

East Penn's secret? It's a people place

Ask how the battery maker landed on *Fortune* magazine's list of the best companies to work for, and employees and management alike are quick to point fingers.

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By **Jon Fasnacht**
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For proof of East Penn Manufacturing Co. Inc.'s personable take on the often cutthroat business world, look no further than founder and Chairman DeLight E. Breidegam Jr.'s Cadillac.

Some time ago, Breidegam was walking in a company facility when an employee called needing a ride from the medical building, according to Michael J. Tehansky, plant manager of the industrial building. The employee worked in a dirty area — the boosting room, where workers put initial charges in batteries.

"DeLight jumps into his Cadillac and pulls up in front of the building," Tehansky said. "He waves at her, she waves back. She walks over and asks, 'What can I do for you?' And he says, 'Jump in.' And she says, 'I can't do that. I'll ruin your car.' And he says, 'If it weren't for people like you, I wouldn't have the Cadillac.'"

She took the ride.

Stories like this are plentiful at the battery-making firm near Lyons. And that's one of the reasons *Fortune* magazine recently put the company at No. 79 on its national list of the "100 Best Companies to Work for."

Breidegam, 79, who co-founded the privately held company 60 years ago with his father, DeLight E. Breidegam Sr., credits his employees and the company's devotion to people.

"I always say that a business is nothing but nouns: people,



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places and things," Breidegam said. "And people have got to come first, whether it's customers or the people making the products."

Employees have a significant say through the company's safety suggestion program. If a proposal is implemented, the employee gets a financial thank you.

Last year there were 705 suggestions. The company implemented 150 and 135 still are being analyzed, according to personnel director Alison Snyder.

East Penn, the second-largest employer in Berks, employed 4,506 as of Dec. 31, up 358 from a year earlier. And it has plans to build another facility on its nearly 500-acre campus.

The company has been named one of the "Best Places to Work in Pennsylvania" for the last five years but this is the first time it has made *Fortune's* list, which is based on an employee survey and the company's policies and culture.

"I really believe anybody can buy machinery and build a building and put the machinery in the building, but not every organization has the people to make them work," said President Daniel R. Langdon. "Someone's doing something good around here 24 hours a day."

Automotive maintenance supervisor Joel S. Fox likes coming to work so much that he hasn't used a sick day in his 19 years at the company.

Industrial-cable assembler Patricia A. Swoyer said she plans on working at the company until she turns 90.

Debbie A. Michael, finish-line acid leveler/capper, simply shook her head after listing the company's perks.

"I've never seen a place like this," she said.

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Marjorie G. DeJesus uses an instrument to check batteries at East Penn Manufacturing Co. Inc., Lyons.

Reading Eagle: Ryan McFadden



Lab technician Luke J. Bricker runs a test at East Penn Manufacturing, which helped pay for his college education.

Why employees like East Penn

East Penn Manufacturing Co. Inc. employees list these top 10 reasons why their company is a good place to work:

- Job security.
- Benefits.
- Personable and family-oriented executives.
- Safety: There's a safety committee in each building. The company's suggestion program encourages employees to submit safety ideas. If a suggestion is used, they're rewarded financially.
- Communication.
- Opportunity for advancement and promoting from within.
- Pride in the products.
- Investments back into the company.
- Steady bonuses and raises.
- Perks such as one free battery a year, a Christmas turkey and an annual picnic.

— From our news staff

Best places to work

1. Genentech, San Francisco, biotechnology.
 2. Wegmans, Rochester, N.Y., food and drug stores.
 3. Valero Energy, San Antonio, petroleum refining.
 4. Griffin Hospital, Derby, Conn.
 5. W.L. Gore, Newark, Del., chemicals.
 6. Container Store, Coppell, Texas, specialty retailers.
 7. Vision Service Plan, Rancho Cordova, Calif., health care.
 8. J.M. Smucker, Orrville, Ohio, food.
 9. REI, Kent, Wash., specialty retailers.
 10. S.C. Johnson & Son, Racine, Wis., general merchandisers.
- Pennsylvania firms**
60. Vanguard Group, Valley Forge, fund company.
 79. East Penn Manufacturing Co., Lyons, battery maker.
 96. Ikea (U.S.), Plymouth Meeting, Montgomery County, furniture.

How to make the list

Fortune magazine chooses its winners by evaluating a company's policies and culture and a 57-question survey given to 400 randomly selected employees. The survey accounts for two-thirds of the score. Source: *Fortune*

East Penn Manufacturing Co. Inc.

Address: Deka Road, on more than 490 acres in Richmond and Maxatawny townships and Lyons.

Founded: 1946 by DeLight E. Breidegam Jr. and his father, DeLight E. Breidegam Sr., as a battery-rebuilding business.

Employees: 4,506

Fortune magazine's take: "It's a company of lifers. ... The top 10 senior employees have 419 years of combined service; the staff includes 246 married couples."

Sources: East Penn Manufacturing Co. Inc., *Fortune*



"My education was partially paid for by the company (through the Timothy M. Breidegam Memorial Scholarship, which assists students at Moravian College in Bethlehem, Northampton County).
"I was on the baseball team at Moravian, and we used to take a spring trip to Florida. DeLight owns a place out there, and he used to come see our games."
Luke J. Bricker, 24, lab technician, hired in 2003



"East Penn reinvests back into the company, which I see as definite job stability and job security. And it always promotes from within. I work in personnel, and over 99 percent of all employees are brought in through the ranks: worker-leader-supervisor.
"I want to retire from here. I don't think there is a better place to work. They always go beyond the call of duty to try and help someone."
Tony J. DiBenedetto, 47, personnel coordinator, hired in 1981



"The big thing is the company has always kept up to date with new equipment. It's taking a lot of the manual labor out of there — where the mind has to work, not the physical body. It trickles down and helps the health department and helps the benefits department."
William C. Stump Jr., 42, paste-machine mixer/automotive division, hired in 1982



"When I got the job, people said, 'Hey, you're working at Deka, you're working with acid.' But there's a national standard of safety and there's the Deka standard, which is well above the national standard."
Candalario Matos Jr., 37, quality-assurance supervisor, hired in 1994



"At my former job, they didn't observe employees at all. They didn't give you a 'thank you.' Here they can't do enough for you. Every time you turn around, they're giving you something. And they're really family-oriented. I've already seen them send flowers to a funeral home."
Debbie A. Michael, 52, finish-line acid leveler/capper, hired in 1993



"There's always a line of communication with the people who run the company. There are good benefits. And we have a lot of pride in our products."
Barbara A. Johnson, 60, industrial-cable assembler, hired in 1986



"I like the sense of security; the sense of accomplishment you get when you see how this place is growing and that you're involved in it. I like coming to work; I've had perfect attendance."
Joel S. Fox, 37, automotive maintenance supervisor, hired in 1987



"East Penn is one of the few companies where you are given the chance to show your skills and move up based on your talent. Everyone's on a first-name basis."
David L. McFarland, 44, injection-molding supervisor, hired in 1994