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Ron Alvesteffer, president of Service Express, is shown with the type of mainframe hardware his firm repairs and maintains.

Service Express honored as top workplace

Pete Daly
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Service Express Inc. will go a long way to keep its employees happy and thriving, so much so that the Cascade Township firm has been listed in the June issue of Inc. Magazine as one of the 50 top small-companies to work for in America.

The companies were selected by Winning Workplaces, an Evanston, Ill., nonprofit organization that recognizes companies that attribute much of their business success to their commitment to "exemplary people practices and outstanding workplace cultures," according to the Winning Workplaces website.

"For us, it all starts with the right people coming on board, and creating opportunities for them to thrive," said Ron Alvesteffer, president of SEI since 2002.

According to Winning Workplaces, 80 percent of the top 50 small companies have increased revenues over the past three years, and 88 percent have increased their work force over the past three years. These small firms were able to not just survive but thrive, despite the recession, in part because of their enlightened workplace practices and the productive cultures they have built, according to Winning Workplaces.

SEI is one of six Michigan firms among the 2011 top 50 workplaces listed in Inc. Magazine; the others are in Ann Arbor, Troy and Southfield.

SEI, located at 4845 Corporate Exchange Drive, about a mile south of the Gerald R. Ford Airport, is an independent service company that repairs and maintains data center hardware on contract — mainframe computers and servers — at larger businesses and organizations, particularly hospitals, major universities and businesses that typically have 100 or more employees and more than \$10 million in annual revenue annually.

"That's who needs the kind of hardware we are going to service," said Alvesteffer.

SEI has about 170 employees, half of them based at the headquarters in Cascade Township, and operates in nine states. Most of those are Midwestern states but SEI is expanding with new offices in Tennessee and Georgia.

The Inc. Magazine article about SEI said that the company has a "simple but effective expansion strategy," which basically is: Move to where the top employees want to move. SEI knows what is on its employees' minds because management has regular "vision talks" with them on an individual basis.

"What really sets us apart is our corporate vision, which is to work with employees to help them achieve their personal, professional and financial goals. That's not just to build a culture; that's our No. 1 strategic objective," said Alvesteffer.

"The whole idea is, if we surround ourselves with the right people and figure out what they want to do and give them opportunities to do it here, the company's goals will be blown away, and so we've averaged over 20 percent annual growth over the past 10 years."

SEI recently opened sales offices in Nashville and Chattanooga because a top sales person in the Indianapolis office wanted to be a sales manager and move further south. "So we opened up a whole region for him," said Alvesteffer.

"I think the top employees are hard to find in any industry," said Alvesteffer, "so creating a great work place is a competitive advantage because we're able to attract the most talented people."

SEI's technicians could be graduates from two-year technical schools, but apparently it takes a little more than a certificate to get aboard SEI. "In the next generation coming up, a lot are so technically savvy. We're looking for the people who have their own server built in their house as their hobby," said Alvesteffer.

"Other than that, we'll take the talent and we'll train them," he said. SEI's internal training program is so tough that it has hired former engineers from OEMs such as IBM, Hewlett Packard and Sun, who had to take the SEI in-house course on repair and maintenance of those brands of hardware "because our certifications are harder than the OEMs."

SEI competes with the big OEMs in the servicing of mainframe and server hardware.

Alvesteffer said SEI sells "a little bit of hardware" amounting to about 7 percent of revenue.

"We are 90 percent service, where many companies are 90 percent hardware (sales), and then they try to sell some service," he said.

Alvesteffer said SEI can save its clients money because the OEMs and many service firms urge the client to "upgrade" — purchase new equipment based on the reasoning that a particular computer or server has reached "end of life." That term generally means the manufacturer has discontinued production of that product.

"What we are telling them is that there are parts available through vendors throughout the country, that end-of-life does not mean you have to get rid of it. There are parts available up to 10 years after something goes end-of-life, and it's actually less expensive to keep your server and keep it under a maintenance agreement than it is to upgrade to a newer server. That's what the OEMs try to do: constantly get you to upgrade to something new."