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PM

Plumbing & Mechanical

**PM's 2008 BEST
CONTRACTOR
TO WORK FOR**

**RKS Plumbing & Mechanical
Phoenix, Ariz.**

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Spotlights**

RKS Plumbing & Mechanical Phoenix, Ariz.



Bob Sornsin, owner and president
of RKS Plumbing & Mechanical.

FAIR. HONEST. LOYAL.

Strong leadership. A person who genuinely cares about his employees. These are a few of the traits that employees of Phoenix, Ariz.-based RKS Plumbing & Mechanical attribute to owner and President **Robert Sornsin**.

Some of the comments we received from RKS employees mentioned how Sornsin has built up the company and, in turn, solidified employees' futures.

Working in his father's construction company in Fargo, N.D., during summers and school breaks from high school and college provided Sornsin with a look into the intricacies of running a construction business. After graduating from Arizona State University, he went back to his father's business for awhile but was lured back to the Phoenix area.

After deciding to strike out on his own, Sornsin began RKS Plumbing & Mechanical in 1990 with one employee; now RKS employs more than 250 people.

But that growth did not come easily, Sornsin says. During the early 1990s when the economy in Phoenix was down, it was difficult to survive on the usual diet of school and commercial jobs. So RKS began bidding on work through three or four tenant improvement contractors in the area, relationships that the company still has today. Under Sornsin's leadership, RKS also diversified into chemical process piping for water and wastewater treatment plants and some high-profile commercial projects in the Phoenix/Scottsdale area.

Photos courtesy of John Trolio

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BY KELLY FALOON
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Accountability and respect are what drive this year's winning company.

Currently, despite the fact that the nation's economy is in distress, that big projects in RKS Plumbing's backyard of Phoenix are slowing down or stopping because of the tightened credit market, that RKS had several projects that were stopped at the last minute because of funding issues (about \$10 million to \$15 million) — Sornsin estimates that the company's 2008 revenues will total about \$29 million, an increase from \$22 million in 2007.

It may be taking longer for the company to get the big projects it once had in abundance, but they *are* coming in — predominantly prisons and hospitals, Sornsin notes. RKS laid off 20-30 workers earlier in the year, but hired almost all of them back to work on these new projects.

Put Me In, Coach: From the comments we received on the nomination forms, it is obvious that Sornsin and his management team treat all employees with respect, whether they work in the office or on the jobsite. "The office staff respects the field, and the field personnel respects the office," he says. They realize how important the other group is to the success of the company.

A large part of the RKS Plumbing & Mechanical culture is mentoring/coaching, what Sornsin says he enjoys most: "I'm really a teacher at heart."

Part of the mentoring process at RKS involves accountability — this means each employee is responsible for getting his or her job done and done correctly. For field personnel, it also means that foremen and project managers are responsible for not only making sure that each worker on each project is doing what he is supposed to do, but that each worker is learning skills to become a better plumber.

"We believe that employees' experiences at RKS Plumbing should teach them to be better at their jobs — how to communicate, how to respect people, how to be accountable for what they do, and how to manage people as well as themselves," Sornsin explains.

Communication plays a big part in the accountability game. RKS has an open-door policy, which means that any employee can walk into Sornsin's office and ask questions or discuss an

RKS celebrates successes — whether having a bid accepted on a large project or an employee receiving a compliment from a customer — by gathering employees together for a spe-



The management team of RKS Plumbing & Mechanical (left to right): Joe Stachel, executive vice president and operations manager; Anthony Abbruzzio, vice president of field operations; Bob Sornsin, president; and Randy Ackman, vice president of large commercial projects.

issue. That policy extends to the offices of project managers, operations, human resources, estimators, etc.

This two-way communication between office staff and field personnel is meant to create a transparency in the company. "There are no secrets here," Sornsin says. And because of this policy, employees can't use non-communication as an excuse for not knowing critical information regarding a project or how subordinates are progressing. RKS has empowered its employees to ask questions, give input and learn from their mistakes.

Play Time, Too: But it's not all work at RKS Plumbing — they like to have fun, too.

"We have a lot of humor here, a lot of laughter," Sornsin says. "Part of our philosophy at RKS is that work is tough enough, we might as well have fun."

cial meeting. And while RKS doesn't celebrate its misfortunes, it doesn't blow them out of proportion either.

"If we've had a bad job or a complaint, I like to say: 'Should we jump off the top of the building?' It lightens things up, puts things in perspective," Sornsin notes.

The company has a softball team, but also supports a local Little League team (which Sornsin also coaches). Employees have access to the company's Diamondbacks and Cardinals tickets (Sornsin goes to maybe two games a year; the remainder of the tickets are for employees and their families).

Once a year, the company rents out beach condos in Mexico for the office staff and their families, as well as some of the field plumbers. During the last trip, RKS rented 21 condos for a total of 60 people.

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While fun at work is, well, fun, peace of mind is nice, too. Employee benefits include paid vacations, health insurance, 401(k) and Christmas bonuses.

But Don't Take Our Word For It: What follows are observations we received from RKS employees that helped us select RKS Plumbing & Mechanical as *Plumbing & Mechanical's* 2008 Best Contractor To Work For:

"Bob Sornsin has created a hard-working, family-oriented company with smart individuals to provide a promising and exciting future for us."
— **Daniel Jimenez**

"Bob Sornsin encourages his employees to further their education and improve their lives. He is deeply invested in the personal and professional success of all who work for him."
— **Misty O'Brien**

"All the employees work as a team to reach company goals. RKS has consistently picked up more business while being in a down marketplace, which furthers employees' futures. Bi-weekly meetings keep us all informed. Management works



Photo courtesy of RKS Plumbing

Accountability, respect and communication are key elements of the culture at RKS. Employees are responsible for getting the job done, and done correctly. When mistakes are made, employees are expected to learn from them, not repeat them.

with employees and appreciates their input."
— **Tim Traylor**

"Bob has 'coached' a fantastic group of employees to a higher level of service and quality by providing resources and opportunities to learn

and grow. This has allowed RKS Plumbing to become the largest, most productive plumbing contractor in the Southwest. I am very proud to be part of the quality team at RKS Plumbing & Mechanical."
— **Jim Shiers**

"The camaraderie at RKS is the best because we have such a great boss."
— **Roxanne Sotelo**

"Bob has built a business where a person knows that he or she has a future with RKS."
— **Dathan Fisher**

"Bob runs the company with strong leadership but a family attitude. I love working for this company."
— **Donald Williams**

"Bob is an awesome boss and RKS Plumbing is a great place to work."
— **Shannon Gurtin**

"Bob buys breakfast for our entire office staff about once a week; sometimes lunch, too. Sometimes he gives baseball or football tickets to some of the employees. He takes the time to make sure he knows about everything that's going on in the office."
— **Kelsey Blincoe**

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Photo courtesy of RKS Plumbing

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