

Happy Equals Productive

By Jennifer Swanberg
Work/Life Columnist
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With the establishment earlier this year of the Institute for Workplace Innovation (iWin), the University of Kentucky became one of the few land-grant universities in the nation to respond to state economic and workforce development challenges.

Already, iWin, under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Swanberg, has established a network of employers who are maintaining innovative workplace practices and solutions. Dr. Swanberg's monthly "Work/Life" column is a regular feature in Business Lexington.

Presented here is the introduction of one of the first projects undertaken by the Institute, "Making Workplaces Work: Employer Best Practices in Kentucky" along with a breakdown of 24 companies profiled in the study and the work/life issues they address.

Introduction

A growing number of employers are using innovative workplace strategies to recruit top talent, enhance employee engagement, reduce turnover and maintain a competitive edge in the marketplace. This report, Making Workplaces Work: Employer Best Practices in Kentucky, seeks to provide the public with an understanding of the types of strategies that improve both the employer's bottom line and the employee's quality of life. The report provides an in-depth look at how a variety of employers stay competitive and productive in the changing economy.

Background

The composition of today's workforce creates distinct challenges for employers. More diverse than ever, the labor force comprises more women, single parents, older workers and employees with working partners. Within Kentucky, the graying of the workforce is one of the most striking demographic changes. Over the next decade, workers age 50-69 will rapidly increase. By 2015, 32 percent of workers will be 50 or older. Concurrently, the share of workers ages 0-49 is decreasing. While workers once spent an entire career with one company, today's workers are more committed to professional development, growth and working environments that allow simultaneous contribution to family and community than staying with the same company for the span of their careers.

Other workforce trends suggest that a large percentage of the labor force is working more than one job, and more people are working jobs that require nontraditional shifts within the 24/7 economy. While workforce demographics have changed dramatically, standard workplace structures have been slow to change, resulting in an institutional mismatch between the needs of contemporary workers and the contemporary workplace. A growing number of workers report strain integrating the often-competing demands of life on and off the job, while a growing number of employers report difficulty in recruiting and retaining quality employees.

Economic globalization also influences today's workforce and workplaces. Industries and communities previously insulated from the rapid changes associated with globalization have been hard hit. There are fewer manufacturing and industrial jobs, and an increasing number of employees are reliant upon lower-wage service sector jobs that often require nonstandard work hours. Simultaneously, there is a growing demand for a skilled workforce, yet employees may not be prepared with the skills needed to perform in a highly technical and rapidly changing economy. Furthermore, slowed workforce growth may make it difficult for employers to recruit workers even during periods of strong economic growth.

Why innovative workplace practices matter

Creating an organizational culture that embraces innovative workplace solutions makes good business sense — employers and employees benefit. Modifying workplace environments to better meet the changing needs of the contemporary workforce has been shown to assist employers in the recruitment and retention of key talent and to assist employees in balancing their multiple work and family responsibilities.

In this report, the workplace policies, programs and practices are referred to as innovative because they illustrate ways workplaces are redefining organizational culture to be both responsive to the changing needs of the workforce and to the expanding demands of the global economy. Making Workplaces Work: Employer Best Practices in Kentucky highlights seven areas of innovation that are effective in attracting, motivating and retaining a loyal workforce and in helping the workforce have a better quality of life on and off the job:

- Health and Wellness
- Dependent Care
- Financial Assistance
- Employee Development
- Flexible Workplace Options
- Community Investment
- Effective Workplace Culture

The employers profiled in this report represent a growing number of businesses that recognize investing in their own employees is a good business decision. When organizations offer employee development opportunities such as on-the-job training or tuition reimbursement, employee commitment to their employer is enhanced. Similarly, employers who invest in some form of employee health and wellness program reap positive benefits through the reduction of employee health-related costs and reduced absenteeism, while employees benefit by engaging in healthful lifestyle practices. Employers who assist employees with their caregiving demands are also more likely to cultivate employee loyalty and reduce absenteeism.

We highlight these seven areas of innovation because they respond to key concerns of today's employers and employees. Moreover, they illustrate a broad range of practices that are applicable to employees at different stages of their careers and life courses. This report has been created as a first step in recognizing workplace practices that impact the economy of the state, and it lays the groundwork for further understanding Kentucky's work culture and the lives of its citizens. The report will guide the development of tools and resources that can assist employers in meeting the challenges of the 21st century economy.

FROM Making Workplaces Work: Employer Best Practices in Kentucky 2007 By Jennifer Swanberg, Ph.D.; Diane Loeffler, Ph.D.; and Mac Werner University of Kentucky Institute for Workplace Innovation (iWin)