLP**

Kramer Rayson LLP has specialized in labor and employment law, corporate and commercial law, insurance defense, health care law, litigation (personal injury and other areas) and immigration since 1948. The law firm has 49 employees who are involved in activities outside the practice including local boards and associations. The company has two locations, one in Knoxville and another in Oak Ridge. This is the fifth year Kramer Rayson LLP has been named in the Top Workplaces poll.

"We are helping people and companies," one employee commented about why they love to work at the firm. "There is teamwork, camaraderie, and empathy. I feel that I am appreciated."

# LEADERSHIP LESSONS WITH TOP WORKPLACES CEOS

**Allie Clouse**

Knoxville News Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

More than perhaps any other, this year has come with its share of challenges and opportunities. We asked four Knoxville-area leaders of Top Workplaces to share their lessons learned, tips for productivity and how their companies have changed as a result of the pandemic. **Continued on Page 15**



**The single most important quality in an employee in my opinion is a proactive 'can do' attitude. Competencies can generally be learned, but a strong work ethic and creative problem-solving are much harder to teach.**

**Sindy Dawkins-Schade** SHADES of Development



Pinnacle Financial Partners volunteer together regularly. SUBMITTED

# AT PINNACLE FINANCIAL SERVICES, THERE ARE NO ROOKIES

**Brenna McDermott**

Knoxville News Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

Pinnacle Financial Partners was created to break from the large, impersonal bank model. Now, with \$29.3 billion in assets, leadership is looking to the future, challenged to maintain the culture it has built on the way to \$100 billion.

"The bigger you get, the harder it is to do what we have been doing for the past 20 years," said Harvey White, senior credit officer. "I think that's the challenge that we have as leaders, is to preserve that. Things will change, but that feel of 'We're all in this together' doesn't have to change."

For the third time in four years, Pinnacle Finan-

cial Partners ranked first among medium sized businesses in the Knoxville area in the Top Workplaces annual survey. Top Workplaces, managed by outside firm Energage, surveys employees about company culture.

Pinnacle employees, the survey results show, appreciate the independence and flexibility they're given. That's been the approach since the bank was founded in 2000 by CEO Terry Turner, Rob McCabe and Hugh Queener.

The result is a fresh approach to hiring, incentives and communication.



Pinnacle Financial Partners plans regular family friendly social outings so employees can bond together outside of work. SUBMITTED

**We don't have to encourage teamwork, it is a passion that seems to burn in each of the associates that we attract to the firm.**

**Missy Wallen** Pinnacle Knoxville Chairman

In 2018, Pinnacle, which offers banking, investment, trust and insurance services for businesses and individuals, was the No. 1 bank in Nashville by deposits, where it is headquartered.

### **Not accepting applications**

Pinnacle doesn't take applications. In fact, the entirety of its Knoxville team has been recommended by an existing employee. Pinnacle's advisors have at least 10 years of experience and on average 26 years.

There are about 129 employees in its seven Knoxville locations and more than 2,500 employees nationwide.

"We won't hire somebody unless one of our existing associates has worked with them and worked with them closely enough that they know not only their technical competence but their cultural fit," White said.

With a turnover rate, including retirements, of 5 percent or less per year, there aren't many slots to fill.

As a result, associates feel a sense of commitment to one another, and clients experience continuity.

"We don't have to encourage teamwork, it is a passion that seems to burn in each of the associates that we attract to the firm," Knoxville Chairman Missy Wallen said.

Upon hiring, employees are gifted stock in the company and participate in a yearly cash bonus incentive based on company performance in credit, earnings and deposits, rather than based on individual performance.

Associates aren't micromanaged, Knoxville President Mike DiStefano said. They're encouraged to manage their accounts as they see fit.

Keely Ritchie has worked at Pinnacle for eight years and relishes the opportunity to be an "old school banker," handling business and personal banking needs for her clients.

She gets more referrals at Pinnacle, which she attributes in part to the bank's commitment to customer service.

"That's one of our founding hallmarks is that we do not have automated voicemail; you have a three-ring rule, you pick up the phone and you address clients' concerns," she said.

She values being treated like an adult, trusted to do her job in a way that works for her, but supported when she needs it.

### **Coming together during the pandemic**

Wallen saw the Pinnacle teamwork in action when financial advisors and credit analysts helped customers navigate the Small Business Administration's fraught Paycheck Protection Program, a loan designed to incentivize small businesses to keep employees working through the coronavirus pandemic.

SBA guidance would change sometimes multiple times a day, creating confusion and uncer-



Health and wellness is a core principle of Pinnacle Financial Partners' company culture. SUBMITTED

tainty for business owners. Employees took it personally to make sure their clients were getting the help and clarity they needed.

"You had this whole network of our associates working with each other voluntarily," Wallen said. "It is something that I will remember for the rest of my career."

At one point, more than 70% of the Pinnacle employees nationwide were working from home.

The experience was a reminder of the importance of communication for DiStefano, even if that means just acknowledging the work employees were putting in at home.

"You have to adapt your communications and the way you handle people to how they process things and how they handle things, whether that's a pandemic or that's just everyday normal life," DiStefano said.

### Staying independent

The company relies on committees made of a cross-section of employees to bring ideas on topics like wellness, social events or work environment to the leadership team.

Pinnacle publishes an internal survey each year that evaluates leadership's performance and surfaces any potential problems.

Taking care of employees isn't just an altruistic endeavor. Great culture leads to great customer satisfaction, which leads to strong financial performance.

"We don't want to sell out to a large, impersonal bank," White said. "So the idea, 'hey we're wanting to remain independent and masters of our own destiny,' if you will, is sort of the driving thing behind our focus on earnings and growth to a large extent."

### 2nd Place: First Utility District of Knox County

This water and wastewater utility district has been providing clean water to citizens and businesses in the communities of West Knoxville and beyond since 1954. First Utility District of Knox County has grown to be one of the state's largest water and wastewater districts, serving more than 37,000 customers across 62 miles. The company has been ranked in the Top Workplaces poll for the past three years.

"First Utility District is the best company that I have ever worked for. The environment is fun and inviting and the people here genuinely care for one another," one employee commented. "I am blessed to work for such a wonderful company and look forward to many years alongside my FUD family."

### 3rd Place: SmartBank

SmartBank's story started in January 2006, when longtime executive bankers Bill Carroll and Billy Carroll imagined creating a "better bank." A year later, the first location opened in Pigeon Forge. Now, the bank has 35 branches that serve clients across Tennessee, Alabama, and Florida. SmartBank is dedicated to creating a "better bank" for shareholders, associates, clients, and communities. The company has been named in the Top Workplaces poll for the past four years.

"I am doing the job that I have always wanted to do, the job I was meant for," an employee commented. "I love my customers, my co-workers and the company that I represent! I am treated with respect and kindness. I am given any help or training that I may need by my department managers and/or my senior manager."

# ALL ABOUT PINNACLE

**Industry:** Financial Services

**Headquarters:** Nashville, Tennessee

**Founded:** 2000

**Nationwide employees:** 2,508

**Knoxville area employees:** 129

**Fun Fact:** Every Pinnacle associate has access to the "WOW budget," funds that can be used at any time to wow an associate or client

**For Fun:** Last year's annual summer picnic for associates and their families was held at Dollywood

**Perks:** A robust wellness program with coaching, fitness challenges and prizes for making healthy choices



**Mike DiStefano,**  
Knoxville  
President at  
Pinnacle Financial  
Partners.



**Missy Wallen,**  
Knoxville chair at  
Pinnacle Financial  
Partners.



**Harvey White,**  
Chief Credit  
Officer at  
Pinnacle Financial  
Partners.

### What important leadership lesson have you learned?

Shannon Harper, Harper Auto Square: Managers are just support staff to the producers in our business. I'm only successful if they are successful. And the only way to lead is by love. Fear is a terrible motivator.

Mike Parton, Coulter & Justus: The importance of being gracious. While every person has the ability to affect others through their actions, leaders have more responsibility for their impact on others, and being gracious matters.

Tom Gallaher, Gallaher & Associates: I have learned that everything boils down to the "right people doing the right things right." To accomplish this, a leader has to know his or her purpose, vision, and core values and be relentlessly and consistently committed to them in everything. I use my personal values as my company's core values, so I can be true to myself and to the company at the same time, while knowing I am serving every employee by asking them to adopt these values. We use our values as our guide to navigate opportunities, address problems, and conflicts. In the hiring process, we evaluate potential new team members to ensure we employ people who are in alignment with our values. Having the "right people" means that we find team members that desire to become better people each day and strive to be the best version of themselves on and off the clock. Experience has taught me that our highest success comes as a consequence to our collective pursuit of our vision, purpose, and mastery of our core values.

Sindy Dawkins-Schade, SHADES of Development: I believe that it is important to be a servant leader, dedicated to balancing the needs of individual team members with the needs of the organization — creating an environment that is structured, yet compassionate. Open, positive communication is also extremely important in helping team members feel informed, competent, and the sense that they are making a difference.

### What is your goal for 2020?

Harper: My professional development goal for 2020 is to improve my



Shannon Harper,  
Harper Auto  
Square



Mike Parton,  
Coulter & Justus



Tom Gallaher,  
Gallaher &  
Associates



Sindy  
Dawkins-Schade,  
SHADES of  
Development

implementation discipline. Servant leadership and empathy are constant improvement areas for me.

Parton: To ensure our clients and our people are well taken care of amid all the disruption of the pandemic.

Gallaher: Like many others I'm sure, some goals have changed due to the pandemic. As an essential life safety business that is critical to the area's infrastructure, we quickly adjusted into working remotely, where possible. Those who work in the field did not have the same opportunity, as their roles require a physical presence on customer sites. With customer closures being widespread, we developed an individualized online training plan for each team member, allowing all employees to confidently know their jobs are safe and that there would be no plan to furlough or lay anyone off during the shutdown, should there be periods without regular work to perform. Our mindset is that we will honor our company's values by "Serving Others with Passion" where we can, and when this isn't possible, we will "Thirst for Continuous Improvement" to make ourselves better through investing in our people through training resources.

Dawkins-Schade: In the area of professional development, we are continually working to improve onboarding, organizational systems and continued training practices, platforms and content. My primary goal is to finish building our employee portal and Google classroom to provide and track completion of relevant and required training. My secondary goal is to send as many of my team members as possible to state and national professional development conferences, giving them the opportunity to experience a broader view of our industry's best practices and impact.

### What is the most important

### quality in an employee?

Harper: Honesty.

Parton: That they care about our clients and each other.

Gallaher: The single most important quality for our people is our first Core Value, "Demonstrate Integrity, Regardless of the Outcome." This character trait is a foundational standard that is further described in summary to explain that we must be ethically unyielding, honest and above reproach in all things. We are to inspire trust by saying what we mean and match our behaviors to our words. When this isn't possible, we reset the expectation. We take responsibility for our actions in our successes and in our failures, seeing failure as an opportunity for growth. We are quick to listen, slow to speak, and we choose our words and actions carefully. We recognize that we are responsible for our own happiness and success.

Dawkins-Schade: The single most important quality in an employee in my opinion is a proactive "can do" attitude. Competencies can generally be learned, but a strong work ethic and creative problem-solving are much harder to teach.

### What have you learned during the coronavirus pandemic?

Harper: We have the best employees in the country. Nobody complained. Nobody gave up. Our crew was innovative in creating solutions to provide an absolutely safe environment for their customers and coworkers. We all rallied behind each other and avoided a single layoff. I know we have already emerged from this pandemic as a more cohesive team of people.

Parton: Our people were able to adapt more quickly than we could

have even dreamed possible. Everyone's continued dedication during this time has proven our culture is strong in what matters most to our firm — serving clients and taking care of each other.

Gallaher: The pandemic has served as a great opportunity to discern how effective our team is at living by the company's core values. There are opportunities to take advantage of an organization through working remotely and in other situations of reduced supervision. Our efforts to focus on being the best versions of ourselves have helped our team to develop strong habits and work ethic, allowing us to navigate adversity with grace and efficiency.

Dawkins-Schade: I have learned that we as a team have amazing creativity and problem-solving abilities. Our team members are thoughtful, compassionate and mission-driven, which has allowed us to adapt to our new reality.

### What's your productivity secret?

Harper: Organize your life. Delegate more. Push decisions down. Trust your people.

Parton: A list of priorities and action steps that is updated daily.

Gallaher: The answer is twofold. Hiring people that meet our company's values means we employ hard-working self-starters. Our core value "Empower the Work Environment" is also an essential ingredient, demonstrating trust in our people. The summarized version of this core value describes that we strive to create a work environment where we flourish and succeed to our highest potential. We recognize that everyone has value to add regardless of position or title, and we appreciate effort by rewarding results through measurable, achievable, and accountable goals. We have an attitude of care and kindness toward the well-being of our people's careers, personal lives, and spirituality, using Christian principles to guide our actions.

Dawkins-Schade: My passion for being a lifelong learner, specifically my interest in learning to use new technologies that allow me to stay organized and work smarter, not harder. Equally important to my productivity is that I have surrounded myself with a great team that also values a growth mindset.



Pilot Company, based in Knoxville, is the large category winner for the 2020 Top Workplaces awards. SUBMITTED

# HOW PILOT MAINTAINS A PEOPLE-CENTRIC APPROACH FOR ITS 28K EMPLOYEES

**Brenna McDermott**

Knoxville News Sentinel USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

This year will represent immense change for all businesses, including the Knoxville-based Pilot Company, formerly known as Pilot Flying J.

For the 62-year-old company, though, change has been a constant.

The senior leadership team has spent time recently redefining its values, Chief People Officer

Paul Shore said, to make sure applicants and team members understand the company culture.

"We value people, we value working hard, we value working together and getting results," Shore said. "Those are pretty simple things for people to wrap their heads around when we're talking to applicants."





For the fourth time in four years, Pilot Company has been named a Top Workplaces recipient among large businesses in the Knoxville area. Top Workplaces, a program led by outside firm Energage, surveys employees about company culture.

Pilot employees, according to anonymous surveys, have confidence in the leadership of the company and feel empowered to solve problems.

That leadership is in the midst of a transition. CEO Jimmy Haslam will transition to chairman of the board in January and will be succeeded by Chief Strategy Officer Shameek Konar.

The Haslam family will continue to have a strong presence in the company both in board representation and day-to-day operations. Jimmy Haslam told Knox News in July that Konar is "very smart, great work ethic, a very humble man, and I think understands people very well."

Founder Jim Haslam might have started with just one gas station in 1958, but he's had that people-first mentality from the beginning. It's a message that is reinforced today to Pilot's 28,000 employees at more than 780 travel centers across North America.

Pilot supplies more than 11 billion gallons of fuel each year and is ranked No. 10 on Forbes' list of larg-

est private American companies.

The people-centric approach starts in honest hiring. A 24/7 business like Pilot's, responsible for fueling professional drivers hauling food and goods across America, is not for everyone, Shore said.

"It's hard work out there, so first and foremost we need to be honest about the expectations," Shore said. "We expect people to be friendly and service oriented and have a service mentality in what they do every day here at Pilot."

For the last four years, the company has been "over-investing" in team members with the right benefits, training and leadership development.

"And if we're taking care of that team member who's taking care of that guest, the financials will come," Shore said.

Joanna Martin is a specialist for PFJ University, an internal learning and development program that offers training for Pilot employees.

PFJU offers training courses for new hires, potential general managers, recent college graduates and interns.

Martin started her career at Pilot as an intern. Now, three years later, she helps drive home the people-first culture to new team members and emerging leaders.

## ALL ABOUT PILOT

**Industry:** Energy and Convenience Store

**Headquarters:** Knoxville, Tennessee

**Founded:** 1958

**Nationwide employees:** 28,000

**Knoxville area employees:** 1,501

**Fun Fact:** Ranked No. 10 on Forbes' list of America's Largest Private Companies

**Perks:** Professional development through PFJ University

**Pilot CEO Jimmy Haslam and Chief Strategy Officer Shameek Konar at Pilot.** SAUL YOUNG/NEWS SENTINEL



Pilot Company, based in Knoxville, is the large category winner for the 2020 Top Workplaces awards. SUBMITTED

"Having that intern experience really set me up for success in understanding different parts of the business and a greater picture of what Pilot is," Martin said.

And once new hires are in the door, there are plenty of opportunities for growth across divisions, from retail to energy.

"Culturally, we like to see people grow, we like to see people flourish, we like to see people take on broader responsibilities out there," Shore said.

Allison Cornish is a vice president of operations in retail. A Pilot employee since 1999, Cornish manages day-to-day operations in stores on the Eastern seaboard.

Though it was smaller, Cornish said it was obvious even then that Pilot was a growing company, a place where she could thrive and advance her career.

"It was innovative, even back 20 years ago, and always trying to improve itself," she said.

Since that time, she's observed Pilot investing more in team member development and formal mentoring programs. Seeing a store employee work her way up to becoming a store manager is one of the most rewarding parts of Cornish's job.

The company values people, teamwork, hard work and results, she said, and the working environment has become more collaborative and teamwork oriented over time.

"Because it's built into the DNA of the business, I actually do feel very optimistic that we can continue to have that great culture," Cornish said. "We've got over 28,000 team members, which is really hard to believe, who are kind of living and

**"Yes, we're driven, yes we work hard, yes we hold each other accountable for results, but there's just a genuine feeling of we're a family, we're a team, we take care of each other," Shore said. "It (does) not feel like just a big business."**

breathing that culture. There is definitely power in the masses for having that many team members that value the same thing."

As a private company, it's easy to make decisions in the best interest of employees, Shore said, rather than reacting to the market or shareholders.

"Yes, we're driven, yes we work hard, yes we hold each other accountable for results, but there's just a genuine feeling of we're a family, we're a team, we take care of each other," Shore said. "It (does) not feel like just a big business."

### **2nd Place: First Horizon**

First Horizon has been committed to an "employee first" vision and philosophy since 1864. One of the company's 5,000 employees nationwide commented that even after 45 years of working, "it doesn't seem that long." Another said, "Every day I come to work, I am thankful to be here, and I work with awesome people who also make coming to

work a joy as they embody the values of First Horizon Bank."

The bank has been ranked in the Top Workplaces poll for the past four years because of the great feedback from employees, but it's not just the employees who enjoy working with First Horizon. The bank has one of the highest customer retention rates of any bank in the country. First Horizon's "Firstpower" culture is based on accountability, adaptability, integrity, and relationships. These values power every decision made at the company's 25 locations.

### **3rd Place: 21st Mortgage Corporation**

21st Mortgage opened its doors in 1995 with only four employees, two of whom were founders of the company. Today, 21st Mortgage has two locations and more than 850 employees. The company is a full service lender specializing in manufactured and mobile home loans. This is the first year 21st Mortgage has been ranked in the Top Workplaces poll.

The company is proud to give back through its "21st Cares" program. During the past three years, 21st Mortgage employees have collectively volunteered more than 5,000 hours with more than 30 nonprofit organizations in the community.

"21st Mortgage provides for me financially, emotionally and physically through programs that encourage me to give my best in all areas of my life," an employee commented. "I am challenged to grow, and I am appreciated for my contributions to our department. I look forward to coming to work every day, Monday through Friday!"

# Key steps before returning to office life



**Doug Claffey**  
Energage CEO

Employee feedback plays a vital role in any return-to-work plan. The first thing leaders need to do — before any transition plan is communicated to the staff — is to gather employee feedback via a short, targeted survey. This provides the critical data needed to help inform a successful plan.

Think of the return-to-work transition plan in three phases:

1 Planning input: Human resources, a tiger team, or a combination of both develop a plan to return to the workplace.

2 Post-decision: Make sure your plan is clear and is without missing spots before you begin to execute.

3 Post-return: Assess the transition, how it went, where there are hotspots, and what went well.



GETTY IMAGES

From the start, it's important to capture employee feedback while you are formulating your plan. There are two critical factors to consider:

**Who is at risk?** Know how many of your employees are at a higher risk of serious complications from COVID. Also, be aware of how many employ-

ees are caregivers for people who have complications for COVID. Employees who are immunocompromised or have breathing challenges are in a higher risk category.

**Who has childcare challenges?** Childcare is one of the biggest pressure points we've seen. Employees who are caregivers to school-age children, particularly in the 5- to 10-year-old range, require a lot of time and attention. Schools, camps and other care settings are probably not an option.

Focus your attention on three key topics as you begin your transition:

1 Productivity: Are people going to be more productive as they come into the office?

2 Emotions: What emotions are people feeling? These can range from fear to excitement.

3 Logistics: What are the who, what, and how logistics of returning to the workplace.

If employees are fearful of contracting COVID, the way they perceive

the workplace is going to be different than others. There's a very good chance this will create drama throughout your organization. But if you can get out ahead of that, you can really save yourself a headache and also be more productive when you're making this transition.

Lastly, this is the new reality. Be deliberate. Be thoughtful. Make your employees feel like they're part of the planning process and that their input matters. And after you've communicated the plan and started the rollout, continue to collect their feedback so they feel valued and heard. This is extremely important. Because if you don't put a lot of thought into it, your business will suffer a significant impact.

*Doug Claffey is founder of Energage, a Philadelphia-based research and consulting firm that surveyed more than 2 million employees at more than 7,000 organizations in 2019. Energage is the News-Sentinel's research partner for Top Workplaces.*

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