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Inside the Top Five Best Places to Work: No. 5: Grant Thornton LLP

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June 19, 2006 (Computerworld) At Grant Thornton LLP, the "Grant Thornton experience," as employees call it, is how the Chicago-based accounting firm is providing career development for its staff and maintaining its integrity and technology during a period of rapid expansion.

David Holyoak, partner and CIO, started out as a CPA more than 20 years ago on the business side of the firm. He notes that "over the past five years, we've grown significantly, from 2,700 to more than 5,000 people total. With growth comes complexity and change. How do we keep pace [with] or, better put, stay ahead of that growth from a million-dollar to a billion-dollar organization? We intend to support our internal customers with the best technology available." A snapshot of a typical day at Grant Thornton shows how that's done.

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Special Report...

100 BEST PLACES

TO WORK IN IT 2006

13th Annual Report:
100 Best Places to
Work in IT 2006

List of Best Places
Winners

6 a.m. to 8 a.m.: Network engineer Craig Cohen is on call three days a week. "I'm going through the transition from being a remote-access engineer to learning the essentials of a network engineer," he says. "After my manager feels that I have the appropriate training, I'll be on call all the time."

8:30 a.m.: Melissa Hunt, regional technology manager at Grant Thornton's Dallas office, logs into instant messaging and e-mail. She has already checked them from home with her BlackBerry. "I'm responsible for relationships with regional managing partners, the office managing partners and the IT support staff in the field in my region," she says. "I'm also involved with the national work/life balance task force. I get to be involved in the business side as well, to learn about the business and take that back to IT."

I need a secure way to transmit medical records.

9 a.m.: "Typically, I have a couple of hot issues," says Cohen. "Packing up a router or shipping it out or making a change to an interface. I may have to call people back or respond to e-mail -- dealing with 'little fires.'"

Stephani Osborne, manager of IT communications and training, meets with the strategic learning group regarding plans for a formal 360-degree review program. After that, she meets with one of Grant Thornton's relationship managers. "Their role is to be the liaison with internal customers, to listen to what customers

need and help the back-office staff understand what those needs are," Osborne says.

WHY THEY'RE TOPS

■ **Ranked No. 9 for retention**

■ **Spends $2,318 per year per IT worker on training**

■ **43% of its IT managers are women**

■ **29% of its IT staffers are women**

10:30 a.m.: Aenoi Narisak, a Web programmer in Grant Thornton's application development and programming unit, attends a two-hour class in Finance 101. "It's very helpful to someone like myself, who's oriented toward IT," he says. "Such classes count toward our goal of 40 hours of training per year."

10:45 a.m.: The IT infrastructure support staff installs Visio on Osborne's computer. "The staff is fabulous," she says. A few years ago, Grant Thornton had a program designed to recognize and reward employees for outstanding customer service, "but it became an ineffective measurement because people were doing so well," she says.

Noon: As part of the IT department's open-door policy, Holyoak has "skip-level" lunches with his staffers about once a month. "Upper management gives us the opportunity to have a conversation with them about what problems we have and what we're doing well," Narisak says.

"We have monthly socials, and every two years there's a three-day conference for all IT employees in Chicago," Hunt says. "The CEO attended the last conference, in November, and I actually got to meet him. As a team, we decided to wear T-shirts with techie sayings. Our teammates voted on which best matched our personalities. On Saturday we wore our shirts, and everyone had a good laugh."

Members of the Grant Thornton IT team: Noi Narisak, Craig Cohen, CIO David Holyoak, Stephani Osborne (holding a rose to signify what the company calls its "passion for the business of accounting") and Melissa Hunt (on videoconference from Dallas).
Image Credit: George Tuft

2 p.m.: Cohen views frequent interruptions positively. "The more people trust me to check something, as opposed to my manager, that's a big compliment," he says. "I think the Oak Brook data center feels almost like a club -- we're truly a close team. We [also] have some of the best cutting-edge technology right here in our data center."

Osborne spends the rest of the day in software demos for project management methodology software. "The fact that I was included in the panel, despite my nontechnical background, means a lot," she says. "I got to bring a different perspective, and I learned a lot about project management."

Meanwhile, Cohen says, "I'm involved in projects such as evaluating new technology, assisting in rollouts or creating various mediums, such as a Web site for communication or instruction documents. I'm also creating a lab for internships."

6 p.m. to 8 p.m.: For Cohen, self-improvement continues after he gets home. "I try to pick up some sort of journal to keep my skills up, with IT as well as organizational skills," he says. "I'm in a Cisco class this week. I have over 70 hours of training this year. Grant Thornton offers lots of recognition and opportunities."

See the complete Best Place to Work in IT 2006 special report.