Best Places to Work
For minorities

Flexibility, security, opportunity, recognition—these are factors that staffers at the area’s best workplaces all seem to appreciate. But in survey after survey, people of color tell us they also value a handful of additional characteristics: mentorship, opportunities to advance, support, and a certain intangible sense of belonging. These are the Chicago-area companies that ranked highest in the eyes of minorities.

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1. Microsoft  
**Software development**

*Year founded:* 1975  |  *Employees:* 120,849 companywide (including part time), 596 local  |  *Are they hiring?* Yes (estimate not available)

A design engineer, Chandra Cramer spent two decades as the only woman and the only person of color in her workplace. Then she walked into Microsoft’s Chicago office, where the general manager who hired her was a woman of color. “I felt at home for the first time in my career,” recalls Cramer, corporate accounts sales director, Midwest region. “I’m valued and not seen as different.” She’s been at Microsoft 15 years and still appreciates the flexibility she had and can offer her staff. And in a time when people can and do work anywhere, the eight who report to Cramer insist on meeting every Friday—Skype doesn’t cut it.
Lani Phillips, general manager of the company’s Midwest district, has been with Microsoft 20 years, the last two in Chicago. A woman of color, she pays it forward by mentoring (especially black women) and by sharing her career experience. “It gives me oxygen to give back,” she says. “Anything is possible.” This year she’s been working with younger associates on their elevator pitch. “What’s your story?” she asks them. “It’s a big company. How do you get to the next level? Let’s talk about it.”

Using Microsoft’s generous benefits, Phillips made a $15,000 investment to send a Kenyan girl to college, and Microsoft matches that. The company also paid for an executive coach to guide Phillips’ professional development, prompting her to set goals, be more present and even eat better. (She lost 26 pounds.) “I wanted to take my leadership skills to the next level. They invested in me.”

Never mind an open-door policy, how about no office at all? Chris Sakalosky, vice president, central region, uses a headset telephone and is either walking around or sitting in a high-back chair that offers some privacy. “My office is my headset,” he says. Sakalosky uses the company’s stay-fit benefit ($8000) to play paddle tennis and bike with his family. “I model ‘get out of the office’ by using the benefit.” At Microsoft for 20 years, he marvels at the opportunities he’s had within a giant corporation, including a stint running a startup Microsoft acquired. “I got to scratch that itch, and it taught me a lot.”

—Anne Moore

2. Radio Flyer Toymaker

Year founded: 1917 | Employees: 109 companywide, 74 local | Are they hiring? Yes, recruiting to fill five positions and 15 summer internships

Work is play and play is work at Radio Flyer. It’s common to see employees (called Flyers) at the company, famous for bright red wagons and now its zippy Tesla Model S for Kids, rolling through the warehouse testing a new trike, bike, scooter or wagon. “We have a world-class model shop where we create prototypes,” says Matt Young, 34, advanced concepts manager. Employees can take products home to test. “We get paid to play.”

LEED-certified headquarters, installing geothermal and solar systems that reduce natural gas use 50 percent. CWO (Chief Wagon Officer) Robert Pasin, 48, sees being eco-friendly as a selling point for recruiting and retaining talent because young staffers care about sustainable design, he says. Increased natural lighting, an outdoor walking path landscaped with native plants, and free vegetables and herbs from garden beds are other eco-friendly amenities Flyers enjoy.

All staffers get free HMO and dental coverage, access to an onsite workout facility, and year-round flex time. Generous financial incentives include $5,250-a-year tuition reimbursement, a $1,500 travel bonus and a $300 annual wellness reimbursement.

Many employees, like communications lead Brittny Aupont, 30, come in through Radio Flyer’s popular intern program. Twenty-five percent of current Flyers were interns, says Amy Bastuga, 45, senior vice president of human resources.

Recently back from a three-month paid maternity leave, Aupont loves the new spa-like lactation wellness room and adjustable desks that allow sitting or standing. Expectant mothers also get a free prime parking spot.
Quality assurance engineer Mitesh Shah, 24, says until he became a Flyer, he'd never heard of a company offering paid days off to do volunteer work. "That's a huge difference."

—Cassandra West

### 3. Stratosphere Networks  IT managed services

**Year founded:** 2003  **Employees:** 56 companywide, 55 local  **Are they hiring?** Yes, six people

Though relatively small, Stratosphere is trying to do things big businesses do, like spending more energy on leadership. It created an executive leadership team that's focused on organizational development tasks and improving the performance review process. And to help employees keep their tech skills fresh, Stratosphere covers certification expenses in full.

"We know that every year, we have to be thinking differently," says co-founder Steve Melchiorre, 41. One example: In the last year, Stratosphere added a bereavement policy, giving employees three additional paid days off.

Gus Gonzalez, 40, who does network support, takes the performance review opportunity to let his bosses know what's going on with him. "I tell them everything, what I do outside of work." And the company works to accommodate his schedule as a full-time travel softball coach. Flexible schedules allow him to work 6 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Because IT work can be stressful, Francis Micor, 42, likes the perk of free chair massages. More important is the company's constant focus on improving the culture and respect for his being a father of three. "They absolutely understand the responsibility of family." The director of client engagement can work from home when needed and not have his job performance questioned.

 Occasionally getting "excellent Bulls and Cubs tickets" isn't bad, either.

—Cassandra West
4. Edlong Dairy Technologies  Dairy flavors and ingredients

Year founded: 1914 | Employees: 89 companywide, 79 local | Are they hiring? Yes, seven people

Edlong has long championed trust, teamwork and community philanthropy.

The firm offers a summer outing and a family trip annually—events that involve the entire company and help build personal connections and improve teamwork.

Beyond some of the usual frills that come with almost any Best Places to Work environment, Edlong gets extra points from employees for developing in-house talent: Sixty-five percent of managers and supervisors have been promoted from within. "Our mission is to enrich the lives of those we touch," says CEO Laurette Rondenet, 46.

Rondenet's attitude seems to be getting through to her staff, judging by their responses to Crain's survey: "Leadership genuinely cares about the employees as individuals." "We are a company that cares about doing the right thing for the customer." "I feel it's MY company. We all are in this together. We have lots of fun while working."

—Liyong Qian

5. Braintree  Payment processing software

Year founded: 2007 | Employees: 550 companywide, 300 local | Are they hiring? Yes (estimate not available)

Since being on Crain's Best Places to Work list last year, PayPal subsidiary Braintree has added more than 100 people to its Chicago office. The mobile payments company expects to up its headcount this year but won't disclose expected numbers.

Emese Balla, who moved to the U.S. from Hungary in 2010, is Braintree's head of people. She leapt from the food industry to tech when she joined the company last year. While she’s responsible for bringing on new hires, she likes that the company allows people to shape their own destinies once they’re on board. "If you want to create a job that works for you or inspires you, you can put a small-business case together." And if bosses can see the business needs, they'll make it happen.

The company likes to "hire curious individuals," says Anna Johnson, who trains new employees and is on the internal diversity and inclusion team. "A lot of companies can write really pretty diversity statements on their website." But when she came for an interview, she took note of the Braintree-branded rainbow stickers for the LGBTQ community all over the office. "What it told me is that people were comfortable being out."

Along with yoga, dance classes, a sabbatical program, subsidized child care and legal assistance, Braintree also offers benefits for transgender employees.

Editor's note: This story has been corrected to reflect that Braintree is a subsidiary of PayPal.

—Cassandra West
6. Centric Consulting  
*Management consulting*

Year founded: 2001 | Employees: 432 companywide, 56 local | Are they hiring? Yes, 12 people in Chicago

Centric’s culture is embodied in the idea of “do the right thing,” says Vice President Ted Goodman, 52. “We create an unmatched experience for employees and clients.”

The company offers an annual holiday trip in January for all employees and a guest. Typically three days and two nights, the trip has taken staffers to locations such as Puerto Vallarta, Mexico; San Antonio; Phoenix; Cancun, Mexico; New Orleans; the Bahamas; San Diego; Nashville, Tenn.; Puerto Rico; Miami; and Las Vegas.

Back at home, staffers get unlimited paid time off and leadership training. Customer service is emphasized over sales. “Leadership does not push sales, rather genuine relationship-building with its clients and prospects,” as one employee notes in Crain’s survey.

—Lijing Qian

7. Neighborhood Loans  
*Mortgage brokerage*

Year founded: 2005 | Employees: 141 | Are they hiring? Yes, 28 people

The scent of new carpet and freshly done offices hangs in the air at Neighborhood Loans’ Lombard headquarters. Expansion comes with 20 percent annual growth. Offices are bright and cheerful, and the space has amenities like gyms and game areas.

Employees get free lunches on Friday, and the company hosts potlucks that can seem like a mini United Nations. “We want everyone to bring something from their culture,” says Jordanian-born Omar Mryan, 26, a two-year employee and senior manager of strategy and business development.

“We are a diverse mix here—Albanians, Russians,” says senior mortgage banker Mayra Rubio, 34, who’s Mexican-American. She says the coaching and mentoring from the top are invaluable in ways she can’t measure.
The company encourages employees to give back to the community through its Neighborhood Loans Gives Back program, which matches charitable donations up to a certain percentage.

A culture of camaraderie and management's open-door policy make Canadian-born Gene Raso, 41, head of secondary markets, enjoy coming to work. In fact, he owned the company before selling it to the current owners in 2010. It was their leadership and the company's genuine caring about people that brought him back, he says.

—Cassandra West

8. SWC Technology Partners Information technology services and consulting

Year founded: 1980 | Employees: 182 companywide, 180 local | Are they hiring? Yes, 65 people

Talent development is SWC’s core mission. To further employees’ career, the firm offers leadership training, career coaching and business writing workshops.

“We provide people with the right opportunities to make sure they are challenged and moving toward their next step as opposed to staying stagnant in one role,” human resources manager Fran Peters, 38, says.

Staffers value the access to top levels of management. “I feel my ideas are solicited and taken into consideration,” one says in Crain’s survey. “I could talk to my supervisor all the way up to the president of the company about ideas, and they’d be taken seriously.”

Wrote another: “I always feel supported by my peers and the management team. They are open to hearing ideas and acting on the ones that make sense.”

—Liyong Qian

9. DialogTech Information/data technology services

Year founded: 2005 | Employees: 145 companywide, 123 local | Are they hiring? Yes, 30 people
DialogTech employees must be "swans," says CEO Irv Shapiro, 61. "A 'swan' is smarter than average, hardworking, ambitious—and you have to be nice."

While the five VCs who fund the firm might raise eyebrows about the nice requirement, there’s a reason to encode it into the company culture, he says. "People want to work with other people who are pleasant."

Aditya Jayanty, 33, director of application release and telecommunications, says the concept syncs up with his management style. "I don’t manage people on hours but results," he says. And he goes out of his way to always make himself available to his team.

In the last year, DialogTech began an agenda to make the company a more attractive environment for women and increase their number in management. Paid maternity leave got bumped to 12 weeks, paternity leave to three (the industry standard is two, says HR director Amy Dolan, 30).

Every employee gets a Mac computer. Those who have long commutes get a hot spot if they want to beat rush hour and get work done on the train. DialogTech also allocates $1,000 per employee per year for personal development opportunities.

DialogTech employees apparently are cereal lovers, because the kitchen and dining area stocks a variety of cereals and two refrigerated cases filled with gallons of milk. Opposite is a lounge/playroom outfitted with a large-screen TV, hammock chair, pinball machine and guitars for times when workers want to kick back and relax.

—Cassandra West

10. Ketchum  
Public relations and marketing

Year founded: 1923  |  Employees: 2,500 companywide, 90 local  |  Are they hiring?
Yes, nine people in Chicago

If annual company training getaways to destinations like Jamaica, France and Belgium don’t command the attention of globe-trotting go-getters, a study-abroad-esque program for working professionals just might.

Ketchum’s Global Scholar Program sends two employees each year to another Ketchum office for up to two months—all expenses paid.

"(Candidates) make the case both in terms of what they would bring to that office and what they would bring back in knowledge from that office, because we recognize—both culturally and in terms of expertise—there’s a lot of sharing that can happen when you bring people together," says Bill Zucker, 53, partner and director of Ketchum Midwest.

Having offices in 70 countries not only gives employees a wide selection when pitching a destination to work abroad, it also allows them to regularly interact with their international colleagues.

"I have peers in Germany, in London, in San Francisco, in New York, in Atlanta, in Brazil that I talk to and email with every day, every week, and we share ideas back and forth," says Tera Miller, 51, partner and director of strategic and creative planning.
And since employees aren’t always traveling to exotic locations, Ketchum’s Chicago crew aims to create a fun and inclusive local office environment as well.

An in-house Diversity & Inclusion Team hosts events covering everything from Hispanic and LGBT communities to Black History Month and International Women’s Day; new employees meet with the leadership team over pie; and everyone reaps the benefits of beer-and-wine-cart Fridays.

The company’s retention rate? More than 90 percent.

—Madie Scott

Methodology

Who was eligible? Businesses in Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry and Will counties in Illinois and Lake County, Ind., with more than 50 full-time employees as of Sept. 1. (Published employee totals are as of Dec. 31.)

What criteria were used? Conduent HR Services, a global human resources consulting firm, developed two surveys, one for the company and one for its employees. Of the 195 companies that applied, 147 took part in both the employer and employee survey rounds. More than 14,900 employees in the Chicago area took the survey. The employer portion focused on quantitative issues about pay, promotions, health care and other benefits, hiring practices and more. The employee portion dealt with fairness of pay, vacation time, relationships with management and coworkers, career development, culture and other day-to-day workplace issues.

How was it scored? We combined the scores of the two surveys, with the employee responses making up roughly 66 percent of the total. To be included in the Best Places to Work for Minorities rankings, responses from employees self-identifying as members of a minority group had to make up at least 10 percent of the company’s total number of respondents. Only those employees’ survey responses were used in the analysis.