

BEST PLACES TO WORK IN THE BAY AREA 2009

HEFFERNAN INSURANCE BROKERS — NO. 2 — MID-SIZE EMPLOYERS (101-500)

Colleagues are like family for Heffernan staffers

BY DAVID MILLS

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If you walk into the Heffernan Insurance Brokers office in Walnut Creek, you'll probably see and hear why it's considered to be a great place to work.

On any given workday, you would probably hear chatter and laughter at the desks. You might also see a child playing or a dog scampering down a hall.

If it's lunchtime, you might stumble upon a yoga class or a couple of dozen employees training for an upcoming walk-a-thon.

It's all part of the philosophy that CEO Mike Heffernan has instilled at the company since he started it in 1988.

"I try to create an environment where people are respected at all levels," Heffernan said. "I think you should treat employees like you'd want to be treated."

That was the culture Heffernan brought in two decades ago when the insurance company was in one office and had only nine employees. The corporate climate has remained the same even though Heffernan Insurance now has 405 employees in 11 branches nationwide. That includes 297 workers in four Bay Area offices.

"The thing Mike has been able to do is keep the core culture," said Melani Conti, a senior vice president who started at the firm in 1987. "It's like family. We care about each other."

It's a theme echoed by employees throughout the company.

"I tell people I have my own family, but I also have this other family here," said Human Resources Director Maria Warlich.

Heffernan accomplishes this feat in a number of ways.

The first is the respect the people at the top give the employees lower down the ladder. The company also keeps its operations



PAOLO VESSICA

Warlich (left) says Heffernan (right) has developed a family-like company culture.

at a smaller, more local level. No division is larger than 30 people. Workers are also encouraged to maintain their individuality. Children and pets are allowed during office hours.

"I think the key is that the workers feel comfortable to be themselves," Heffernan said. "They feel they can come in and talk and walk like they usually do."

There are also the amenities. Most of the office staff work 35-hour weeks, with every other Friday off.

The company pays for training and licensing. Classes and lectures are led by senior employees as well as guest speakers in what known as Heffernan Group University.

The company also employs a full-time wellness director. He advises people on how to eat healthy and how to quit smoking, among other topics.

The yoga classes are part of that program. They are offered during the noon hour twice

HEFFERNAN INSURANCE BROKERS

CEO: Mike Heffernan.

Headquarters: Walnut Creek.

Number of Bay Area employees: 297.

Score: 94.85.

a week at the Walnut Creek office.

"I think the wellness program reinforces the notion that the company cares about its employees," Conti said.

Heffernan also believes in giving back to the community. This year, more than 30 employees will participate in the Avon Breast Cancer walk. They expect to raise more than \$30,000, and the company will match their donations.

Warlich has four children, and she says it's nice to work at a place that reduces her stress rather than adding to it.

"It's nice to wake up in the morning and want to come to work," she said. "I love my job."

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