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August 28-September 3, 2009 • Page 29A

HUMAN RESOURCES & EMPLOYMENT

SPECIAL SECTION

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Page 34A • August 28-September 3, 2009

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SOUND OFF

Human resources leaders discuss employment-related issues



Elizabeth Halkos

Vice president of sales and marketing, Purchasing Power

Morale: Employers should continue to offer workers choices. Nontraditional benefits are becoming increasingly important. Originally, voluntary benefits consisted of additional insurance products, such as long-term care, disability and critical illness. Now, more nontraditional products have emerged, such as prepaid legal, pet insurance, entertainment discounts, wellness programs and purchase programs.

Legislation: The Employee Free Choice Act could impact Georgia businesses in many different ways. EFCA would pre-empt Georgia's right-to-work law, which has been perceived to provide a competitive advantage in attracting new businesses to the state. The legislation also gives more bargaining power to workers.

Strategies: Strategies are evolving — focusing on financial well-being in light of the economic downturn. At Purchasing Power, our program helps employers increase benefits packages, making them more competitive. We help people buy items they want and need, such as computers, via payroll deduction.



Brian Meyer

President and managing partner, Meeting Expectations Inc.

Morale: First, you have to be honest with your team; let them know what you're doing and why, and maintain open lines of communication. It also is critically important to stick to your core values and other principles that have always made your company successful and a great place to work.

Legislation: The two biggest pieces of legislation that could impact businesses are 1) the "card check" bill, which seems to be on the back burner as the nation debates health-care legislation, and 2) the health-care proposal(s) on the table. Neither is very business-friendly at this point and would lead to direct increases in our cost of doing business, as well as pricing increases for our customers.

Strategies: We're taking a holistic approach to compensation, our key strategy in retention. We benchmark our total compensation versus industry peers annually. We survey employees to discover which benefits they want and need and determine how they value existing benefits. Based on feedback, we've rolled out a work-from-home policy and flex-time policy.



Carolyn O'Brien

Founder, Tag Team Marketing Resources LLC

Morale: Ensuring better communication during these periods is critical. Being open and honest about the state of the business, reasons for downsizing, the process by which the downsizing program will take/took place, and the future of the business, leads to increased trust and empowerment between managers and employees.

Legislation: The Employee Free Choice Act is the most impactful labor and employment-related legislation for Georgia businesses with 30-plus employees. Because Georgia has traditionally been a soft union state, this legislation is divisive. If passed, Georgia businesses would feel the impact of easier union access.

Strategies: Top companies are realizing that a holistic approach to what has come to be called "talent management" can produce big cost savings. In a competitive market, best practices for retaining top full-time talent include offering a stimulating work environment, flexible career options for work/life/family balance, an excellent benefits package, and a culture that values staff contributions.



Randy Hain

Managing partner, Bell Oaks Executive Search

Morale: The first step is to not hide bad news. Face it head-on and keep your team in the loop on the company's financial health. Build more collaboration through team-based contests and incentives tied to increased revenue. And don't forget in the midst of the daily stress to thank people for their hard work and find ways to show your appreciation, like handwritten notes.

Legislation: The federal government's proposed health-care plan would have the biggest impact. I am still studying the proposal, but the way it is worded is tough on small businesses, and most will abandon health insurance for workers, pushing them toward the government insurance option.

Strategies: The biggest impact on recruiting has been the use of social networks, such as Facebook. Retention strategies will be increasingly more important as we get on the other side of this tough economy and see the unemployment rate drop. The best programs involve continuing education, tuition reimbursement, increased vacation, better health benefits and strong mentor programs.