



Making the Career Development Investment Pay Off

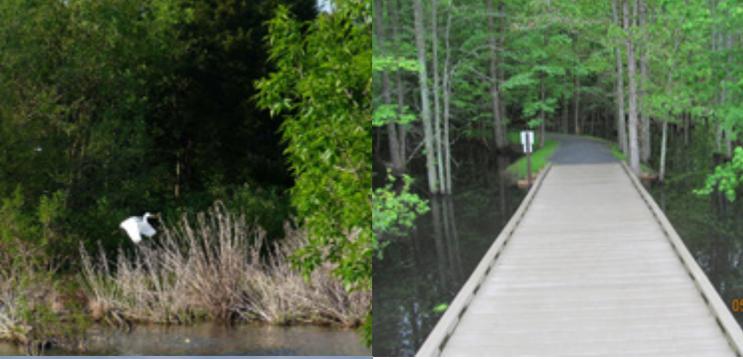
How a Virginia Consulting Firm Hires Young Talent, Trains It Well, and Keeps It for Decades

Plenty of organizations say they develop their employees, but many end up doing it for someone else. This is especially true for places that hire young people and provide them with training only to see them leave for larger organizations with bigger this and flashier that.

But in northern Virginia, an environmental consulting firm has built a culture that develops young talent and then retains it. It grows careers with opportunities for advancement and learning, and then it reaps the rewards that come with employee longevity.

Michael Rolband, president of [Wetland Studies and Solutions Inc.](#) (WSSI) in Gainesville, Va., says at least a quarter of his staff started as college interns.

“Our first intern, Jennifer, started in 1994, and she still works here,” Rolband said. “Another one, Brian, started right out of college. He just hit his 20th year. We hire a lot of people right out of school, and we hire a lot of college students as interns. We have a lot of interns who have



been here 10 to 15 years already. It's a big family. And at this point it's not only them. They have families now."



The WSSI family has grown to about 120. The company, founded in 1991, employs scientists, regulatory specialists, engineers, surveyors, permit compliance specialists, archeologists, ecosystem and restoration specialists, arborists, and geographic information specialists. WSSI consults with public and private sector builders to obtain the environmental approvals needed to complete their projects. WSSI has provided services and permit approvals on approximately 7,500 projects encompassing 275,000

acres. It has created and restored more than 1,000 acres of wetlands and enough streams to paddle nearly 45 miles.

Rolband worked previously as a real estate developer specializing in environmentally challenging sites. With the arrival of a recession, paying the bills meant doing consulting from a basement office with a file box for a table. But Rolband had plans.

"I'm not against making money, but my first goal originally was really to enjoy myself, be challenged, and do things," he said. "My theory was, if we were doing things that are enjoyable, fun, creative, and meaningful, we would make money."

WSSI has built a proven track record with enough monetary success to become the leading natural and cultural resources consultant in the Mid-Atlantic. Their headquarters is an environmental marvel that incorporates innovative design and sustainability practices into a showcase that displays its work and stewardship ideals. The company has made acquisitions and been acquired. Now Rolband has retirement plans, but he seems far from slowing down.

"Our goal is to be the best in what we do, period. That's our vision," he said. "You want to be the best, the most innovative? You've got to invest in people to get there. We do that by hiring good people and then training them – providing lots of educational tools

and any equipment they need. That's been our fundamental growth concept: We want to be the best; and to be the best we had to have good people and then invest in those people."

Rolband said, "Over the years, I've had other consulting firms review our business practices. One of the first things that I've been told every time is, 'Well, you can make a lot more money if you stopped spending so much money training staff.' "

Technical training is expected, but often that involves more focus on project and financial management with groups dominated by engineers and scientists.

"Last year, we sent 22 people through a program called 'Finding the Lost Dollars,'" Rolband said. "We talked about how companies make money, lose money, and where it goes."

But training doesn't retain employees if there aren't opportunities to apply the learned skills. A geographical expansion has led to offices in central Virginia, southwestern Virginia, and Maryland. That means leadership roles in smaller organizations that can operate with independence.

How does a growing organization hold on to a culture it has worked so hard to build? Rolband points to several strategies that have worked for WSSI:

Addressing issues from acquisitions. WSSI was acquired in 2014 by the Davey Tree Expert Company, but retains a large degree of autonomy. When an issue did arise around changes in health insurance, it was addressed with the creation of health savings accounts for employees.

Transparency. Because Davey is employee-owned, its financial results are available to everyone. Rolband explained, "Every month we have a staff meeting and everybody sees the revenues, the profits and the new sales contracts. They see the winner and loser jobs – those that made a lot of money and those that lost money. But everyone sees every month how we're doing financially, and the vast majority of people like that."





Financial incentives. WSSI pays overtime to everyone except top managers. Rolband said, “I don’t want to take advantage of people, so if they are going to put in extra time to make clients happy, they’re getting time and a half even though it’s not required and a lot of other firms don’t do it.” He said up to 25 percent the company’s profits go into an incentive pool paid out to employees. The percentage varies according to WSSI’s profitability, so the more the firm makes, the more employees receive. Paid time off that goes unused is converted to salary. Employees can even cash out part of their accrued PTO.

Employee surveys and testing. A [Workplace Survey](#) confirmed plenty of positives for WSSI, but also revealed a few problems that are now being addressed. One involved salary levels for less-experienced employees in a particular field. Another was a manager struggling in that role. “I found the survey information fascinating,” Rolband said. “It objectively demonstrated there was a problem.” Rolband also uses testing to confirm beliefs about employees’ suitability for their jobs and their potential for advancement.

Venues for community-building. WSSI has a range of activities that bring people together. Rolband said, “In our main office, we have a large gym with group workouts. We have a garden club and a vegetable garden. We even have a kennel club. People get to meet each other, and not necessarily people they work with day to day. That’s helping.”

Rolband sees a future full of potential for WSSI. “The goal is to eventually work me out of a job and let people keep growing.”