Advanced Technology Laboratories Leads the Pack with Ultrasound Harmony

The precocious child of Westmark International, Inc., Advanced Technology Laboratories (ATL) is at the forefront of the worldwide medical ultrasound industry. They currently market their equipment to four major user groups throughout North America and Europe. These end users are the physicians working in Obstetrics and Gynecology, Cardiology, Radiology and Vascular treatment specialties.

ATL's success in the industry can be attributed to two main factors:

- An ability to swiftly develop and manufacture reliable high quality products.
- A commitment to nurturing the well-being and job satisfaction of its employees.

To understand the roots of these characteristics, you need look no further than the founding members of the company. ATL was formed by a group of Boeing engineers in 1969 as a marine electronics consulting firm. A few years later they became involved in noninvasive medical ultrasound research with the University of Washington and introduced the Mark I ultrasound monitoring system in 1975. ATL had found their niche.

In 1980 the Squibb Company purchased ATL, then called ADR SpaceLabs. Five years later ATL spun off to form Westmark International, Inc. In 1989, Westmark's reported earnings were $438.8 million, with ATL leading the medical ultrasound field and generating $265.5 million of those profits.

Employees Benefit from Their Labors

The development and manufacture of high tech medical equipment is a volatile environment driven by major technological innovation -- a piece of equipment can be outdated within a few years of its introduction to the marketplace.

For example, when color flow monitors were introduced they quickly became the standard, the obsolescence of millions of dollars of relatively new equipment. For ATL, the color flow monitors resulted in overall industry growth of about 20 percent per year -- and those ATL employees participating in the company ISOP program benefited directly from this growth.

That is because ATL has a profit-sharing policy that allows those who participate in creating the profits to share those profits.

With creativity and innovation driving the industry, Research & Development engineers are under considerable pressure to stay on the leading edge of medical technology and to consistently perform beyond expectations. They must be able to think fast and respond; to hear an idea and turn out a prototype quickly.

To encourage this type of creativity, ATL acknowledges employees for outstanding contributions with cash bonuses, trade show trips, awards and company-wide honors, educational opportunities, preferred parking spaces, acknowledgement lunches, and even flowers.

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Employees Enjoy Personal Support And Career Growth

To help their employees stay current in this swiftly moving business, ATL keeps their extensive technical library up-to-date and available to staff members. It regularly sends designers through training programs and to trade shows to keep tabs on the competition.

The company also provides plenty of stress-relief opportunities. On-site volleyball and basketball courts, plus a weight room let employees blow off steam and sweat while they think. Fridays are reserved for casual dress and the Fourth of July is the annual barbecue and a T-shirt contest. The contest winner (determined by an applause meter) receives a dinner certificate and a lot of ribbing.

A Start to Finish Plant, ALT Offers Cross-training and Flex-time

More than 1,200 employees work at ATL's newly expanded 280,000 square foot Bothell headquarters, which was built in 1985. In those early years, the company was spread across 16 buildings in a five mile radius making communication difficult. Now employees develop, build and sell this sophisticated equipment all under one roof, which also helps ATL maintain strict quality control.

ATL cross-trains most of their assembly plant employees and uses an adjusted schedule to avoid down time. This schedule reduces inventory space and speeds up assembly by building the equipment to order whenever possible.

The engineering department is almost 200 strong, consisting of electrical, chemical, and software engineers, plus a full complement of technicians. Doctors on staff are available to explain the diagnostic capabilities of the equipment directly to the end users, as well as overseeing the content of the interactive training videos.

A small research and marketing staff promotes the equipment directly to their four target niches worldwide, while sales offices around the globe move the equipment into the marketplace.

The legal department and a regulatory group work with the government and industry agencies that oversee the introduction of medical equipment into the marketplace. Technical support personnel staff the customer service department and the whole company runs smoothly thanks to dedicated administrative support.

ATL is a growing company dedicated to helping doctors do their job better. ATL prides itself on the humanitarian attitudes of its employees, which reflects the company's own commitment to creating a quality product.

As technology improves and the medical community seeks to lower costs, ATL's combination of high quality ultrasound equipment and an efficient satisfied work force will continue to attract new converts.

Employee of the Month: Greg Kraft, SMT Production Supervisor

Greg Kraft began his career at ATL in 1979 as a technician, testing and trouble-shooting circuit boards. Recently, when a new division was created, Greg was promoted to Surface Mounts (SMT) Production Supervisor.

Greg 's two and one-half years in the Army working on helicopter radios, plus an Electronics Associate Degree, won him his first job with ATL; the company of his choice. He met his future wife, Sunny, in the assembly plant and they were married about a year later.

Like most employees in the early days of the company, Greg had multiple duties. Most of the time he worked as a technician, but he also helped with quality control, stores and assembly.

"It was difficult to communicate in those days,' Greg says. "The circuit boards were built in Redmond and tested in Bellevue, Washington, so if there was a problem the board had to be shuttled back and forth. Plus people would be moved to another building and you might not see them for a year. Now, I like working as a manager with the same teams. I like the people, the atmosphere here at ATL. It’s a good place and I feel good about the products."

Sidebar: What is Ultrasound?

Ultrasound is a non-invasive, cost effective diagnostic tool used to monitor soft tissue. Ultrasound frequency waves are bounced off soft internal body tissues to provide measured readings of those tissues. Ultrasound equipment is very sensitive and can measure the blood flow and velocity in the various chambers in the heart. It can detect abnormalities in soft internal organs or in fetuses. Because of its reliability and broad application, the use of ultrasound has become standard in at least one key area of most medical disciplines.