

# Eight employee relations challenges and opportunities

*Address these areas, and your employees will indeed be your most important assets*

*Editor's Note: The following article is based on "Challenges and Opportunities: The Process," a presentation by Tim Becken, vice president of operations at Cemstone Products Co., Mendota Heights, Minn., at the National Ready Mixed Concrete Association's March 1998 Annual Convention in San Diego.*

I don't have to look any farther than the Minneapolis-St. Paul market Cemstone serves to see that a major labor shortage looms for the concrete industries in the next decade. In our market, the average block layer is 52 years old.



Tim Becken, Cemstone Products Co.

You've probably noticed in your market a lack of young blood to pick up where this kind of quality help will soon leave off.

Walt Disney, founder of one of the world's most identifiable and successful companies, once said, "You can dream, create, design and build the most wonderful place in the world, but it requires people to make the dream a reality." Managers of concrete industry companies must realize that treating employees as their most important assets is more than just a feel-good, trendy concept—it's a necessity.

To ensure that quality help is always available to design, produce, deliver and install concrete as the building material of choice, we first have to be aware of several challenges presented by employer-employee relations in the 1990s. These same challenges also present us with opportunities, however.

## **Challenge No. 1: The construction**

**work force is aging.** Our industry is getting to the point where, for the first time, three generations are working at once, and this is out of necessity.

**The opportunity.** Keeping employees working past age 59½ may be an option. Another of the world's most identifiable and successful companies, McDonald's, employs many senior citizens as an effective solution to labor shortages. We need experienced employees, but they may not need full-time hours or some benefits; northern producers may find that experienced employees don't need to work throughout the year, either.

**Challenge No. 2: Employees need balance.** Today most families require two incomes to make ends meet, and this causes stress.

**The opportunity.** Consider offering your employees options that allow them to a) handle family responsibilities and b) get a break from the daily routine while increasing their job-related knowledge. Flex time (studies show it's the No. 1 perk employees want) and employer-provided day care address the first need. Sabbaticals involving a project or training and education away from the plant address the second.

Other options are allowing two 20-hour-per-week employees to fill one position or allowing some employees to work four 10-hour days a week.

Another opportunity to provide balance is to bring more fun into the workplace. Things like setting up basketball courts or having the occasional goofy theme day provide a little recreation on the job.

**Challenge No. 3: Authoritative management doesn't work today.** The three generations working in our industry each have different expectations of how they should be treated. The younger generation doesn't respond to

an authoritative management style, yet this may be the only approach experienced managers know.

**The opportunity.** An industry selling such a versatile product has opportunities to market innovations requiring new production and construction techniques. We need ideas from every

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level to ensure quality, so team management is a natural fit. The Morse Bros. Mentor Driver Program is an example of an effective team-management approach. Decisions should be made with employees' buy-in.

**Challenge No. 4: Employees need more training.** We have high expectations for our employees, yet we're seeing more employee turnover than ever.

**The opportunity.** We may increasingly find that basic training in English, reading, writing and arithmetic is necessary, even for the employee who has a high school education. However, a willingness to provide this training offers potential employees an opportunity for personal growth.

Certification and training may also give employees greater satisfaction, and it builds employee loyalty. Not only does an ACI Level I-certified technician feel more like a delivery professional than a driver, the employee's company differentiates itself.

**Challenge No. 5: We must retain good employees.** Our industry is judged by our employees, and we compete with many other industries for labor.

**The opportunity.** We can provide po-

tential employees with a career path, differentiating our industry from those with which we compete for labor. Providing employees with career growth raises the professionalism of the industry and also empowers all levels of an organization.

**Challenge No. 6: We must motivate employees to give superior service.** We're becoming an increasingly service-oriented society. Good service is becoming less noticeable and more expected.

*The opportunity.* We can use creative approaches to motivating employees. To do this, we must reduce stress in the workplace, improve communication with all levels of employees, and act on employee suggestions. Finally, we must make sure that employees feel that managers are backing their deci-

sions. This might include allowing a driver to stay an extra hour to help a homeowner finish concrete.

**Challenge No. 7: Employees want a sense of fulfillment from their jobs.** Unlike an older generation that was content to punch a clock, young workers have many more employment choices such as working as an Internet designer in a clean, air-conditioned office.

*The opportunity.* We should realize that employees want to do more than just punch a clock; they're willing to represent the company in community events. This builds long-term employee loyalty.

To get employees more involved, the company must show an interest in more than profit. Getting them more involved in screening other potential

employees is an example of increased involvement.

**Challenge No. 8: We must reduce employment claims and lawsuits.** In recent years, these have proliferated.

*The opportunity.* To react, we must train managers and workers to work out their own problems. We must also increase training for new employees and improve communication throughout the company. These strategies will pay off by reducing employees' reliance on the courts or government agencies to solve problems.

Many challenges await you in the 21st century, not the least of which involve employees, your most important resources. If you can succeed in these areas, you'll position yourself, your company and our industry for the future. ■

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