

Show Your Flexibility: Locals vie for flexible workplace honors

By Laura Flowers
Guest Columnist
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What company doesn't want more recognition with no additional advertising dollars out of pocket?

This year, for the first time, Lexington has the opportunity to show off its employers with the Alfred P. Sloan Awards for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility. Lexington has been selected as one of 30 cities nationwide to participate in the initiative, called When Work Works, and give local employers an opportunity to apply for the Sloan Awards. When Work Works is a national, community-based initiative to highlight the importance of workplace flexibility as a strategy to enhance businesses' competitive advantages in the global economy and to help both employers and employees succeed. Locally, the initiative is spearheaded by the UK Institute for Workplace Innovation (iWin) and a coalition of community leaders from Commerce Lexington, the Mayor's Office, Business Lexington, the Bluegrass Chapter of the Society for Human Resource Management, and the Kentucky Small Business Development Center. The Sloan Awards are just one part of this exciting initiative.

The Sloan Awards are open for application. Potential applicants include Lexington organizations from any industry, large or small, with a minimum of 10 employees). The application process entails an online questionnaire for employers, which usually only takes about 20 minutes to complete. The results are compared to national employer data, and a sample of the top applicants' employees is surveyed to further narrow the field. Employers who apply will be benchmarked against national standards, and the top 20 percent are recognized as award winners in a full-page advertisement in USA Today, in the Congressional Record, in local media and at a local award ceremony. In addition, all employer applicants will receive benchmarking reports that can be used in promotional materials or as tools to shape business practices toward flexibility. There is no cost to apply. Previous winners include a few large employers such as US Airways, Ernst & Young LLP, Deloitte & Touche, State Farm Insurance, Continental Airlines, Capital One Financial, Enterprise Rent-A-Car Company, and Wells Fargo Bank, among a host of small businesses who are bringing attention to their products and communities through the Sloan Awards.

Flexibility in the workplace has been recognized as a tool to recruit and retain valuable employees. New studies in flexibility have also recognized it as beneficial to economic development, employee health, employee engagement, reducing rush-hour road congestion, in turn reducing emissions. The business case is solid. Employers who promote flexibility show positive results in measures such as customer satisfaction and sales.

Think flexibility isn't an option for your organization? You may already have flexible policies in place that you don't even realize. Flexibility can come in a variety of forms. Flexibility in the manufacturing industry is going to look very different than flexibility in retail or professional settings. At its most basic definition, workplace flexibility is giving employees some control over their work time or place. Simple. While professional workers have traditionally had more access to flexible work arrangements, progressive companies are thinking creatively on how to provide flexibility to hourly employees. Some ideas include: compressed work weeks, job sharing, flex-place policies, or just the ability to modify work schedules to accommodate personal responsibility.

Locally, companies ranging in type and size from Central Baptist Hospital to construction contracting company W. Rogers Company to the small, non-profit Kentuckians for the Commonwealth are creating flexible workplaces, reaping the rewards and being recognized for their commitment to their employees as well as their organizational success.

Central Baptist has implemented a job-share policy where nurses can share shifts to accommodate individual schedule preferences. This program is just one of several initiatives Central Baptist uses to keep their staff engaged. The results have been overwhelmingly positive. Last year Central Baptist boasted a 1.73 percent nurse vacancy rate. This compares to a national rate of over 10 percent. In the healthcare industry where worker shortages are not uncommon, Central Baptist is finding solutions to retain critical staff, including the promotion of flexibility. "Work flexibility/job sharing has been very beneficial for the hospital," said Lynette Walker, Central Baptist's human resources manager. "We have noted that employees who participate in this type of work arrangement tend to have increased work productivity, are more than willing to work additional hours to help us meet our staffing needs, and have a very high morale."

W. Rogers Company creates flexibility for an entirely different set of workers. In the construction industry, flexibility may come in a different package than for healthcare workers. W. Rogers Company has set up a four-day work week where traveling workers have more time at home with friends and family rather than the traditional five days on the job. In an industry where employee skills are the product, W. Rogers has been able to attract and keep employees with the skills needed to do the job well.

"We've gained a competitive advantage with employees who are required to travel by allowing them to spend an additional day at home," said Warren Rogers, the company's president and CEO. "There are the additional benefits, that employees have less idle time during their workweek and have a built-in make-up day. Productivity is enhanced because the time taken to retrieve and store tools is reduced by one day per week. Our employees would never want to revert to a five-day week." This is just one example of a creative way to boost employee engagement and productivity.

While 2008 will be the fourth year organizations have competed for the Sloan Awards, this is Lexington's first opportunity to strut its stuff. If you think your organization has an innovative way to do flexibility, why not apply?

Top reasons for your organization to apply for the awards include the chance to be recognized locally and nationally as an employer of choice, as well as the opportunity for objective feedback and benchmarking on your current efforts in flexibility. And finally,

Businesses that compete have nothing to lose in this free competition, and so much to potentially gain.

To take advantage of the opportunity for your organization to be recognized for flexible and effective workplace practices, see www.iwin.uky.edu for more information about the application process for the Sloan Awards, workplace flexibility, and the When Work Works initiative.

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