



PHOTOS BY LAURA MORTON

Left: Employees of McGuire and Hester sit down to eat a barbecue lunch outside of the Alameda administration offices of the Oakland-based company. Right: Louie Roessler, left, and Zeydi Gutierrez talk in the lobby of McGuire and Hester. Below: Bikes that employees can use to cycle around Alameda are in the lobby of the construction company.

Feeling appreciated speaks louder than perks for workers

By Deb Wandell

There is no two-week notice or dramatic exit. In fact, when someone quietly quits — doing just enough to meet expectations and no more — most managers don't notice until it's too late.

Quiet quitting isn't about laziness. It's about erosion of motivation and connection. For many employees, it starts when they stop feeling valued.

"Companies need to be working harder than ever to make sure they are keeping their people engaged, feeling appreciated and keeping them on board," said Bob Helbig, media partnerships director at Energage.

While compensation and benefits matter, Energage's Top Workplaces survey consistently shows that feeling valued and appreciated ranks even higher, Helbig said.

In the Bay Area, three businesses — McGuire and Hester, East Bay Innovations and Ad-

verum Biotechnologies — are demonstrating that appreciation isn't just good manners. It's smart business. These companies aren't flashing fancy perks. They're doing something more effective: creating cultures where employees feel appreciated.

Building trust

At McGuire and Hester, appreciation starts with something tangible: ownership. The Oakland-based construction and civil engineering firm is 100% employee-owned, and that model shapes more than just balance sheets.

"Employee ownership shifts the mindset completely," said Brock Grunt, president of McGuire and Hester. "People feel like they're working for themselves and their team, not just a company. That shared success brings people together."

But appreciation here goes deeper than profit-sharing. McGuire and Hester, which was

ranked No. 2 in midsize companies, has built a culture focused on long-term investment in people.

"We've cultivated a supportive and collaborative environment, one where people feel they matter beyond just their job title," Grunt said. "That sense of belonging often contributes more to lasting employee satisfaction than compensation or perks alone."

The company's open-door culture is reinforced through quarterly check-ins — not just performance reviews but conversations about personal and professional goals.

"People want to feel seen and heard," Grunt said. "These check-ins allow us to connect beyond the task list and support people's development."

Based on the survey results, Energage gave McGuire and Hester an award for the way it shows appreciation to its employees. In an industry known for tight deadlines and high stress, McGuire and Hester



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Adrian Lopez, assistant director of training and recruitment at East Bay Innovations

leans into autonomy, giving employees the freedom to handle their work in ways that play to their strengths while making sure they know they have support when they need it.

“Managers are expected to be problem-solvers and sounding boards,” Grunt said.

Employees describe that approach as empowering and effective. Energage survey responses repeatedly cited being trusted, challenged and heard.

“Trust is built by actively encouraging input, truly listening and keeping communication open and honest,” Grunt said. “It’s about making people feel like they’re part of the bigger picture.”

Supporting the supporters

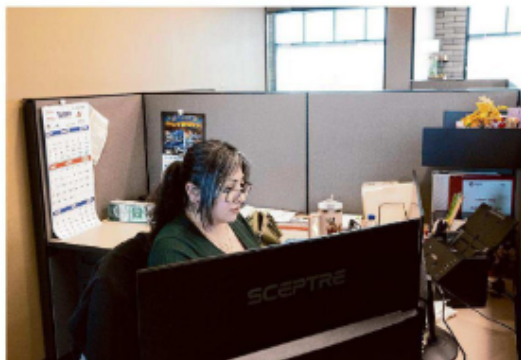
At East Bay Innovations, appreciation is about more than thank-yous. It’s about supporting the people doing emotionally demanding work. Based in San Leandro, the non-profit helps more than 1,000 individuals with autism and developmental disabilities live independently, find jobs and feel engaged in their communities.

“We’ve built our culture around listening to employees,” said Adrian Lopez, assistant director of training and recruitment. “That means checking in regularly, responding to feedback and removing barriers that make their work harder than it needs to be.”

EBI was ranked No. 4 in midsize companies and won a special Top Workplaces award for clued in senior management. To combat burnout, the organization offers more than



Above left: Ed Aldine, left to right, Bruce Daseking and Louie Roessler grill meat on a smoker the company owns in the parking lot for an employee barbecue lunch at McGuire and Hester. Above right: Company branded trinkets are seen decorating the top of a cubicle at the construction company. Below left: Contract specialist Claudia Ortega works at McGuire and Hester. Below right: Vice President of Business Development Bruce Daseking, second from right, talks with other employees of McGuire and Hester.



vacation time. It provides mental health days, access to virtual counseling through an employee assistance program and spotlights staff who go above and beyond.

“We know the work is emotionally intense, so we give people space to care for themselves, not just their clients,” Lopez said.

Flexibility is also key. For caregivers or employees navigating personal challenges, EBI allows shift swaps, alternate scheduling and extended leaves when needed. Staff also have access to elective training to advance their careers. Many current supervisors started in entry-level roles.

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celebrate it,” Lopez said. “That goes a long way in making people feel like they’re seen.”

Making the unseen seen

In biotech, it’s easy for appreciation to get lost in the pressure to produce. But at Adverum Biotechnologies, recognition isn’t just a formality — it’s a through line. The Redwood City-based company is developing gene therapies to treat vision loss. The timelines are long. Progress can be hard to see in real time.

So Adverum builds in rituals to mark it.

Employees talk about handwritten notes from senior leaders, public shout-outs at team meetings and peer-nominated awards that recognize behind-

the-scenes efforts. One employee described getting a company-wide award that helped them “understand and feel that my work created value and is appreciated by leadership.”

Adverum was ranked No. 19 in small businesses. Managers are trained to keep one-on-one meetings focused on growth and clarity, not just checklists. And at all-hands meetings, teams share not only what was accomplished but how — highlighting cross-functional teamwork and small acts of support that made the difference.

“People truly care about folks outside of their department,” one employee wrote. “It’s observed and demonstrated regularly.”

That culture of day-to-day appreciation has shaped how the company retains talent — even during hard moments such as a workforce reduction a few years ago, according to Romina Moore, human resources business partner director.

“Several former employees in their exit interviews said things like: ‘Don’t worry about us finding another job. ... What we won’t find is another culture like this one.’”

When the company began hiring again last year, many of the employees that were laid off reapplied for roles.

“Some even left full-time roles to return as contractors because they wanted to be back in this culture and environment,” Moore said.