

Creative management practices for making work work

Ellen Galinsky, Tyler Wigton and Lois Backon

Smart companies are coming up with bold ideas to keep employees engaged, while offering them ways to facilitate career and lifestyle changes.

The economy is uncertain, unemployment has increased, and with U.S. productivity at a six-year high, employers everywhere are doing more with less. So why is now the right time to make bold moves to keep your workers engaged?

"Our people are our greatest asset." The sentiment is ubiquitous, but translating this management rhetoric into practice can be a stumbling block even in the best of times. Yet even now—with a beleaguered economy still in the tentative, early stages of what could be a long road to recovery—it is more important than ever for managers and organizations to help employees manage their work and personal lives. Why? The answer is simple, though maybe counterintuitive: because it makes good business sense.

The 2009 Guide to Bold New Ideas for Making Work Work, just published by the Families and Work Institute (FWI), reveals that even in the midst of a turbulent economy, employers across the country are creating imaginative workplace approaches for improving the work environment and for helping employees navigate the shifting demands of their work and personal lives. They are offering assistance, for example, on how to manage job stress and overwork, welcome a new baby, or cope when a spouse loses a job. What is key (and perhaps surprising) is that these strategies help these companies achieve business results and respond to fluctuations in the economy. They help companies create effective and flexible workplaces, where work "works" for both the employer and employees.

Published annually, our guide highlights winners of the Alfred P. Sloan Awards for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility, a national award unique in its rigorous criteria. To win, applicants have to score in the top 20% of employers nationally in providing effective and flexible workplace programs, practices, and culture. What's more, two thirds of the winning score is based on the results of a confidential employee survey. In other words, not only do these employers have programs and policies in place, but they are having an impact where the "rubber meets the road"—in the employee experience.

Learning from adversity

Challenges can necessitate and stimulate creativity. Many of the employers profiled in the 2009 guide view their initiatives to create effective and flexible workplaces as tools to manage through the recession. Among the trends we see:

- Employers are using schedule flexibility to deal with the recession in constructive ways: avoiding layoffs through voluntary reduced hours; allowing employees to work at home one or two days a week to save on commuting costs; allowing employees greater scheduling flexibility if their spouses have lost a job or seen their hours reduced and the family needs to make changes; and reassigning responsibilities when no hiring is possible.
- Employers are providing direct financial assistance to their own employees. At 1-800 CONTACTS, a direct-to-consumer retail contact lens business in Salt Lake City with 850 employees, the company's Associate Outreach Fund offers emergency one-time financial assistance to employees in a financial crisis. More than \$14,000 in emergency relief was distributed in 2008, enabling a number of employees to keep their homes. A health-care company, Bon Secours Richmond Health System in Richmond, Va., with 6,579 employees, developed a comprehensive economic relief package that includes financial education,

seminars for employees' unemployed family members, an employee crisis fund providing monetary assistance to employees in financial trouble, the ability to trade time off for cash, a housing assistance program, discounts at many area businesses, and various college tuition assistance plans for employees and their families.

- Employers are offering programs that range from financial literacy initiatives to calculators for helping employees manage their money. Topics covered in seminars include assistance with budgeting, saving for children's college education, saving for retirement, financing housing loans, and reviewing choices that affect tax rates.

Employers also work with community groups to screen employees for publicly funded benefits and supports (such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, Food Stamps, children's health insurance, heating assistance, and housing and automobile loans, among others). This assistance puts more money in the pockets of low- to mid-wage employees.

- New initiatives in flexibility also draw on social networking techniques and help employees help each other. KPMG has created a shared leave program. Employees with serious illnesses or other emergencies can receive up to 12 weeks of additional paid personal leave from other employees who donate their unused time off. The company reports that fully 100% of needs for donated time are met by KPMG employees, usually within minutes of an employee making an anonymous request.

- Employers are providing flexibility so that their employees can volunteer in the community and help others in need. Intel, a three-time Sloan winner in Chandler, Ariz., with 10,000 employees, celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2008 by asking employees to volunteer, with a goal of reaching one million hours for the company worldwide—a goal it achieved.

- Employers focus on health and wellness, often using social networking strategies to promote their goals. Given the increasing stress of the recession and spiraling health-care costs, leading employers want to promote prevention and wellness. What's interesting is how they are using the notion of "employees helping employees," often assisted by screenings, healthy lifestyle programs, and "coaches." For example, Rice University in Houston has an on-campus subsidized Weight Watchers program open to its 2,700 employees. Collectively, employees have lost more than 2,000 pounds. They also have access to lifestyle screenings and yoga classes, and they can shop for healthy foods at a weekly farmers' market on the campus.

- Employers have created systems to monitor overwork as a way of promoting wellness and improving employees' energy. Fenwick & West, a law firm in San Francisco with 245 employees, has created "workflow coordinators" and two "balanced hours advisers" who review attorney hours regularly to ensure that those on reduced schedules are not subject to "schedule creep" or overlooked for good assignments.

- Beyond the basics—employers have expanded the use of flexibility to ensure that all employees have access and they are providing coaches to ensure their offerings will be used. RSM McGladrey, an accounting, tax, and business consulting firm in New York, has introduced FlexYear, a program that provides a schedule similar to a teacher's. FlexCareer, another option, lets employees take up to five years off for personal reasons and provides resources, such as subsidized training, to keep participants connected with the organization and industry so they can come back to work with greater ease. Coach-on-Call gives employees free access to a professional coach offering advice and support on work-life issues. And the New Parent Coach provides resources, support, and information to help new parents navigate through pregnancy, leave, and the transition back to work.

- Employers are developing performance metrics to ensure that their programs do not discriminate, are used by employees, and yield results. Grant Thornton, an accounting and management consulting company in Dallas with 320 employees, has created Partner Performance Metrics to hold office managing partners accountable for the turnover and retention of women in their local offices, embedding metrics into the firm's partner performance management system. These efforts have paid off by increasing the number of women partners from 31 to 81 in just five years, an increase of 174%. The firm offers considerable career flexibility to encourage employees to develop and grow in the firm, whatever the changes in their personal and family lives.

The 2009 guide shares innovative approaches for creating effective and flexible workplaces. Our hope is that for employers and employees everywhere, it serves both as an inspiration for what is possible and as a detailed resource for how to get there.

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