

“THE COMMON LINK IS TALENT. OUR CONTINUED SUCCESS AS A VIBRANT ENTERPRISE DEPENDS ENTIRELY ON OUR ABILITY TO ATTRACT, MOTIVATE AND RETAIN EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE FROM AN INCREDIBLY SMALL AND COMPETITIVE TALENT POOL ... WE END UP ATTRACTING INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE FAIRLY SELF-ASSURED AND WHO DON'T NEED THE TITLES AND CHECK BOXES TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT THEMSELVES — JILL WAGMAN, MANAGING PRINCIPAL, ECKLER LTD

# Sterling reputation built on quality

ECKLER LTD.

PAUL BARKER

Ann Fyffe and Natasha Gajdemski may have different roles and distinct responsibilities at Eckler Ltd., the largest independently owned actuarial consulting firm in Canada, yet they share a very real passion for their job and admiration for the organization that employs them.

Sam Eckler, its late founder, would be proud — for it is proof that the corporate culture he created so many years ago is alive, it is well and it is flourishing.

“Our firm has grown primarily because of the people in it,” he said in 1990 of the company that once again has been named one of Canada’s 10 Most Admired Corporate Cultures (Mid-Market category). “We value most highly the quality of our work, the service to our clients, our reputation and our contribution to the actuarial profession.”

As an actuarial firm, says Jill Wagman, managing principal, it is Eckler’s job to help organizations identify and manage future risks — and to approach their business decisions with a greater degree of certainty than they might have independent of our advice. It’s a little bit crystal ball. And a whole lot of sophisticated mathematics and modelling.

The firm basically serves two key markets. The employee benefits (EB) side of the business provides consulting services primarily to the sponsors of pension and benefits plans, while the financial services (FS) team consults primarily to insurance companies and other financial institutions.

“The common link is talent,” Wagman says. “Our continued success as a vibrant enterprise depends entirely on our ability to attract, motivate and retain exceptional people from an incredibly small and competitive talent pool.”

In a corporate cultural submission, an Eckler team responsible for producing



ALEX UROSEVIC FOR NATIONAL POST

Eckler Ltd. team members: Greg Moss, left, Sam Amiel, Mariana Huerta, Ann Fyffe, Natasha Gajdemski, Flora Skeaff and Jill Wagman, managing principal.

the document wrote that “fit is everything. As a professional services firm, we don’t sell widgets or other leverageable commodities. We sell intellectual solutions, provided by highly qualified (and, as such, scarce) talent, within an increasingly competitive business environment.”

Fyffe is an example of that, having joined Eckler 23 years ago as an administrative assistant. She now has her Fellow, Life Management Institute designation — Eckler gave her study time during working hours — and has upgraded her skills by taking an assortment of other training courses over the years.

“After about a year, having learned more about the company and understanding their culture, I thought, wow, I would like to stay here,” says Fyffe. “I saw room

for growth and saw the potential to succeed. You could feel the energy at every level.

“Part of Eckler’s culture is having trust in its people. So I never felt micro-managed and I am being empowered to do my very best.”

Gajdemski concurs. An honours graduate of West-

ern University’s business program, she joined the company in 2012 and was hired in an actuarial position despite having not written a single actuarial exam. What she did have, though, was a love for the profession, excel-

lent mathematics abilities and the right personality and skill set.

She has since completed seven actuarial exams, averaging two a year, thanks in part to the study time she receives while on the job. “It has been complementary to the work I do here at Eck-

back. You are allowed to take on as much responsibility as you want and are able to handle. You get exposed to so much when you first come in. Everyone comes to the office happy to be here and liking what they are doing. You see that everywhere, including from the people in positions you are aspiring to get to. That makes me very excited for the future.”

Equally excited for the future is Wagman, who has carried on the organization’s age-old tradition of “empowering our employees with fairly significant decision-making authority at a fairly early stage.

“They have to earn it but given our private ownership, we are not encumbered with a lot of the red tape and hoops some of our competitors have to go through to satisfy their external investors

or shareholders or auditors. We are able to keep our policies down to a minimum and work on a principle-based approach and a values-based approach as opposed to a rules-based approach.

“There are lots of good mathematicians out there. I will tell you what we don’t look for — people who are very focused on themselves and are driven by promotion, personal achievement and climbing the corporate ladder. They just don’t fit with us.

“We end up attracting individuals who are fairly self-assured and who don’t need the titles and the check boxes to feel good about themselves. They are more comfortable and more effective in a collaborative environment, where they contribute their strengths but also draw from others.”

“PART OF ECKLER’S CULTURE IS HAVING TRUST IN ITS PEOPLE. SO I NEVER FELT MICRO-MANAGED

## At Eckler, diversity is just another day at the office

Diversity in the workplace is something many organizations can only aspire to, but at Eckler it’s another day at the office.

So much so that they recently invited a group of Niagara University Ph.D. candidates researching that very topic to conduct an on-site cultural assessment. Not surprisingly, the results were superb.

Among the study team is

John Oliphant, an assistant professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and Gina Pizziconi-Cupples, a major in the U.S. Air Force Reserve. In a report they write that Eckler’s culture extends beyond a state of diversity and resembles a kinetic, inclusive, cohesive organization. The firm celebrates diversity of thought and individual experience, rather than gender, race,

sexual orientation or other surface-level indicators.

“Eckler was incredibly receptive in opening their doors for us,” Oliphant says. “We had full access to both the employees and the principals. When we looked around the large room where a volunteer group of employees assembled to discuss their views on diversity, it was like a gathering of the United Nations. It was an amazingly diverse cross-section of people.

“They obtain diversity, but not in a way that I have ever seen before. By focusing on finding talented employees who enhance the culture of the organization, they end up with a diverse workforce

capable of delivering exceptional services for their clients. The firm doesn’t believe in micro-management and employees are given the freedom to be creative and come up with new ideas. Everyone involved in the field project agreed that this place is special.”

Pizziconi-Cupples says that while “diversity can be a lightning rod of a topic,” she was fascinated by how quickly the Eckler leadership agreed to host the study team, regardless of the outcome of the report. “They knew it was academic in nature and I think the principals were interested in getting a baseline assessment on how they were

doing in terms of their culture and their diversity and how can they do it better.

“You can make an organization look diverse in short order — as quickly as one to two weeks — but they don’t do that; it’s not their approach to just check a box. They are genuinely interested in getting the right fit for the working environment. It is definitely above and beyond what we were expecting.

“For the employees it proved that the leadership was genuine in wanting to assess their current state and see what improvements could be made going forward. I can see why they continue to do well.”

Oliphant, meanwhile, says that many companies could learn a great deal from the firm’s nimble, entrepreneurial spirit.

“If I am a heavy-handed boss who tries to throw his weight around and make everybody feel insecure that is not going to lead to the best for my company. If I take the authority that I have and I share it with others and empower them to become all that they can be, that is going to be so good for my clients and good for my business.

“You can achieve much greater things if each person feels invested and really wants to dedicate themselves.”

THERE’S NO

“I”

IN ECKLER



Eckler

CONSULTANTS + ACTUARIES

Congratulations to our team for making Eckler an **Inspiring, Innovative, and Ingenious** place to spend our days. Huh — I guess there are some I’s in Eckler.

[eckler.ca](http://eckler.ca)