

how well the organization is doing at holding down turnover, Brideau points to its 3.5 percent vacancy rate, the percentage of jobs open on average at any particular time; the industry average, he says, is about 10 percent.

Our survey repeatedly found people praising Columbia St. Mary's flexibility and caring environment, though a few offered negative comments. Brideau, however, has set a tough goal for HR Vice President Cheryl Hill. When she interviewed for her position shortly after Brideau was hired, Hill asked him to define how she should measure her own success on the job. "In a few years," he told her,

"there will be two types of healthcare workers in Milwaukee – those who work at Columbia St. Mary's and those who wish they did."

**(TIE) 5. UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE**  
4,864 employees

A couple of years after Nancy Zimpher arrived as new chancellor at UWM, she appointed a commission to examine the status of women at the university, part of a UW System initiative. The results of the May 2001 report were troubling. One-third of female employees felt that "the climate is unsp-

portive, that they are not recognized or valued, that colleagues and students question their competence and that they are excluded from formal and informal decisions and activities." An equal number complained of discrimination and harassment. The commission's head, Nadya Fouad, an educational psychology professor, admits today that she "would have been pretty pessimistic" about the prospect of the university ever finding its way onto a list like this one.

But UWM did something that too rarely happens after such fact-finding exercises: It took action. The commission's recommendations were handed over to a series of implementation teams. Two years later, the university "does belong on such a list," says Fouad. "People are feeling like decisions are made much more quickly, more responsively. It is not lip service; people are trying to make this a better place, and it is indeed a better place."

The changes didn't so much involve a raft of new benefits. "We're not policy poor," notes Sona Andrews, UWM vice provost and the person who ultimately oversees human resources operations. "The biggest changes have been in structural changes we've made to provide services for employees." For instance, the university pulled together all of its existing work/life balance policies – leave programs, telecommuting policies, flex-time programs – into a single reference brochure and also carved out an office in the HR department devoted to the topic so employees who need the flexibility can more easily find out what's possible. Telecommuting policies were made more generous, and Andrews says mentoring programs were expanded to cover a wider range of employees than just faculty. "Policies establish the floor," she says. "What we've done over the last couple of years is go beyond the floor."

Zimpher, of course, has been recruited away to the University of Cincinnati, and a search is on to find her successor. Fouad and Andrews, though, believe the changes the chancellor encouraged are here to stay. The changing culture "is becoming institutionalized," says Fouad. "I can't imagine a chancellor coming and not saying that a healthy, respectful and supportive climate for everyone is not in the best interest of the university."

**101 TO 500 EMPLOYEES**

**1. NEROLI SALON AND SPA/  
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WELLNESS, Milwaukee**

103 employees

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Susan Haise started her career as a hairdresser, then became a trainer and adviser for a company that distributed the Aveda line of personal care products. Seeing a market both for a one-stop day spa – a less expensive alternative to resort-based spas – and for increased training for salon professionals, Haise opened the Skin Institute and Day Spa in the Third Ward in 1993. The institute moved into its own quarters at 342 N. Water St. under the name Institute for Beauty and Wellness in 2000, while the spa remained at its 325 E. Chicago St. address and changed its name to Neroli. A second Neroli spa opened in Brookfield's Town Centre this fall.

While she started small, Haise says she's always brought a big-business outlook to the job. "We've always had a systems handbook and always felt training was important," she says. Employees get regular performance reviews, and the business periodically surveys workers to find out what benefits they would like to see.

It's definitely a family enterprise: Haise has two sisters who work for her, and their father, a retired truck driver, used to help with maintenance and related work until he fully retired.

Neroli encourages employees to explore career paths that can keep them in the company by learning new skills. Those surveyed praised training opportunities. Emphasizing the personal touch, new employees fill out a form listing favorite products and restaurants; the information is used to tailor the choice of incentive awards made to those workers. Paid vacations are available even to part-timers (10-15 percent of the staff), pro-rated based on the number of hours worked.

Neroli's benefits plan includes health insurance for employees and family members. The firm also provides a short-term disability leave often used for maternity (employees pay for it through a payroll deduction plan). Costly? No – it pays off in continuity, says Haise. "Fifty-four percent of our team members have been with the company three years or longer. That's the payoff for me."

Employees were almost unanimous in their praises. "Unbelievable environment," says one, adding that she is "constantly surprised by continuously improving benefits." The spa, she says, has "an excellent – maybe unheard of – environment for working mothers in terms of flexibility. I wouldn't consider working anywhere else."

**2. P.F. CHANG'S CHINA BISTRO,  
Wauwatosa**  
129 employees

This trendy Mayfair restaurant has made a splash in the year since it opened. Two recent weekday visits found it bustling and crowded with diners.

Part of a national upscale restaurant chain

based in Phoenix, P.F. Chang's has also made a splash among employees. A look at the waitstaff alone suggests the place not only accepts diversity but embraces it. The look is redolent of urban ethnic chic. Flexible schedules enabling employees to attend to children's needs or personal priorities such as schooling, extensive continuing education programs and significant numbers of women in managerial roles all contributed to the establishment's ranking among employers in its size category as a best place to work for women.

Amy Herold had logged years in restaurant management when she said good-bye to all of that four years ago to give birth. Returning to the business last year as a server when Chang's opened, she hadn't expected to work her way so soon into the management track, but Chang's flexibility made that possible. "I witnessed firsthand that P.F. Chang's was committed to providing their managers with quality of life," Herold says in MRA's survey. "Many restaurants say that, but not many actually deliver."

Employees share in the enthusiasm. "There's no glass ceiling," says one. "I have never worked for a more responsive management team," adds another.

There's a reason for that. "You just can't lose your top people," says John O'Neill, operating partner for Chang's operation here. "It's just so much more economically feasible to work with them."

**3. KAHLER SLATER ARCHITECTS,  
Milwaukee**

102 employees in southeastern Wisconsin  
Kahler Slater was one of the companies that ended up both on the list of best places to work for women and on the list of best places to work overall for its size category. Benefits and pay helped there, but its collaborative culture and particular flexible approach to scheduling contributed to its high score on the women's portion of our survey.

Flexible doesn't mean undemanding – the standard work week for the firm's professionals is 45 hours – but employees have both the freedom and responsibility to manage that time themselves. "To be able to schedule your day based on what is best for your personal schedule [also factoring in your clients' schedule] is priceless," says one. "It is great to be actually treated like an adult."

Yet Kahler Slater, where 49 percent of employees are women, never set out to focus on the particular needs of those workers. "We've never created or crafted any policy around a gender strategy," says Jill Morin, one of three people who share the firm's top executive duties. "We address the needs of our staff, and if some of them happen to be women, great."

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