

**A**WARDS ARE EVERYWHERE. Magazines, industry journals, chambers of commerce, newspapers, television networks, websites, community organizations, governments...all of them offer awards to be won by individuals or organizations.

What are the benefits of winning awards? Is it more than just personal satisfaction? Do awards offer any strategic advantages? Should they be actively pursued? How can organizations best capitalize on them – both internally and externally? What opportunities do they create?

Or are they just a waste of time, money, and energy?

*The CEO Advantage Journal* talked to three executives whose organizations have been very successful in winning awards. Beyond the obvious joys of public recognition, these leaders have learned to leverage awards for ongoing improvement in the health of their organizations. Indeed, pursuing awards has a rightful place in the strategic plans of many organizations.

# *The* Benefits *of* *Awards*



## Brian E. Fayak

Founder & Chief  
Visionary Officer

### Nextep, Inc.

www.nextep.com

## Company Information

Nextep provides Professional Employer Services for small and mid-sized companies such as payroll administration, benefits administration, HR consulting, and risk management in a single, bundled approach. Their objective is to make this essential part of a client's business very efficient through the use of cutting-edge technology and professional expertise. In doing so, the executives and staff are free to focus on running their business.

Nextep has been serving clients from a wide range of industries, focusing primarily in Oklahoma and Texas, since 1997.

## Selected Awards

- Best Place to Work in Oklahoma (2006, 2007)
- Oklahoma Ethics Compass Award (2007): *For displaying a high level of ethical standards.*
- Character First Award (2008): *For displaying ethical leadership in the community.*
- Red Shoe Award (2007): *Given by Ronald McDonald House to Brian Fayak for volunteer efforts and charitable contributions.*

**Your organization has a track record of winning different awards. Describe the key benefits to your organization of pursuing and winning awards.**

The most important benefit we see is with our employee morale. We focus on hiring the best possible talent we can find. We also believe very strongly in the power of engagement – creating an environment where employees feel engaged and want to be productive.

One of our first major awards was *Best Places to Work in Oklahoma*. Our staff initiated that as a way to show pride in where they work. We work very hard on building a culture of ethics where employees have fun at work and have freedom to do what they need to do. Our employees like it, and they want to boast about it. Winning that contest began a snowball effect with other awards, and the morale and engagement of our employees has been very beneficial. Part of peoples' perceived success is the stature of the company for which they work.

In addition to helping us get the best employees, it helps us engage in the community, which is a real intangible benefit.

**In your case, some may say that the big reason for winning awards is to attract new clients to your organization. How do you perceive that? Is that something you seek when applying for awards?**

I think that's important. Good recognition can be helpful in putting potential clients at ease with our organization. Our focus, though, is on the employees and the community first because that forms the foundation of why we are successful. For the most part, you win awards because you do the right things, you're a good place to work, and you're a good corporate citizen.

Community service is big to us. Our people receive bonuses for doing a certain amount of community service hours. Our company certainly benefits from that.

**It seems like there's a triangle of benefit. First, there's the culture of the organization. Second, there's the impact of the employees and the organization in the community. The recognition that comes with that feeds the third leg, which is the comfort level felt by your potential clients.**

Yes, there's definitely a benefit there. My biggest point is that if you take care of the fundamentals, the benefits will be there. With a healthy culture and a commitment to the community, your business will do well regardless of what rewards you win.

**Nextep is in a unique position since your clients are businesses themselves. You have the ability to influence them as they build their own organizational cultures. Do you encourage them to pursue awards as part of their strategy?**

We do. Not only are we business-to-business, but we're in the business of human resources, and that includes stuff like employee benefit plans, payroll, and government compliance. Still, we believe strongly that culture is the #1 foundation of a company and how its employees perceive their workplace. If you do the basics, the awards will come, but there is real benefit in going after the right awards.

When my staff wanted to pursue *Best Places to Work*, I felt we had laid a good foundation for it. In fact, just pursuing the award made us better at running our company.

**What did you specifically change in the process of trying to win that award?**

*Best Places to Work* measured tangible things like benefit packages and average salary, so we were able to specifically address those. However, most of the criteria was based on employees' responses to a confidential survey on their perceptions of the workplace. Once judging was complete, we were given a copy of our own employees' responses and benchmarked against competing companies. Even though we won, this revealed areas where we could improve.

One thing we found was that today's young workers don't just want work-life balance; they want to work at all times of the day. This is particularly prevalent in our IT department (we have one IT guy who works from 8-noon and from 8p.m. - 4a.m.). We had to reconsider the flexibility in our work environment so our employees could have some of the freedom they wanted.

We ended up implementing an em-

ployee personal day once/month. Employees are able to take a day off to do anything they want, and it doesn't count against vacation time. Some were concerned about it, but we had a belief that the employees would not leave unless their work allowed it. That's exactly what we've seen. They have the freedom to make those decisions within the parameters that we give them. Obviously, some positions are not as free to improvise as an IT guy who can keep himself hooked in electronically at all times.

This can be difficult to manage, so many companies don't try it, but we have benefited from further empowering our employees. A strong culture allows us to do that.

**Have you had any clients that have seen specific benefits from pursuing and winning awards?**

Yes. One client manufactures seatbelts for cars and heavy machinery. Last year, they applied for *Best Places to*

*Work* and used the process to increase their current employees' pride and attract new employees. Winning awards makes attracting talent much easier, and talent improves the organization.

**Which of your company's awards was most meaningful to you?**

*Best Places to Work* brought me a lot of pride because I founded the company and always wanted it to be a great place to work. The award that probably brought me the most pride, however, was the Compass Award from the Oklahoma Business Ethics Consortium. That award embodied the message we want to send as an organization. It's nice to be successful and a fun place to work, but it's important to be a company of character and ethics, always looking to do the right thing.

In the long run, the good guy doesn't finish last.

American Dream (Jill Stefani Wagner)

