

Anderson & Associates: High Tech / High Touch

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John Naisbitt, in his book *"Megatrends"* says that successful companies will be ones that leverage their abilities through technology and, at the same time, attract and nurture outstanding people by being attentive to their needs. Naisbitt articulated precisely the philosophy that Anderson & Associates (A&A) has tried to operate under since its founding in 1968.

A&A is certainly "high tech". Computers have been on each desk for years. All systems are networked and the company communicates by e-mail to a large extent. Videoconferencing is used regularly between the Blacksburg headquarters and the Richmond office. The Greensboro and Tennessee offices will be on-line shortly. A&A also offers this capability to clients for their use. This service complements the active wide area e-mail communication that links the firm with a growing number of Internet-enabled clients. The objective of all of this is to improve our productivity and provide an improved, more responsive service to clients.

Almost all work, from the field or in the office, is produced in digital form. This includes drawings, instrument readings, text documents, pictures or a combination. We expect to use digital video in the near future. The digital format allows us to develop, manipulate, store and transmit information much more efficiently than information in static form. The company has begun development of an "intranet" which will use Internet techniques such as "browsers" to simplify using the data we work with every day. This technique will also allow clients to have instant and continuous access to the drawings, maps and other documents we produce for them.

A&A not only develops geographic information systems for clients, but also uses the systems internally to analyze data. GIS functionality will be a central part of the company's "intranet" since much of our information has a significant locational element. Since we work over a multi-state region, we can reduce internal costs and costs to our clients by completing several jobs while in a particular area. Tracking projects on a GIS will help with this.

Global positioning systems are used extensively by the company to reduce costs and to expedite surveys. Our precise, surveying grade instruments are shuttled from office to office to provide locations for photogrammetric control and large boundary surveys. These instruments are also used to determine the exact location of cellular towers.

The "high touch" element of the company is reflected in the flexibility of our organization and an absolute minimum of internal rules and regulations. A determined effort is made to recruit top notch people, assist them in personal and professional development and allow them to be directly responsive to the clients rather than internal management. A&A does not try to pound "square pegs" into "round holes". Freedom is given to work in ways most comfortable to employees as long as objectives of the company and clients are met.

All full-time employees with over a year of service and who are at least 21 years old are shareholders in the company through an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP). A five-person ESOP Advisory Committee has great influence in the direction of the company. These five are elected by their peers by secret ballot, and have the responsibility to act in the best long-term interest of the employees. As employee ownership of the company increases, the best interests of the company and the employees will continue to converge.

Every financial number in the company is open to our employees, even individual salaries. Financial statistics go to the project team level and all employees are taught to understand the relationship between the financial health of the company and their long-term financial well-being.

Creativity is valued more highly than conformity. By providing an open and supportive organization, the company has been able to recruit and retain creative and dedicated people.

Anderson & Associates' employees are proud to be active in VAMLIS and many other organizations devoted to the "Commonwealth." ❖