



BRIGGS LOVE: From left, Fallon Keplinger, Robert Ford, Chris Estes, Helen Paulson, Kenal Cagri, Porter Briggs, Jeremiah and Cristin Owens, Betsy Popeck, Nina Grothaus, Naomi Saforo, Pete Davidovich, Nicole Sabasowitz and Lenora Shipman-Clarke

Address: 1054 31st St.

NW, Suite 270,
Washington, D.C.

Employees: 16 in greater
Washington

Top local executive: Porter
Briggs

Products: Passport and
visa expediting services

Perks: Commuter/parking
discounts or reimburse-
ments; formal telecom-
mating policy; 100 percent
coverage of health insur-
ance, dental, mental and
vision; negotiation of work
hours; casual dress code

#1 SMALL COMPANY

A Briggs Passport & Visa Expeditors Inc.

In some ways, A Briggs Passport & Visa Expeditors Inc.'s office works best for employees when it's at its emptiest.

Two of the area employees, one a first-time mom, the other a four-time mom, telecommute from their homes in Waldorf and South Riding, respectively. Another negotiated later hours because he's just more of a night person. A new employee will get earlier hours in order to take night college courses. Even company founder and CEO Porter Briggs changes into one of the seven pairs of shoes lining a wall in his office for a lunchtime run on the nearby sandy trails every day because it "keeps me sane."

But the casual atmosphere at the 20-year-old, 27-person passport and visa company goes beyond mere hours.

Workers define their own dress code, from hoodies to jeans to worn T-shirts. Footwear ranges from Nike sneakers to flip-flops to hot pink socks. Visitors find

more dressed-up people at the seafood restaurant next door.

As stressed as they are from check-in to check-out in processing their customers' most crucial documents, and as professional as they sound in customer service calls seeking passport data, the employees' environs are more dorm room than OfficeMax.

Cardboard boxes serve haphazardly as tables. Old sofas and desks lay cluttered with papers and files. Pink Post-It notes remind co-workers to check on that UPS account or that they lost at air hockey.

But the mostly 20-something employees wouldn't have it any other way. "Generally, it's a very young environment," says Nina Grothaus, a 24-year-old visa director. "But we're all still allowed to have as much responsibility as we want."

For a company that's buried in the red tape of the State Department, there's little bureaucracy within its small quarters.

BLESS THIS MESS:

The college dorm feel isn't unfamiliar for most of the young staff. Cluttered closets and microwave popcorn add to the dorm room aura.



Titles are largely whimsical. When Grothaus "consults with the passport department," she's just hollering a question to passport director Lenora Shipman-Clarke, also 24, a desk away.

All local employees interview job candidates mostly found on Craigslist. There is no employee manual, no written rules. Briggs refused to share verbal ones with a reporter for fear they'd be recorded.

Briggs is the first to say he didn't budget for "fancy furnishings." Instead, he put his dollars toward things like paying 100 percent of employee health insurance.

"People we want to keep, we do," says Briggs, who paid the full salary for one worker laid up in bed for 2.5 months after her son's birth. "If you want to give good customer service, you have to have happy employees."

And sometimes, that means telling them they need not come to the office.

■ VANDANA SINHA



WELL GROUNDED: Briggs takes 'business casual' to a whole new level — one that goes all way to your toes. Sightings of socks are not uncommon.



VISA REMARKS:
Visa director Nina Grothaus likes the freedom and responsibility of working for an entrepreneurial firm.



SOLE SUPPORT: Porter Briggs doesn't need a passport for his daily escape: lunchtime runs in one of his many pairs of sneakers. In the kitchen, a mini fridge sits next to crates of water and a microwave topped by boxes of popcorn.

