Congratulations to the Inc. 5000 list-makers

Communicators
Orchestrators
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Game-changers
Cooperators
Mediators
Navigators
Go-getters
Creators
Negotiators
Facilitators
Leaders
Timing. In the history of startups, nothing does more to divine good or bad fortune than the moment an entrepreneur touches down in the market on the wings of a new idea. Nicola Tesla was disastrously premature with his brilliant idea for distributing electricity via alternating current. A century later, Elon Musk’s Tesla Motors nearly died before the EV market sparked to life. Last year’s No. 1 Inc. 5000 company, OneTrust—which helps businesses comply with new consumer privacy laws—showed what kind of magic can happen when an idea and the need for it glide into the market in total synchronicity. • A rare event such as Covid-19 only underscores how determinative timing can be. If you carefully planned the opening of a restaurant, store, hotel, or cycling studio in 2020, you found that fate was dealing from the bottom of the deck. • Which makes the 2021 Inc. 5000 different from any other in the list’s history. Today’s fastest-growing privately held American companies proved resilient and flexible during 2020’s unprecedented challeng-
Should You Be More Like Bezos?

As the Amazon founder exits the CEO role, he leaves his successor a set of rules that might be helpful to any entrepreneur bent on conquering the known universe.

From the March/April 2021 Issue

Given what we know now, the trajectory of Jeff Bezos seems almost inevitable. The founder and CEO of Amazon has been relentless in his pursuit of building the most dominant, customer-focused enterprise in modern history. It’s fitting, considering he first thought to name his company Relentless.com.

Looking backward, however, it can be easy to forget that relentless did not mean inevitable, at least not in the early years. But as Amazon’s execution began to match Bezos’s vision, an extraordinary company emerged—one that changed our lives. Bezos leaves his CEO role as one of the most important business leaders of his generation, having taken his company from zero to nearly $1.7 trillion, the market value of Amazon today. Along the way, the man behind “The Everything Store” gave us some of the most important lessons on entrepreneurship, innovation, and customer experience. Here are 11 principles every entrepreneur can learn from Jeff Bezos.

1. USE THE REGRET MINIMIZATION FRAMEWORK

When Bezos first entertained the idea of moving across the country to start an online bookstore, he used a mental exercise he calls a “regret minimization framework.” The idea was to think about turning 80 and looking back on his life. “I want to have minimized the number of regrets I have,” Bezos has explained. “I knew that when I was 80, I was not going to regret having tried this. I was not going to regret trying to participate in this thing called the internet that I thought was going to be a really big deal.”

2. FIND THE RIGHT OPPORTUNITY

Bezos decided to build an internet business first, not a book business. He had been working in New York City for D.E. Shaw, the investment firm, when he heard that internet use was growing at an annual rate of 2,300 percent. His math, in fact, was grossly incorrect. The internet was growing by a factor of 2,300, meaning it was actually growing at a rate of 230,000 percent. That math worked too.

Bezos was not especially fond of books, but books seemed like the best bet to take advantage of the internet’s explosive growth. In 1994, the year Amazon launched, the catalog of available books in print was effectively infinite, with more than three million titles—a long-tail business well suited to e-tailing. Shipping books was also relatively easy and not terribly expensive. As a place to start, the idea just made sense.

3. BE CUSTOMER-OBSESSED

Many companies preach the gospel of customer focus. Bezos lived it. “The secret sauce of Amazon—there are several principles at Amazon—but the number one thing that has made us successful, by far, is obsessive, compulsive focus on the customer,” Bezos told David Rubenstein in a 2018 interview at the Economic Club of Washington, D.C.

He wasn’t talking about feel-good service. It was more about creating a company people couldn’t live without. “From the beginning, our focus has been on offering our customers compelling value,” he wrote in Amazon’s 1997 letter to shareholders. “Compelling” also meant clear. One often-cited example was Bezos’s insistence that for every new product, the team write a six-page memo and include a sample.

The man behind “The Everything Store” gave us some of the most important lessons on entrepreneurship, innovation, and customer experience.
Wealth is important, and we can help you build it. But it’s what you do with that wealth—the memories you make, the families you build, the worlds you change—that makes life worth it.

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Build wealth that’s worth it.

Paul Gunn, Jr. knew he was stepping into an intensely competitive field in December 2016 when he started KUOG Corporation, the Huntsville, Alabama company that provides military procurement, logistics, and supply chain services to the federal government and its contractors. The movie War Dogs, inspired by the story of a $300 million government contract, had recently come out, spurring interest in government contracting.

Gunn says his motivation for starting the company was “to support the warfighter” and decided to make empathy and kindness part of the company’s unique selling proposition.

GETTING BY GIVING

Gunn never bought the notion that you need to be laser-focused on your own advancement to get ahead. His experience running an earlier business had taught him that the opposite was true. He shared those lessons in his book, Succeed the Right Way: What Every Compassionate Business Person Must Know.

Instead, taking an indirect approach to acquiring a business benefit—offering to help others, building relationships, getting involved in community events and meeting a useful contact by chance—can be the quickest way to your goal.

Operating by those principles, KUOG hit its five-year earnings goal in only two years, and Gunn estimates they’ll hit their 10-year goal in five years. The federal government has awarded the company more than 30 contract vehicles, including blanket purchase agreements and indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity contracts.

CHANGE OF FOCUS

Gunn’s initial plan in starting KUOG was to be a consultant to would-be government vendors. “Find a good business, vet them, and then show them how to bid directly to the government” was going to be the business model, he says.

But many of the business owners he approached about offering consulting services were more interested in having him land the primary contracts and hiring them as subcontractors.

Since shifting KUOG’s focus to contracting, his clients have offered to bring him in as a subcontractor on their contracts. That’s another sign, in his view, of how helping others first pays off.

Gunn calls his management style at KUOG “open autonomy,” meaning: “You pass somebody an idea, and you let them run with it.” Along with an in-house staff that includes three executives, a logistics director, and the warehouse team, KUOG also hires independent contractors. He seeks out other small businesses as vendors to help boost their success.

“Since we’re able to support a small business, we’ll try to take the lead and do it,” he says.

KUOGINC.COM

No 273
2021 Ranking

1717%
3-Year Growth

15
Employees

$12.2
million
2020 Revenue
press release. “We don’t do PowerPoint (or any other slide-oriented) presentations at Amazon,” Bezos once wrote. “Instead, we write narratively structured six-page memos. We silently read one at the beginning of each meeting in a kind of ‘study hall.’” Bezos believes that the narrative style of the format clarifies the strategy, and that by writing the press release at the outset, the team was forced to think about whatever they were doing through the lens of the customer’s first encounter with the product.

Even as the web became easier to access, the question remained: Does your site make your customers’ lives easier or better in some tangible way? If so, they’ll probably buy just about anything from you. In Amazon’s case, that’s almost exactly what happened.

FOCUS ON THE LONG TERM

In 1997, Amazon was still a relatively small company. It served some 1.5 million customers. Bezos’s shareholder letter that year sent a signal to Wall Street that he didn’t care about quarterly earnings, a trait the company would willingly demonstrate for years.

“We believe that a fundamental measure of our success will be the shareholder value we create over the long term,” Bezos wrote. “This value will be a direct result of our ability to extend and solidify our current market leadership position.”

Prime is a great example. When launched in 2005, it cost $79 a year and offered free, two-day shipping. Bezos would later write: “We want Prime to be such a good value that you’d be irresponsible not to be a member.”

Acquiring all of those customers that a relatively modest price was expensive. Those willing to pay that much money were likely to be repeat customers who bought a lot of stuff, meaning shipping costs could quickly exceed the price of the membership. That was the point. The leaps in sales, even if it meant losing money in the short term, would feed the bigger plan. And they did. For a long time, Amazon reinvested almost everything back into the business, favoring growth over profits. Wall Street complained. Bezos didn’t care.

FEED THE FLYWHEEL

Books were always going to be just the beginning. To attract more customers, Bezos planned on having a large selection of products, at low prices and with great customer service. Increasing the number of customers would attract third-party sellers to the platform, which would increase the selection of products, which would attract even more customers, and so on. The more products Amazon sold, the more efficient its processes and systems became. The higher the sales volume, the better the prices could get from suppliers, and the better it could devote those lower costs to growth. Amazon didn’t invent the flywheel—Walmart has also used it as an operating principle—but Bezos & Co. certainly made it spin faster.

HIRE FOR INTENSITY

Do you want mission-aries or mercenaries? That’s the question, “How do you hire great people and keep them from leaving?” Bezos asks. “By giving them, first of all, a great mission—something that has real purpose, that has meaning.”

PREFER INGENIOUS IDEAS

Bezos believes that the narrative style of the format clarifies the strategy, and that by writing the press release at the beginning of each meeting in a kind of ‘study hall.’” Bezos here in 1997, founded Amazon. Right: He sold Kindles, which became a huge hit. Below left: The Kindle in 2007. Below right: The Fire in 2014, and the Echo in 2015.

FEAR CUSTOMERS, NOT COMPETITORS

“Don’t be afraid of our competitors, because they’re never going to send us money,” Bezos once said. “Be afraid of our customers, because those are the folks who have the money.” In other words, focus your worry where it really matters.
THE POWER OF PEOPLE
Sikder is also a disruptor in his culture. “When we were hiring talent away from our competitors, some of the candidates asked if we provided after-hours meals,” he says. “I told them, ‘I’d rather you don’t eat dinner at work. Unless there’s a crisis, shut down, go home.’ That’s not the life I am seeking for myself or for my team.”

Axiom’s benefits include Summer Fridays, quarterly Axiom days, SPOT bonuses, and shut-down week. And pandemic support includes surprise DoorDash dinner drop and cash payouts for unused vacation days.

Sikder has built an ecosystem of smart, caring teammates who can step in to lead the brand planning of a $12 billion oncology brand and help a new startup biotech launch its first niche drug.

And it has. In just four years, Axiom Healthcare Strategies surged 685 percent in growth, creating a disruption in the typical consulting industry.

“We are taking work from brand-name consulting shops because clients cannot get the bespoke level of service we offer,” Sikder says. “We have zero attrition from a client perspective.”

Hafiz Sikder, managing principal of Axiom Healthcare Strategies

traditional companies do.” “We are not here to follow tradition; we are here to build a disruptive legacy,” quips Sikder with a smile.

BUSINESS WITH A SOUL
Giving back to society is an equally important part of leaving an enduring legacy, and Sikder built caring for others into Axiom’s DNA. Growing up in Bangladesh with a Jesuit and Muslim upbringing, he saw what it means to have a life with service at the core.

The think tank’s nonprofit arm, Axiom REACH, offers cancer patients free rides to their doctor’s appointment, provides full tuition scholarships and pre-professional support to underrepresented students pursuing careers in health care through its unique cohort-model ARGOS program, and sponsors lodging at Hope Lodge, NYC, providing free housing for cancer patients receiving treatment.

“The Axiom REACH foundation has significantly contributed to the American Cancer Society over the last three years, providing critical funding and support,” said Dr. Mark Goldberg, American Cancer Society Board member. “The Axiom team has now set their sights on helping ACS obtain funding to address disparities that prevent equal access to cancer screenings and care across all communities.”

Team Axiom strongly believes genetic coding should dictate one’s prognosis in cancer, not your zip code. “It’s unacceptable that, as a society, we would allow such disparities across racial divides,” Sikder says. “We are here to change that.”

AXIOMHCS.COM

Hafiz Sikder has nearly 20 years of experience in various leadership roles in the life sciences industry. Partnering with several big-name consulting agencies, he noticed one thing: the relationship was often transactional. When he left to start his boutique oncology and rare disease think tank in 2016, he vowed to change that.

At Axiom Healthcare Strategies, Sikder disrupted the model by building a team with deep clinical and commercial expertise and innovative minds. He embraced a people-first strategy, which turned out to be the secret to his success. An ecosystem that focuses on people—clients, patients, and teammates—all centered on a singular goal of transforming patients’ lives.

“We’re not a traditional agency where we will take on a book of business and manage it like managing a budget line,” says Sikder. “We will always come back and say, ‘Have you considered this?’ or ‘How about this pivot in thinking?’ The money can always come later.”

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Sikder has built an ecosystem of smart, caring teammates who can step in to lead the brand planning of a $12 billion oncology brand and help a new startup biotech launch its first niche drug.

Instead of cubicles and corner offices, Team Axiom comes together around a giant table. The flat organization has no org charts, managers, departments, or supervisors. Business consultants told Sikder, “You need reporting structures and systems. That’s what
While the internet has made information more accessible to students, transforming the role teachers play in the classroom, teaching and teacher training has remained much the same. Emily Feistritzer, PhD, saw a growing need to change how teachers prepared in the digital age for their careers.

Funded initially by the New Schools Venture Fund, under the National Center for Education Information which she had launched in 1979, Feistritzer began work “to create a very innovative, dynamic, alive program” to prepare teachers to be “problem-solvers instead of just knowledge disseminators.”

**INNOVATION OVER TRADITION**

In the digital age, simply parroting information was not enough, Feistritzer knew. The traditional approach to preparing teachers for the classroom involves “teaching them what to teach,” she says. Once they master the content, the focus shifts to training them to dispense it so students can understand and retain it to perform well on standardized tests.

The TeachNow process consists of activities-based collaborative learning. The content is based on the internationally recognized InTASC standards, considered the best practices in teaching.

“Teachers themselves report that the way they best learn to be an effective teacher is by actually practicing, doing it, and working with other teachers and colleagues,” Feistritzer explains. Since research showed “that actually doing a trade is more effective than reading about it in order to acquire that skill,” Feistritzer says, “TeachNow built a custom learning platform to foster activities-based collaborative learning.” Cohorts of 10 to 15 teachers engage in weekly activities online, as part of a nine-month curriculum.

**RISING DEMAND FOR CERTIFICATION**

Program growth has been fueled almost entirely by referrals from past participants. Feedback was that students wanted their certificate or diploma to feature the word “university” rather than TeachNow, Inc. In response, the organization’s name was updated to Moreland University in 2020, in honor of Feistritzer’s maternal ancestors who taught in a one-room schoolhouse in Moreland, Kentucky.

Moreland University, TeachNow’s teacher preparation certificate program and its master’s degrees are the only programs built entirely to train teachers in the digital age. The 100 percent online program boasts a 92 percent retention rate, which is much higher than the industry average of 66 percent, per the Center for American Progress.

According to Feistritzer, increasing application numbers and sky-high satisfaction rates are buoying demand for TeachNow’s teacher preparation certificate program. Having enrolled more than 10,000 students in more than 150 countries to date, “The program is poised for explosive growth,” she reports.

Moreland University, TeachNow, School of Education

MORELAND.EDU
The Bee’s Knees

Founders Ranil Piyaratna and Geetesh Goyal have built Human Bees into a $50 million force in the recruiting and staffing industry. Behold the story, by the numbers, of their rise—and the buzz around their success. —Peter Keating

From the September 2021 Issue

How They Catch More Bees with Honey

Return on Investment for Human Bees’ clients varies widely, depending on what kind of help they’re seeking—but it typically includes savings on recruiting candidates, screening and testing applicants, payroll operations, and efforts to retain and replace workers.

Which raises the question: If there’s this much money available through better workforce management, why don’t companies keep more of it by doing that job themselves? Goyal believes it’s because most big businesses are badly organized. “Corporate organizations have relied on recruiting and staffing up into human resources, and this angle never made sense to me,” he says. “Human resources is the person who walks you through the benefits. It’s so broken—I would mean, would you have HR selling your product? I don’t believe any company has HR selling its product. Why, why is HR selling the heart of your company to your employees? Sales people should be doing that.”

How They Sustain Their Buzz Through the Pandemic

As Covid Ravaged the U.S. economy last year, it decimated the staffing industry: From February to July 2020, temporary employment shrunk more than 25 percent. Over that stretch, Human Bees increased its placements by 254 percent.

A key reason: It never closed its doors. “We supported clients like FedEx, which was shipping essential goods, and Rainin, which makes pipettes for the CDC,” says Goyal. “Our people were still out there on the factory line.”

After weighing such obligations and the relative youth of its staff, Goyal decided to work through the pandemic, and invested $700,000 in personal protective equipment and social-distancing barriers. The choice came with a cost. Despite the precautions, more than two dozen employees, including Goyal, have contracted Covid—out of just over 100 workers. But he still believes he made the right call. “You can place software engineers from home, and maybe financial analysts. But when it comes to industrial and production workers, you can’t do it through the internet. You have to go out there, find them, and interview them in person. Otherwise, they won’t be the right fit. It was the one decision that was the game changer for us.”

How They Pollinate Future Growth

It might seem unusual for a company whose mission is recruiting nonpermanent employees to lean so heavily on loyalty and reputation. But company officials like to tell the tale of account execs Steven Robinson, who ran into his old high school baseball coach three years ago. Upon learning the man was a manager at FedEx, Robinson pitched him on Human Bees and landed a follow-up the next day, and ultimately a partnership at Oakland International Airport.

Today, Human Bees is the top supplier of contract workers to FedEx in Oakland and L.A.

How They Continue to Expand Their Hive

Since Human Bees’ founding, revenue has increased at an annualized rate of 68 percent a year to more than $50 million. How can the company sustain that growth rate over the long haul?

It can’t, because nobody can—at least not organically. Which is why, as Human Bees looks ahead, it’s plotting a new strategy: acquisitions. With his company amassing cash and carrying no debt, Goyal believes Human Bees is worth five to six times its sales, double the multiple of many staffing competitors. So he can create value simply by taking over smaller ones, and even more by making them fly smarter.

As he contemplates this new chapter, Goyal radiates an optimism that, given his company’s recent performance, seems almost justifiable. “I’m not that worried about the apocalypse,” he says, “because the apocalypse sort of happened a year and a half ago. And we thrived through it.”
Short Waits and Lower Patient Costs Yield High Growth

Surgery Center at Corporate Way focuses on service, niche procedures, and research.

After receiving an epidural block for spine pain at the hospital, one of Amol Soin’s patients was incensed at the cost. The hospital billed the insurance company $10,000. Even after discounting the bill several thousand dollars, the carrier—or the patient with a high-deductible plan—is on the hook for that, while Soin earns $100 for the procedure. Soin was also frustrated. So, in 2016, the anesthesiologist and pain management specialist founded the Surgery Center at Corporate Way, in Dayton Ohio.

Soin still makes the same $100 per procedure, but the Surgery Center bills the insurance company around $500. Some tell Soin he’s leaving money on the table, and that he could charge more. But his goal is to lower health system costs. “We offer the same procedures, the same equipment, and the same physicians, at a price that is significantly discounted from what you get at the hospital,” Soin says.

A NICHE SURGERY CENTER

The Surgery Center focuses on efficiency, with outpatient spine, orthopedic, neurology, and pain management procedures that take 10 minutes or less. Even with only one procedure room, the Surgery Center still accommodate other patients with pre- and post-operative surgical beds. The procedures don’t need a lot of equipment, nor is there much blood loss. And both insurance companies and patients like the lower costs.

The center brings in about 30 percent of its revenue research from large medical device companies using the facilities for testing and clinical trial work. Soin Neuroscience (SNI), his own research company, also uses the surgery center when testing medical devices that treat pain and other neurological conditions. “That’s been rewarding, exciting, and fun, and not something all surgery centers do,” he says.

A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE FOR PATIENTS AND STAFF

The patient experience is key, including efficient scheduling and valuing patients’ time. “If we can put that experience first, people will tell 20 others about how awesome their experience was,” Soin says. Along with nice décor and a clean facility, the team streamlines intake paperwork using an iPad. “We strive to make sure patients don’t wait any longer than 15 minutes to go into their procedure.”

Soin pays staff more than they would elsewhere, and team-building activities include holiday parties, meals, and events like a Rent the Runway dinner. Staff members chose formal wear and events like a Rent the Runway dinner. “That’s been rewarding, exciting, and fun, and not something all surgery centers do,” he says.

GOING WHERE THERE IS A NEED

As a commercial restoration contractor, RestoreMasters works on schools and colleges, military bases, and businesses. The company is currently working on its largest single job, worth $24 million, Irvin says. The key to success with storm restoration is responsiveness, he says. That’s why the RestoreMasters team often ends up working around the clock during storms, “to make sure we can take care of as many people as possible. We get crews on-site and boots on the ground wherever they’re needed,” Irvin says. “We’re basically on call.”

Fixing Storm-Damaged Roofs

RestoreMasters moves its commercial roofing and repair operations to where they are most needed following catastrophic weather events.

Shrty after nine tornadoes touched down in central Indiana in May 2011, Matt Irvin and his crew of commercial roofing repair and restoration specialists headed north to help the reconstruction efforts. The tornadoes, coupled with wind damage and hail, had destroyed roofs across the region and provided Irvin with the opportunity he had been seeking to expand RestoreMasters Contracting outside of Florida.

Establishing a business presence beyond a local market is unusual in construction, where just staying in business is a feat. In fact, only 36.4 percent of construction contractors manage to last five years. The high attrition is frequently attributed to a focus on local work, where demand can quickly dry up. To avoid that fate, Irvin and his business partner Justin Reichl have expanded RestoreMasters, doing business in nearly 50 states and is headed into Canada within the next year.

SPECIALISTS, NOT GENERALISTS

RestoreMasters’ nationwide coverage is one competitive advantage. Its specialist business model is another. “Most contractors try to make the salesperson do almost everything. They sell it, build it, and collect it,” explains Irvin, who grew up in the roofing trade.

Irvin and Reichl recognized that expecting salespeople to wear multiple hats wasn’t effective or efficient. Instead, they divide the work by specialists. Not only does a specialist approach increase work capacity and use the best person for the job, it also prevents having a single person manage an entire project.

Relying on specialists is especially important with storm damage, because destruction from wind and hail isn’t always visible, says Irvin. To be sure, it’s critical to take the time to look underneath or cut into top roofing layers. His team, “knows what to look for, where to look, and the correct approach to take,” he says. That skill and experience has prevented future problems for countless customers.
The Great Unicorn Fixer

That Eren Bali came from rural Turkey to create a billion-dollar company isn’t the most unusual thing about him. It’s that Carbon Health is the second time he’s done it.

From the September 2021 Issue

Bali has tried before to reinvent an essential industry. He ended up creating an innovative company worth billions—Udemy, the world’s largest online education platform, which Bali co-founded in 2010 and is widely expected to have an IPO this year (Bali was CEO until 2014, and chairman until earlier this year). Carbon Health is also planning an IPO possibly next year, and its most recent round of funding, in July, valued it at more than $3 billion. That number vaults Bali into the rare pantheon of founders who have created multiple multibillion-dollar businesses.

Carbon Health grew 39,734% over the past three years and brought in more than $45 million in revenue in 2020. Bali’s story begins not in a Harvard dorm room or a Silicon Valley incubator but in a conflict-torn Turkish apricot-farming village near the Iraqi border called Durolova. In the years following the 1980 military coup in Turkey, few doctors and teachers wanted to work in the village, which is mostly Kurdish, amid the tension between the Kurds and Turkish nationalists. But Bali’s Kurdish parents, both educators, moved back to Durolova precisely to fill that gap. Bali’s mother was the sole teacher at his one-room primary school. She immediately saw the need for a new medical system in his spare time. “Health care was very idealistic,” he says, “and she injected this idealism into a lot of students.”

When he returned to the States, he began designing a framework for a new recording system in his spare time. “Health care is far more complicated than food or transportation,” Bali says, “and yet the tooling that we gave doctors was worse than in those industries.” In 2015, Carbon Health was born as an actual company. “The name comes from the structure of its software system: the central node—the patient—and satellite nodes—health care providers—resemble a carbon molecule.” The scope of its work quickly broadened into providing a full-service tech platform for clinics.

Friends of Eren Bali talk about a certain kind of glow that lights up his face when he gets into conversations about solving problems. The soft-spoken co-founder and CEO of Carbon Health, this year’s second-fastest-growing company on the Inc. 5000, has what longtime investor and friend Paul Lee describes as “a weird, quiet confidence about him. He has a calm demeanor, but also this deep curiosity.” To Bali’s college classmate, Ebibi Karaman, his salient feature was a hunger for understanding. “In everything he did, he wanted to learn the very deepest levels of it,” recalls Karaman.

Bali will need those skills. Carbon Health, which grew 39,734 percent over the past three years and brought in more than $45 million in revenue in 2020, aims to solve one of the knottiest problems facing America today: its broken health care system. The spiraling costs that force workers and employers to swallow double-digit annual percentage increases and some small businesses to drop coverage entirely, the lack of transparency that leads to exorbitant and in-decipherable bills, the stark disparities in access and outcomes for people of color: the list goes on.

From its base in San Francisco, the company is one of several in recent years to combine brick-and-mortar clinics with app-based telehealth. Forward and One Medical offer subscription-based care as a supplement to health insurance. Walmart and CVS are building chains of in-store clinics with retail-like pricing. But few, if any, have the overarching vision of Carbon Health, which Bali describes as “a full-stack, omni-channel primary care provider with an obsession for inclusion and being accessible to everyone.” Translation: cheap health care delivered wherever and whenever is most convenient. As of late July, Carbon Health had clinics in 11 states, with 1,500 planned by the end of 2025.

Carbon Health grew 39,734% over the past three years and brought in more than $45 million in revenue in 2020.
a supplement to electronic health records, then a full-blown EHR system, then telehealth tools, prescription fulfillment, payments, and scheduling. Carbon Health would take a piece of clinic revenue and essentially run their operations—without having to spend a bunch of money on real estate or doctors.

Things didn’t quite go according to plan. Clinics saw their costs fall as their efficiency increased, but rather than passing on the savings to patients, medical practices viewed their new system as a premium innovation and a way to madge prices up. Even trickier, Carbon wouldn’t be able to make a dent in health care costs without getting hospitals to sign on. “You can’t just bet on making the components more efficient,” says Bali. “You have to bet on scale.”

Carbon Health did have one exceptional client, a chain of seven urgent-care clinics in the Bay Area called Direct Urgent Care. The company’s mission aligned well with Carbon Health’s. As the two groups shared patient and operational data, they began to see better results, including a nearly 300 percent boost in patient retention. In 2018 Bali decided to buy the chain and turn those locations into Carbon Health clinics—and then build more. “We just said, screw it,” he recalls. “We’re going to own the clinics. We’re going to own the brand. We’re going to own the services. We will own every piece of it.”

“Just said, screw it.”

We’re going to own the clinics. We’re going to own the brand. We’re going to own the services. We will own every piece of it.”

Carbon Health’s business took off, with both telehealth appointments and in-person Covid screenings surging and, later, vaccinations. The company rolled out some of the first mobile testing clinics (those shipping-container test sites that various outfits have plunked down in parking lots all over the country) and eventually created an at-home test kit. Earlier this year, the city of Los Angeles tasked Carbon with running its mass-vaccination site, the country’s largest, which at its height was administering some 10,000 shots per day. Revenue grew fourfold in 2020.

There were only a few hundred bitcoin automated teller machines (ATMs) in the entire world when Chicago real estate investor Sonny Meraban purchased his first machine and parked it in a local liquor store.

His vision was, “Let’s try it out and see what happens,” says Jenna Polinsky, director of marketing and tablet sales at Bitcoin of America, the company Meraban started in 2015. “It was a new and exciting thing.” Today, the company has more than 1,200 ATMs in 31 states.

With its own in-house software team, Bitcoin of America is using technology to make it easier for customers and merchants to trade in cryptocurrency. On the employment side, the company is setting an example for how to bring more women into this male-dominated industry.

EDUCATING CUSTOMERS

In 2019, Bitcoin of America launched a new agent program that enables specially trained merchants to use mobile devices to complete bitcoin transactions for their customers in the store.

“We learned when we started that there was a huge number of people who wanted to learn about crypto but were not sure where to start,” Polinsky says. “So, we created a face-to-face purchasing experience, where they can go in and ask questions.”

In May 2021, the company introduced a universal kiosk that combines the features of a traditional ATM with those of a bitcoin ATM. Customers can use it to withdraw cash with a debit card, buy bitcoin with cash, and sell the currency for cash. The hybrid machine is also a space-saver for the business owner hosting it.

ADVANCING WOMEN

Polinsky was a cryptocurrency novice when she was hired in 2019. But she says the novelty is part of what makes working there exciting.

Women make up the majority of the executive suite at Bitcoin of America, which has a total staff of 27. The company sent an all-female delegation to Miami to attend the Bitcoin 2021 conference in June. The group included Polinsky, Alice Gorodetsky, director of business development, and Samantha Miller, chief operating officer.

Polinsky says CEO Meraban has placed a high priority on hiring and promoting women at Bitcoin of America, which earned a Great Place to Work certification in 2021.

“Because this is such a male-dominated industry, we feel that we have a responsibility to promote women, make sure they are being represented in our company, and use our influence to bring more women into the industry,” Polinsky says.

Cryptocurrency Success Built on Innovation and Inclusion

Bitcoin of America creates an easier cryptocurrency customer experience and promotes gender equity in the industry’s workforce

Electric...
This Entrepreneur Proves Where You Came From Doesn’t Matter

The power couple behind Hardbody Coaching, a premier online health and fitness coaching company, believed in their vision, even when others didn’t.

When you live in Muskogee, Oklahoma—Hardbody Coaching Co-Founder Law Payne’s hometown—the odds of launching four eight-figure businesses are slim. Payne describes his neighborhood as “a place where no one makes it.” Raised by a single mother who worked three jobs to provide for their family, he was first in his family to go to college, earning a dual bachelor’s degree. He was also the first to prove that entrepreneurship is more than a pipe dream.

Payne says success would not have been possible without his wife Patricia Payne, co-founder of Hardbody Coaching. He describes seeing her for the first time in 2009: “It was like seeing a unicorn. It was like I saw my future.” The Paynes got involved in online coaching before it was popular. “The biggest reason we got involved building a fitness empire affords the Paynes a lifestyle that feels out of reach to most people who grew up where Law did. But, he believes you can do anything you set your mind to, whether that is losing weight or working your way out of poverty. “If you align yourself with people who are successful and you are willing to invest in yourself, you can accomplish anything.” It also helps if you find a partner like Patricia, he says.

SHARE YOUR STRENGTH
“The biggest reason we got involved with this was to help people. It was to bless people with the knowledge we had about nutrition and fitness,” Law says. To increase their impact, the Paynes are teaching trainers and nutritionists how to launch virtual coaching businesses of their own. “We teach others the game; that way they can help us with our mission of helping people get in the best shape of their life,” he says.

When he started RestorationHQ in 2015, first, he focused on the commercial market. Then, he decided to operate independent of the insurance industry that traditionally supplies customers with restoration service contractors. “My intent was to change the buying experience of my customers and make myself aligned with them and not with the insurance companies,” says Guk, who spent 12 years at another Phoenix restoration company before launching RestorationHQ.

“THINKING LIKE THE BUILDING OWNER” Without the benefit of being on an insurance partner’s preferred contractor list, Guk focused on earning repeat business from his customers. To do that, he had to provide better customer service than his competitors. Creating custom standards rather than adhering to typical insurance carrier–enforced work schedules and payment guidelines resulted in better overall service, Guk says. From designing project scope to carrying out the equipment setup, performance, and final delivery, he believes in prioritizing the customer’s experience above all else.

BIGGER, MORE COMPLEX JOBS RestorationHQ’s work team once consisted of Guk, a marketing rep, an administrative assistant, and a couple of field technicians. His first two hires, made 90 days after launching the company, were former co-workers. As the company has grown, so has its staff and contractor list. “The projects used to be simple cosmetic repairs: a little touchup paint, nothing major,” Guk says. Today, the work requires project managers, multiple subcontractors, and specialty services. “We are implementing new processes and procedures, and it may be that 12 months from now, we outgrow them,” Guk says. “If we think of big companies as large cruise ships, we are an offshore speedboat, still able to pivot and move quickly.”

Now he’s looking toward expanding RestorationHQ’s market into other states and eventually franchising. “We’re not done growing,” he says.

SERGEI GUZ  CEO OF RESTORATIONHQ

89% 3-Year Growth
19 Employees
$4.6 million 2020 Revenue

Customer satisfaction drives RestorationHQ’s business. “I believe the biggest competitive advantage we have is our customer experience,” says Guk.

Adding a new service line is an opportunity to stretch the team’s capabilities and continue to improve their customer experience. "If you want to succeed in this industry, you have to be willing to reinvent yourself, and be innovative," Guk says.

The company’s products and services are designed to add efficiency and cost savings to restoration work teams while offering a better experience to customers. "I want to do everything right the first time, because I don’t want to spend my life doing restoration," Guk says.

Despite numerous warnings that breaking away from the traditional alliance with insurance companies was a recipe for failure, Guk’s approach got RestorationHQ to $1.1 million in revenue within its first year in business. He can also tally the company’s growth in terms of how much building space it serves. “We measure our footprint and the work we do in the amount of square feet we have under contract,” Guk says. “Right now, we are sitting at roughly 44 million to 45 million square feet under contract, with the goal of having over 60 million in the next 12 months or so.”

BRANDED CONTENT
Connecting People Processes to Business Strategy

Engagedly, a performance management platform for midsize companies, found its footing in a competitive market by risk leaving a partner position at a successful consulting company to bootstrap a business? For Srikant Chellappa, founder of Engagedly, an HR technology company, it was a chance to innovate. “It wasn’t about money. It was about trying to do something more creative and impactful,” he says.

Chellappa worked for top consultancies, including Ernst & Young, for nearly two decades before becoming a principal at a health care technology firm. In consulting, his instinct was always to point out additional innovation opportunities for clients, but he couldn’t always pursue them, which felt limiting. “It was in the interest of both parties to stay within the scope of the project,” he explains.

INNOVATION UNLEASHED

Building a business was a chance to innovate without boundaries. It was also an opportunity to solve a need he had observed in roughly 100 companies: employee disengagement. When employees are unhappy at work or not connected to the mission, performance suffers, which affects business outcomes. Chellappa observed that a common cause of disengagement was lack of communication from the top. Often, employees simply didn’t understand business goals and strategies.

“I saw a need for better connecting employees to the leadership, and a platform obviously would help in doing that, so everything [all communication] is not just top-down,” he explains. Engagedly is that platform: a tool designed to help mid-market companies deliver continuous performance management to improve employee engagement and performance.

CONNECTING ENGAGEMENT TO PERFORMANCE

When Engagedly started in 2015, engagement wasn’t a line item on most company budgets. During the first six or seven months, he and the team struggled to connect engagement to a business value. Based on feedback and testing, they added more performance capabilities to make a clear link between people management and business outcomes.

By pivoting from “People Platform” to “People & Strategy Platform,” Engagedly differentiated its solution. Today, the Inc. 5000-ranking business has more than 400 clients in 30 countries. In the beginning, most clients were technology companies, but organizations across verticals—including retail, banking, and manufacturing—are now adopting people enablement platforms, Chellappa says. He is looking forward to continued growth and adopting personal and professional growth.

FOCUS ON PEOPLE

Noble-Holt says. “We are proud of who we are. This is what makes our culture a big deal. My team is from different backgrounds, races, educational opportunities, and more, but everyone here has worked their ass off to get where they are—and that is our culture,” Noble-Holt says. “We are proud of who we are. This is what makes our culture a big deal. We want to look back over the years and see real personal and professional growth.”

Growth Starts from Within

At MediCopy, a Nashville-based health information management firm, eight core values drive every decision and serve as the company’s North Star. And it’s this dedication that puts the company on the Inc. 5000 list of America’s fastest growing private companies for the eighth time.

MediCopy offers secure delivery of protected information from health care partners across the country to their requesting parties, such as attorneys, insurance companies, government agencies, and patients. You can imagine that core values like honesty, accountability, and quality are important to the company. But it also embraces work-life balance and continuing personal and professional growth.

CEO Elliott Noble-Holt sums it up simply: “We live our core values.”

BUILD A BETTER CULTURE

Company culture is important at MediCopy, but Noble-Holt isn’t following the path other tech startups have taken. “I’m not talking about treats, beer on tap in the kitchen, potlucks, or a foosball table in the break area,” he says. “I am talking about a culture where your co-workers and managers want to see everyone grow personally and professionally. I’m talking about no wage gaps between women and men or race and paying employees a livable wage.”

In fact, 77 percent of MediCopy employees are women, 49 percent are people of color, and 60 percent of the management team are people of color and/or LGBTQ+ people.

“My team is from different backgrounds, races, educational opportunities, and more, but everyone here has worked their ass off to get where they are—and that is our culture,” Noble-Holt says. “We are proud of who we are. This is what makes our culture a big deal. We want to look back over the years and see real personal and professional growth.”
Jonathan McBride knows something about how teams behave in a crisis. For five and a half years, he had a ringside seat in the Obama White House as an oil spill swamped the Gulf Coast and an earthquake devastated Haiti; as the H1N1 virus and Ebola threatened the U.S.; as the government shut down. Same at BlackRock, in the high-stakes sway of the financial markets, and before that, as a co-founder of a small business where dramas unfurled every day, from cash-flow squeezes to personnel flare-ups to can-this-really-be-happening-now? tech failures.

In those tense, swirling moments, he’s seen plans botched, messages mishandled, and opportunities squandered. But he’s also watched as teams responded to a crisis in ways that were flat-out exhilarating: Communication quickened, hierarchies flattened, turnaround-time evaporated, talent blossomed, MacGyver-like fixes got the green light, mission-alignment reached 100 percent, and what truly matters suddenly truly mattered.

Which has led McBride, who served as the director of the White House office of presidential personnel and then as BlackRock’s global head of inclusion and diversity, to ask an against-the-grain question: What if a leader were to invite a “controlled crisis” upon her own organization—and then weaponize it? McBride believes that carefully injecting a little pulse-racing, brow-mopping crisis into the system will not only spark moments of epiphanic insight but may also lead to electrifying growth.

Skeptical? Consider the scientific evidence that a small but intense physiological crisis—like high-intensity interval training or intermittent fasting—can have outsized health benefits. As McBride sees it, a controlled crisis will do the same for your workplace. He’s now developing these counterintuitive ideas for an executive MBA course. Here, he gives Inc. readers a sneak preview.

Most leaders think they’re doing a crackerjack job when they’re avoiding a crisis. But you’re saying—Over time, smooth is best. Fluidity is part of what makes you fast and responsive. But you can create grooves that become your default responses. Hierarchies and habits can develop and calcify, and that chokes off new ideas and slows the business.

But how is a crisis the antidote to that? A crisis instantly disrupts your routines and explodes your habits. When a group of people suddenly face a crisis—a threat—and there’s time pressure, they tend to get very mobilized, organized, and focused, and look for new ideas in places they normally wouldn’t. It’s like intermittent fasting: The early stages, when you’re depleting your system, trigger a whole bunch of things that are restorative and cleansing. A little jolt to a team—and the metabolic shift that follows—increases energy, iteration, and focus.

When would you activate a controlled crisis? When you believe you’re not getting the best out of a group—how they approach things, the level of creativity or focus. Are they stalled or stuck? Or perhaps you see a competitive opportunity and you need rapid iteration.

How big a crisis are we talking about unleashing? Think of it as a dial, not a light switch. Part of the beauty of a controlled crisis is that you can calibrate it. Ideally, you’re not disrupting the whole organization; you’re targeting one group with a booster shot of adrenaline. You don’t need a five-alarm crisis to get the benefits.

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BRANDED CONTENT

Company Name
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2021

YouTube Marketing Pioneer Has a Billion-dollar Future

The CEO of AdOutreach is just 24, but he’s been running a successful tech business for half his life.

The tale of catching the entrepreneurial bug as a child by starting a lemonade stand is almost a cliche. But that’s what Aleric Heck, founder and CEO of AdOutreach, did. But Heck envisioned it as a way to generate seed capital for his real goal: a technology startup.

He achieved that goal at the ripe old age of 12 and repeated the process several times over the next dozen years. Now 24, he sits atop a digital marketing enterprise with an eight-figure annual run rate. Along the way, he used cash flow from his ventures to pay for his college education and, ultimately, to launch AdOutreach.

His company’s flagship offering is The YouTube Ads Workshop, a 10-week program where Heck and his team help their clients integrate YouTube ads into their marketing models. The program covers everything from scriptwriting to advanced targeting, helping clients launch, optimize, and scale their campaigns.

“A-HA! MOMENTS DRIVING GROWTH

Heck grew his first tech venture, AppFind, into one of YouTube’s largest app review channels, generating over 100 million views and more than 500,000 subscribers. Then, he convinced a developer to promote one of its apps with a YouTube ad that he produced. When a $500 ad buy generated 11,000 downloads in just a week, the developer offered him a six-figure salary with stock options to quit college and move to Silicon Valley.

Realizing he was onto something big—and wanting to remain the captain of his own ship—Heck declined. Instead, he used AppFind’s considerable cash flow to launch App Outreach, a company that promotes mobile apps via YouTube ads.

EXPORTABLE SCALABILITY

Heck’s model could help all types of businesses generate leads and sales. He brought on Julia Gordy, a college friend who shared his vision of developing an incredible marketing empire, to help grow the AdOutreach team to more than 26 employees.

AdOutreach launched as a YouTube agency in 2017, but Heck recognized the scalability limitations that imposed. Many of his clients wanted to actually learn about YouTube advertising and handle it in house. He pivoted quickly to the workshop model that combines training with hands-on help.

“We’ve put together a dream team in our new headquarters in Austin and created a culture of empowerment,” he says. “Value-driven video is the future of advertising, and I see us continuing to scale at the forefront of this movement. Our goal is to build a billion-dollar business.”

ADOUTREACH.COM

No 87
2021 Ranking
5,000+
Number of Clients/Customer

AdOutreach

Inc. 500000 Privatw Companies
America’s Fastest-Growing Private Companies

YouTube Marketing Pioneer
Has a Billion-dollar Future

The Inc. 500000 Ranking

AdOutreach

2021 YEARBOOK • INC. 500000 • 29

Aleric Heck, founder and CEO of AdOutreach
is not a good idea. But take a look at the science. When you hold back inputs or resources, you actually induce the body to optimize itself. Same thing with high-intensity interval training. When you raise your heart rate to 80 percent of its maximum for a short period of time, good things happen.

So how would you start a controlled crisis?
The most obvious lever is time. If turn-around time is usually two weeks to prep a board presentation, now you say you need it in four days. That shared sense of risk combined with an aggressive timeline leads to a bucking of the system in beneficial ways. Or you can, without notice, cut away approval layers, which has the effect of increasing people’s sense of responsibility.

What does that look like?
People always tell me they wish the folks creating reports for them would act as if they were in a lesser role. If you say to the CEO, I know what? Next time they hand one to you, tell them to walk it directly to the CEO’s office. They’ll return to their desk, think more, re-edit it. You’ve taken away the comfort of layers. That’s going to shake things up for them.

What’s another way to initiate a crisis? Remove a resource. Say the team usually outsources the creative to an agency. Well, now they have to solve the problem in-house—but maybe you let them bring in a red team. Newsrooms sometimes use red teams to rapidly stress-test a bet-the-farm story. The people working on the story have to sit across from other journalists who try to poke holes in it. If they can’t resolve the questions, the story doesn’t move forward. This is a great way to hack groupthink and confirmation bias, which happens when your brain feeds you information that supports your hypothesis while filtering out some of the information that contradicts it.

OK, I’m going to red-team you now. The workplace can be stressful enough. Do the benefits of a controlled crisis outweigh the added anxiety?

Look, we need layers and processes for quality control, to limit downside risk. But over time, those layers also tend to limit the innovative ideas that are flowing upward, which can lead to a sclerotic organization as well as support untenable bias. And sometimes those layers can even be the cause of the day-to-day stress you’re talking about. But when a crisis hijacks the system, suddenly people from across the organization become maniacally focused on the same thing. The number-one thing that gets people fired up at work is feeling that what they do is important. When the stakes are high and everyone is looking at the stakes the same way, as in a crisis, that’s naturally going to happen. Everybody suddenly understands the thing that needs to get done and done now—which isn’t always true in organizations. I’m talking about total alignment across the group.

Why is total alignment so important?
First, it’s just a great feeling. Normally, people pick things up and move them along when they can. One study showed that when someone is interrupted, it takes 23 minutes for them to get back to work, so there’s no momentum. But when everyone is focused on the same thing, people can iterate rapidly in real time. That focus not only lets the organization solve the problem at hand but—this is almost more important—also allows everyone to see that total alignment is possible and to identify those things that might be blocking it.

How does a crisis lead to innovation?
New ideas get more love, because it’s often the old ideas that brought the crisis on. But the other benefit of a time-bound jolt to your system—where information is out of the usual lines of sight—where people are looking everywhere for answers—is that you have a better chance of hearing from the people who are out of the usual lines of sight.

But in a crisis, when is time of the essence, don’t you want to hear from your most experienced people? The truth is, the people in the organization closest to the customer are usually furthest from the decision-making authority. But they should have a voice in what you’re designing for that customer. In a crisis, you often see a CEO look down the rungs of the ladder. It’s that moment when a senior person hears a 24-year-old say something smart in a crisis meeting and walks her straight into the CEO’s office to explain the idea without first filtering it through seven people.

Right, that doesn’t happen on your average Tuesday. But during a crisis, it does. You get it unfiltered. When I was at the White House, I learned that JFK created the Situation Room after the Bay of Pigs disaster, when he realized the information he was getting from the CIA and the Department of Defense was filtered through a long chain of consideration and scrubbing before it got to him. So he cleaned out a room and put officers from key agencies in there with a direct line from people in the field. That’s JFK cutting out layers, looking down the ladder.

Do you see a crisis as being a moment when ideas from diverse team members have a better chance to break through? This is tricky. When we’re moving fast, we often default to our gut instincts—and the gut is where bias resides. We all have biases, like the bias toward the information we’ve heard most recently. But one of our biggest biases is for sameness: People who look like us and behave in a familiar way appear more predictable and so make us feel safer. We tend to trust their ideas more. In a crisis moment, somebody who’s talking in a different way, at a different pace, using slightly different words, and offering a different theory feels more risky. But when a challenge is coming out of a diverse, interconnected world, having more people thinking alike is actually more risky because the world is not homogenous.

How else does diversity and crisis intersect?
During a crisis, there’s a willingness to listen to people outside the normal hierarchy. Research has shown that women and people of color are more likely to become CEOs when a company is going through a crisis or period of struggle.

Is a crisis a good moment to spot emerging talent? It’s a great time to earn a battlefield promotion. I was running a program that Obama had started for emerging leaders, and William McRaven, who led the Special Operations Command and oversaw the raid that killed bin Laden, snapped by someone I used to talk to a group. He explained how one day you’re in the foxhole with your friends making fun of the lieutenant, and the next, someone comes to your tent and says, “The lieutenant had go back to the base. We’re promoting you!” So how did they find you? One way is that they look for who takes a leadership role in the middle of a crisis, who starts throwing out ideas even if they’re not the team leader. They also look for people who already have a followership.

Fellowship?
Meaning, when this person walks to the left, are people following her even though she’s low on the ladder? A crisis is a very good time to spot people like that.

What are some leadership traits to look for in a controlled crisis?
You want people who speak truth to power. In a crisis, you really don’t want to be “yessed.” But the main thing to tune in to is people who are calm, who think clearly. At the White House, we used to tell a story about an astronaut who posed a question to a group of people: “Say you’re at the International Space Station and suddenly your oxygen goes out. You know you’ve got about 10 seconds before you start to lose consciousness. What do you do?” People started blurting out all these things they would do first—and he interrupts and says, “No. You think for 8 seconds, and you make one move.” In a controlled crisis, you’re looking for the person who is lucid and clear when everybody else is going crazy, because when a crisis hits, you might only get one bite at the apple. —Bill Shapiro
Wealth Advice for a Full Life
Tech investments allow Winthrop Wealth advisors to spend more time strategizing with clients.

When Winthrop Wealth launched the Registered Investment Advisor (RIA) in 2017, the company leaders invested in a robust technology infrastructure. The goal was to create internal efficiencies by streamlining operations to free up advisors’ and relationship managers’ time. “We’re able to stay lean and mean,” says Lucas Winthrop, chief operating officer. Lucas, along with brother Max Winthrop, chief executive officer, now lead the wealth management firm originally founded by their father and uncle. “Our mission is to break down the barriers so that people can get personalized, impactful, and actionable advice at a reasonable cost in any stage of their life,” Lucas says.

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORTS GROWTH
Rather than design a fancy client-facing portal, Winthrop invested heavily in collaboration technology for its team. “Technology infrastructure is one of the top three challenges, generally, for RIAs,” says Lucas. The company’s tech integrates billing, performance reporting, financial planning, and customer relationship management systems. Integrated Artificial Intelligence (AI) serves up client information to advisors automatically, so advisors know what’s happening with clients’ lives and their portfolios, explains Max. Recognizing the value that such a system could have for smaller investment advisory firms, Winthrop Wealth began partnering with sole practitioners and small teams who had hit that capacity wall and who could benefit from the firm’s technology infrastructure, to gain additional capacity for growth.

MULTIGENERATIONAL MONEY MANAGEMENT
Since setting up the new entity, “We have almost tripled the size of our team, adding subject matter specialists in several departments,” says Max, “which was a key element in freeing up more of the advisors’ time as well as leveraging our team to dig deeper into unique client situations and focus on topics that impact clients the most.”

Winthrop has its advisors take the lead in discovering client needs and developing comprehensive plans to pursue their goals, relying on a team of carefully curated professionals for guidance. “Everyone together behind the scenes works as one,” says Lucas, and this reflects the firm’s highly collaborative, ensemble approach to serving clients.

Although entrepreneurs and business owners compose the largest percentage of Winthrop Wealth’s client base, including some fellow Inc. 5000 honorees, corporate executives and professional athletes are also major segments.

“We want to simplify our clients’ lives and give them time back, because time is the most precious commodity,” says Max. “We want our clients to live their lives to the fullest.”

WINTHROPWEALTH.COM

Specialized Commercial Cleaning Provides a Lucrative Niche
Family values and a strong niche have helped Superior Contract Cleaning find a clear path to success.

After Rinea Blanchard became a widow when her husband was killed in a 1992 car accident, she was left to support her two small children on her own. In 1997, a friend asked if she’d be interested in teaming up on a new venture, offering construction cleanup services in their home state of Louisiana. Eventually the partners went their separate ways, and Blanchard launched Superior Contract Cleaning, focusing on construction cleanup in the commercial sector. “I was a young woman with a lot of energy as well as a drive to succeed,” she says.

Blanchard grew her company, adding new services like ongoing janitorial cleaning services. She partnered with another business that provided fire and water damage remediation services. But when Blanchard lost her biggest client, she had to file for bankruptcy in 2010. Down but not out, she eventually got Superior Contract Cleaning back on track. This time, her son Zack Blanchard joined her as CEO. The pair worked together cleaning buildings, acquiring accounts, and expanding their services with strategic investments and a specialization in commercial large loss remediation.

A DRIVE TO HELP OTHERS
The Blanchards have helped others during their time of need through their business. Zack Blanchard earned Master Restorer certifications in mold, fire, smoke, and water, which helped Superior Contract Cleaning earn remediation contracts during disasters. Record freezing temperatures in Texas brought needs for remediation, including nursing and retirement home complexes. COVID also provided an opportunity for the Blanchards to help communities with disinfecting services and products.

“The sense of urgency that my son has, along with his determination, is the reason why we are able to help so many people,” says Rinea. She credits the company’s growth to the extensive certifications that both Zack and mitigation manager Jessica Guidry hold, along with their strong work ethics and attention to detail.

STRONG FAMILY VALUES
A family-owned business, the Blanchards treat their team members like family, too. “The people who are with us today proved to themselves they are valuable, and they showed us they are motivated to perform at the highest level,” Rinea says.

Rinea’s determination to make a better life for herself and her family has set the tone for the company’s success. “We’re taking risks that many wouldn’t dare do, by never quitting, continually growing in knowledge and training, and utilizing modern processes,” she says.

SUPERIORCONTRACTCLEANING.COM
Flexible Business Intelligence Tools Drive Triple-Digit Growth for This Data Tech Company

Zuar’s business intelligence solutions help fast-growing companies do more with less, using its own tools to drive efficient growth.

The only thing surprising about Zuar landing on the Inc. 5000 list of America’s fastest-growing private companies is that the team found time to apply jokes. Zuar CTO Matthew Laue. Since its launch in 2016, the Austin, Texas-based data technology company’s leadership team hasn’t had much time to reflect on what it has achieved. They have been busy building intelligent software solutions that fuel efficient growth for hundreds of companies.

Overcoming the “Wall of Despair”

Before Zuar, companies new to business intelligence often found themselves facing a “wall of despair.” Laue explains. They would see a product demo and think it looked great, but when they learned how complicated and time-consuming it was to deploy the tool, they would get discouraged. CEO Joel Stellner and Laue started the company to tear down that wall. While other data strategy tools take months to get up and running, Zuar provides measureable value almost immediately.

“Fast work really well with fast-growing companies with small, lean teams that are trying to accomplish a lot, because one of the core things we help people do is automate processes and take back time,” Stellner explains. For example, one small business client was able to support a 10-fold increase in demand without increasing head count by using Zuar to automate customer reporting. “We help you do something hard once and then automate it forever,” he says. That not only translates to cost savings; it improves the employee experience by removing painful busy work.

Takes One to Know One

One of the most consequential early decisions Zuar made was to focus on actual customer challenges, rather than trying to assume what clients would need. As a fast-growing business, looking to do more with less, Zuar has many of the challenges its clients face. By using its own solutions to collect, analyze, and automate data, Zuar has streamlined workflows and made fast, smart decisions about marketing and business strategy.

Like many of its small business customers, Zuar often finds itself up against much larger companies for contracts. Zuar wins again and again because of its technology, but also, its smart yet humble team, Stellner says. Stellner has been following the Inc. 5000 for years, but to actually be on it “hits different”. And Zuar is just getting started. “There are literally millions of companies that could benefit from using our product. For us, it’s all about how fast we can reach them,” he says.

ZUAR.com

Prioritizing People Helps This Business Thrive During Challenging Times

Keith Sampson started a solo environmental consulting firm from his Shreveport, Louisiana, home in 1996. Today, SRP Environmental offers several distinct but related services with offices around the country. Sampson credits these diverse offerings, investments in technology, and proprietary methodologies as keys to the company’s success. But the founder and CEO says the people who work for SRP are its most valuable asset.

Steady and Intentional Growth

The original consulting business grew organically while adding new services, including industrial hygiene, safety training, Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) compliance assessments, and natural disaster response. In 2012, SRP expanded to new locations nationwide, making its first acquisition of another firm in Denver and its second of a Charlotte, North Carolina, company in 2016.

By operating as a single resource for environmental and safety compliance, SRP can help clients resolve multiple problems at once. The company also can quickly scale staff to meet any situation, which is a distinct competitive advantage.

This diversification kept SRP nimble during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it saw decreases in safety training offerings but increases in industrial hygiene and catastrophe response work. The oil and gas industry, a major source of clients, was hit hard by the pandemic. But five hurricanes in the latter part of 2020 meant more disaster response work, leading to one of the company’s strongest years. SRP expects to finish 2021 even stronger.

A Team of Smart, Capable People

Nurturing a cohesive company culture is also central to the company’s success. “When people ask about the secret of my success, I say that you’re only as good as the people around you,” Sampson says.

The company invests in state-of-the-art technology and comprehensive staff training to ensure consistent adherence to their rigorous standard operating procedures. These practices, combined with a strategy of promoting from within (the company’s current COO started as a project manager) contribute to a low turnover rate. Most staff members stay for 7 to 15 years. To encourage staff members in different locations to get to know each other, the company builds in time for socializing during virtual inter-office strategy meetings. Employees who are promoted train new hires, ensuring consistent service and inspiring confidence. As Sampson looks to acquire more companies, he assesses them not just in terms of profitability and potential, but culture.

SRPENVIRONMENTAL.COM
Growth and Success
From the September 2021 Issue

EXIT PLANS
7% want to IPO.
64% want to sell.
12% want to pass their companies to family.
17% haven’t yet thought about an exit strategy.

CHALLENGES NOW ...

TOP 5 BIGGEST CHALLENGES NOW
Hiring and retaining employees: 60%
Managing fast growth: 58%
Staying focused: 30%
Improving risk management: 29%
Communicating with consumers via social media: 26%

TAKING CARE OF PEOPLE
27% of CEOs are not the highest-paid people at their own companies.
33% plan to lead differently post-pandemic by being more visible and communicating more with employees.
15% plan to do more leadership development and succession planning.

During the recession, Inc. 5000 CEOs were more likely to make cuts elsewhere than head count:
59% cut expenses unrelated to salaries or hours.
42% delayed or cut executive pay.
17% reduced head count.
14% delayed payments to vendors or lenders.

Percentage of Inc. 5000 companies that expect to end 2021 profitably

43%: Percentage of companies that jumped on new opportunities and target markets during the pandemic
31%: Percentage of companies whose growth will exceed expectations. Over a quarter of those businesses will blow past their projections by more than 100 percent.

TAKING CARE OF PEOPLE

CEO and President Tony Lee says, “We focus on new or startup businesses versus established businesses.”

HOW INC. 5000 COMPANIES HAVE FUNDED THEIR GROWTH

79% funded mostly internally (revenue).
13% funded 50-50 internally and externally.
8% funded mostly externally (loans or fundraising).

BRANDED CONTENT

Online Sales and Customer Service Drive Growth
All American Print Supply Co. focuses on small and new companies for long-term sales

DEDICATED EMPLOYEES AND AN “OWN IT” CULTURE

The staff has the responsibility and authority to make customers happy. Employees brainstorm policies, such as criteria for printer returns, and then share the change that was implemented. ”We make decisions a lot faster,” he adds, another reason the company is growing quickly.

In such a low-margin industry relying on customer service, it’s important to keep inventory in stock and ship quickly. “To sell one $50,000 printer, we need to have two in stock,” in case another order comes in, he says. Inventory stocking relies on the accounting department for accurate and timely cash flow information, and warehouse staff provides quick fulfillment. UPS drivers are even asked to wait, to ensure the remaining packages get out in that day’s shipment. “That’s the reason I wanted to get into this industry. When you order something, you expect it in one to two days, and the industry wasn’t doing that.”

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Deliver Value, Develop Talent, and Do Good

Wizeline provides clients with the strategic support and talent they need to launch successful digital products faster.

Bismarck Lepe, the founder and CEO of Wizeline, initially started the San Francisco-based global digital product and services company in 2014 offering a software-as-a-service (SaaS) product to help clients get to market faster by making data-driven decisions throughout the development process. As more clients began requesting technology services support, Wizeline made the transition in 2017 to end-to-end services.

“Customers were saying, ‘Your platform is fantastic, but it’s suggesting that we build a mobile app, and we don’t have mobile engineers.’ Lepe recalls. ‘We knew this was a great opportunity to begin partnering with them.’

BUILDING GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT TEAMS
Companies across various industries have harnessed Wizeline’s innovative ways to develop their digital products. Clients include large tech-focused companies, like Lepe’s former employer, Google, e-tailers, and leading global media companies.

To meet customer demand for IT specialists, Wizeline stepped up to offer “pods”—teams structured to operate independently or as extensions of the customer’s team. “We do completely outsourced product development, over the entire lifecycle,” says Lepe, who is a Stanford University economics graduate who immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico. “We are well-positioned to respond to the demand for talent because he had previously set up a software development center in Guadalajara, Mexico, for a video platform company he co-founded called Oogya, which he later sold. Guadalajara is now the engineering hub for Wizeline, which has expanded into additional locations throughout Mexico, the U.S., Spain, Vietnam, and, most recently, Colombia. The company is on track to have 3,000 employees by the end of 2025. And Lepe says revenue has accelerated, too, doubling year-over-year for the last two years.

DEVELOPING MORE TECH TALENT
Wizeline’s success is built on a strong community culture rooted in diversity and inclusion that emphasizes support for all “Wizeliners,” as they’re called. “Our D&I [diversity and inclusion] groups are employee-led,” says Chief Marketing Officer Danielle Russi-Salta. “It’s not ‘you should think this way; it’s about having the respect to have tough conversations and feeling comfortable about bringing your true self to work.”

In 2017, the company launched Wizeline Academy, which, to date, has taught more than 500 tech courses to more than 25,000 students.

“Given that so many companies need to adopt digital products, there is a big opportunity to use technology as an equalizer in many emerging regions,” says Lepe. “I think technology has the power to lift societies up around the world.”

WIZELINE.COM

Bucking the Industry Paradigm to Reach an Underserved Market

Options Plus Plan helps businesses with hourly workforces meet the challenge of providing health coverage.

For Frank Villares, founder and director of strategic partnerships at Wayne, New Jersey-based Options Plus Plan, the journey to the top five percent of the Inc. 5000 list of America’s fastest-growing private companies has been a family affair. “A big part of the fun has been being able to grow this business with my wife and daughter,” he says.

Options Plus carved out a niche for itself in the minimum essential coverage (MEC) segment of the health insurance industry. MEC plans are scaled-down, lower-cost versions of conventional health insurance plans. They came on the scene after the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was enacted in 2010 and are most common in industries relying on low-wage and hourly workers.

After two decades as an insurance broker, Villares knew about MEC plans, but he was unimpressed with the products being offered. “I saw an opportunity to create an MEC that would provide more meaningful access to better health care for an underserved-market,” he says.

MAKING HEALTH CARE MORE ACCESSIBLE
Options Plus MEC plans provide ACA-mandated preventative care covered at 100 percent, along with a wide variety of medical and prescription drug benefits covered for just a small co-pay. Virtual health benefits, including mental health coverage and a companion card that includes discounts for dental and vision care, durable medical equipment, diabetic supplies, and fitness are featured on most plans. Options Plus plans can help limit employers’ exposure to ACA penalties, and one of the largest networks nationwide with low minimum participation requirements keeps them affordable.

What sets Options Plus apart is its dedication to a customer-centric business philosophy. Villares credits the Inc. Original book Yes Is More: Tangible and Timeless Ways to Differentiate Yourself from Your Competitors, by Howard L. Brown, with planting the seed for his strategy.

SAYING “YES” INSTEAD OF “NO”
“We’re focused on making it easy for people to do business with us,” he says.

Villares is a first-generation Cuban immigrant, and he and his wife, Debra, both come from humble beginnings. While Villares thrives on what he calls the “controlled chaos” of entrepreneurship, he credits his wife and now his daughter Brianna, the company’s chief operating officer, with having the operational brain set the business needs to succeed.

Being able to work together as a family to make affordable health coverage available to an historically underserved segment of the population is incredibly fulfilling,” he says. “Achieving the kind of growth and success that we have is just icing on the cake.”

OPTIONSPLUSPLAN.COM

Inc. 5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

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OPTIONSPLUSPLAN.COM
Montway Auto Transport’s unique corporate culture is a primary driver of the Schaumburg, Illinois-based automotive transportation company’s ongoing success. “Everyone brings their own experience and perspective to the company, but we all have the same goal to deliver a five-star experience to our customers,” says Dimitre Kirilov, president and CEO. Each of Montway’s 230-plus employees know they play a part in reaching that goal, and they share a sense of ownership and responsibility for achieving it. “That attitude starts with training programs for new hires and ongoing learning opportunities. “Everyone understands how the company is organized and how important the ideas they contribute are to improving our operation,” he says.

**IMPORTANCE OF TECHNOLOGY**

As one of the largest auto shipping brokers in the U.S., Montway is a leader in a highly competitive industry. To stay in that position, it relies on a tech-forward strategy focused on innovations and solutions to meet the dynamic needs of its customers, which include individual consumers, lenders, car rental companies, moving and relocation companies, OEMs, fleet management companies, and both traditional and e-commerce car dealers.

Montway has been first to market with numerous technology solutions, including an online rate calculator to provide enterprise partners. Technology and service have enabled Montway to exceed pickup-to-delivery expectations for a major auto financing company, averaging two days less than the service-level agreement. The company’s latest innovation is a home delivery solution, launched in 2020. It gives auto dealers the technology to seamlessly offer home delivery to their customers and execute all quoting and transport activities via a managed service. “The pandemic changed the way people shop for cars,” Kirilov says. “This end-to-end solution helps dealers compete on a national level while providing a contactless car buying experience for their consumers.”

TRUST EARS BUSINESS

Kirilov got his start in logistics at a trucking company while simultaneously working as a real estate agent and broker. “Both businesses are really about customer service and being responsive and proactive to customer needs,” he says. He joined Montway in 2009, holding several positions during his climb to CEO in 2015. Montway’s team plans to continue expanding through a combination of organic growth and acquisition of adjacent complementary businesses. “At Montway, we don’t focus on selling, we focus on helping,” Kirilov says. “We take an honest and transparent approach to everything we do.”

**ONSHORETECH.COM**

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**COMPANY SPOTLIGHT**

**Tech and Corporate Culture Drive Leadership in the Auto Transport Industry**

Every employee at Montway Auto Transport is invested in its success, and technology plays an important role in achieving it.

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**COMPANY SPOTLIGHT**

**Funding Rapid Growth During a Global Pandemic**

OnShore Technology Group found an unexpected solution to meet a meteoric rise in demand.

Valerie King-Bailey, an award-winning engineer-turned-software developer has successfully steered her company, OnShore Technology Group, through two economic crises. Her secret? A mix of deep and varied industry experience, cash flow management, and the development and delivery of market-leading software for the life sciences industry. OnShore is an enterprise validation and verification (V&V) firm specializing in the life sciences industry, with a global client roster that includes Microsoft and Moderna. After COVID hit, the need to ditch the traditional pen-and-paper validation process quickly became apparent, and more life sciences firms started calling.

OnShore has never experienced a loss but needed more staff to meet this new demand, and more staff required more money to hire them. King-Bailey says she was jaded by previous attempts to seek VC funding that went nowhere. “It’s no secret that women and minorities receive only a fraction of VC funding out there,” she says, adding that firms owned by African-American women receive less than 1 percent of that funding.

THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

Lunch with a friend led King-Bailey to an opportunity that solved her hiring problem in a way she hadn’t imagined possible. The friend connected her with Founders First Capital Partners, a company that provides revenue-based funding to underserved businesses, including women- and minority-owned companies. King-Bailey put together a pitch for their investor community. “I’ve gone through a couple of other pitches before, but VCs were never interested, so I wasn’t hopeful,” she says. However, to her surprise, her presentation earned the number one funding spot in the program. Founders First and Novel Growth Partners awarded OnShore $1 million in revenue-based funding, allowing OnShore to hire the staff it needed to meet its new demand. By July 2021, the firm had matched their 2020 revenue, which was itself a record number. “You can’t talk about OnShore’s success without talking about Founder’s First and Novel Growth Partners,” says King-Bailey, who also credits her staff for going above and beyond during a global pandemic.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

OnShore is poised to conquer new frontiers in the validation industry. King-Bailey plans on adopting new tech to enhance existing offerings. She sees automation through artificial intelligence and machine learning as the future of her industry.

By integrating this technology to write the initial scripts while applying an experienced human engineering eye to perform the final validation, OnShore hopes to accelerate the validation process without sacrificing quality and compliance.

**ONSHORETECH.COM**

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Theresia Gouw’s 7 Key Ingredients of a Successful Company

She’s been supporting talented founders for more than 20 years. Here are the key qualities Gouw has found in the successful businesses she’s backed.

From the March/April 2021 Issue

3 EXPERIMENTATION
Teams should not be afraid to try new things. “Failing fast” is better than not trying.

4 FLEXIBILITY
Companies destined for success make sure they’re agile enough to meet ever-changing customer needs and markets.

5 INSPIRATIONAL LEADERS
Rather than simply communicating a company’s mission, successful leaders inspire team members to join them on a journey.

6 PASSIONATE FOUNDERS
Successful entrepreneurs build companies because they’re passionate about fulfilling an unmet need.

7 SHARED WINS
Companies should ensure that all stakeholders—employees, customers, and investors—share in its success.

A Blueprint for Success

How Poly Print went from struggling startup to sector success

Most people who shop at the grocery store don’t think much about the packaging or label on their favorite foods and household products. Packaging connects us to brands, protects the foods we eat from diseases, extends shelf life, and keeps food cost lower than anywhere in the world. So, you may be surprised to find out that the flexible packaging industry is a multi-billion-dollar business.

Tucson-based Poly Print is one of the country’s more successful flexographic printing and converting operations, supplying more than 30 billion packages and labels annually for major grocery chains and brand owners. Success didn’t happen overnight, with the company facing turbulent times more than once over its 29-year history. “This really is a success story, with the first 10 years in business being such a struggle,” says Joe Genova, co-owner, vice president, and the son of Ron and Elsie Genova, the company’s founders.

ENTREPRENEURIAL STRUGGLES
In 1992, Ron was working for a flexible packaging company in California when an opportunity to purchase a small printing operation in Arizona became available. The flexible packaging industry was growing, and if they could just deliver a quality product, on time, then they could have a thriving business, Genova says.

That’s been easier said than done. The company ran into a plethora of common business startup issues, such as unexpected manufacturing problems, not having enough capacity, and managing through an especially difficult 2008 downturn. “We were positioned for explosive growth,” says Genova, whose first job was driving the forklift when he was 10. “But that didn’t happen.”

SOLID SALES PLAN
In 2013, after struggling through the 2008 great recession, Genova decided it was time to focus on a robust sales plan, something the company lacked. The plan identified new areas for growth, such as labels for bottled water, pet foods, and consumer products like cosmetics, fertilizers, and detergents. Servicing the plan required more than $15 million in new equipment, expansions, and staff, most of whom they trained internally. “Expanding into new markets is unconventional and risky in flexible packaging, but it was part of our growth strategy,” Genova says.

Genova’s plan has worked wonders, with the company growing by double digits every year since 2014, which is especially impressive in a sector where 3 to 5 percent annual growth is considered aggressive. “We moved out of our comfort zone and diversified the markets we serve,” Genova says. “The future is to stay the course, grow, invest, and maintain our status as leader in flexible packaging.”

POLYP print.COM

NO 4747
2021 Ranking
1400%
7-Year Growth
105
Employees
7
Consecutive Years with Double-Digit Growth
Douglas Alvarenga founded Rely Workforce Group in 2016 to meet a need he saw within the temporary employment industry. His mission was to emphasize the human element of staffing services by improving the hiring process both for employers and staff. After 15 years in the industry, Alvarenga recalls his fair share of jobs where he was treated poorly.

By focusing on quality and connection on both sides of the hiring equation, Rely Workforce Group found a formula for success. The Charlotte, North Carolina, company positions itself as a high-quality, high-volume staffing firm working in the health care, light industrial, and administrative/clerical industries. Alvarenga says that adding “high-quality” to their brand means that temporary staff are always more than just a number.

CLIENT SUPPORT THAT ENCOURAGES EMPLOYER-EMPLOYEE CONNECTIONS

Rely Workforce Group is selective about its clients, ensuring that they are committed to the same values of training and developing temporary staff and offering opportunities for growth. “We become a true partner to our clients in how we evaluate everything from testing assessments to onboarding structure to on-the-job training and retention,” says Alvarenga. The firm analyzes a client’s onboarding structure to ensure it offers the best fit for applicants, along with attractive retention options.

The company has even offered its clients managerial training on Lean Six Sigma process improvement and emotional intelligence practices. The goal is to foster genuine interpersonal connections and apply effective problem-solving techniques with staff.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO PERSONALLY CONNECT WITH THE WORKFORCE

Where many companies use algorithms to scan resumes and AI to respond to applicants’ questions, Rely Workforce Group uses technology to make genuine human connections. Alvarenga says that everyone who takes the time to submit a resume and apply for a position will have a human voice call them back. Rely also has a team dedicated to customer service for its temporary staff via an app, and another team on social media responds directly to questions and concerns. “We’re constantly touching base with everyone we hire, so they can see that we’re going to bat for them,” says Alvarenga.

The strategy driving the company’s original mission to humanize hiring is working. Alvarenga points to glowing Google reviews from staff that mention recruiters by name, thanking them for connecting them to the right position. He also cites low turnover rate as a point of pride when compared to the industry competition. And Rely Workforce Group hopes to keep changing the employment game for the better.

RELYWORKFORCE.COM
This year, 144 Ohio businesses made the Inc. 5000 list. Next year, make yours the 145th.

Growing VC investment, increasing new business development, and a booming economy. Just a few reasons your competition is already Buckeye State bound.

- $1.2 billion
- 171,073
- 21st

By Q2, Ohio businesses received 1.2 billion dollars in Venture Capital investment in 2021.¹

In 2020, Ohioans started 171,073 new businesses—a new state record.²

Ohio’s economy is ranked 21st worldwide.³

¹ - NVCA Pitchbook, 2021
² - OhioSOS.gov, 2021
³ - WorldAtlas, 2019

Learn more about what JobsOhio can do for your business at OhioIsForLeaders.com
See what’s possible with the right HR partner

Insperity offers competitive benefit options for your employees while helping you with hiring, training, HR administration and compliance support. So you can spend more time growing your business and less time on HR. With Insperity behind you, nothing seems impossible.

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EMPLOYEE BENEFITS
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