

# Preventive Perking

As we emerge from The Great Recession, employers should get creative with employee engagement and rewards.

By Lisa Maxwell

As the economy begins to show glimpses of improvement and job opportunities start to increase, companies will start to recalibrate their workforce strategies.

We have been in a “hunker down” mode for a while now. Employer focus has been on streamlining and getting higher productivity with fewer employees. For the most part, they have implemented more stringent compensation measures, instituted cut-backs in hiring, and restructured responsibilities of current employees. In short, many in the workforce have been asked to do more for less. Thankful to have a job in this economic climate, they are happy to do it.

Early indicators point to economic recovery. Manufacturing activity has increased, and consumer spending has grown. The Labor Department’s jobs reports in February indicated that companies are hiring temporary workers. That’s an excellent sign. In recent years, economists say, putting temps to work has preceded a wider and stronger pickup in business.

As we progress out of the recession, we might see a considerable rise in hiring, which means it’s important to keep employees engaged. A survey earlier this year by Salary.com found that 65 percent of employees said they were passively or actively looking for new jobs. Retention of talent could be the most challenging issue facing CEOs.

At first glance, it might appear that employers have kept their best talent and gotten the most out of those they retained during The Great Recession. Beneath the surface, however, negative residual effects could affect current employees. They’ve maintained a positive attitude as colleagues and friends were laid off. When they did not receive their annual bonus or perhaps had to take a reduction in salary, they might have outwardly accepted it. However, if they are motivated by new challenges, they might be frustrated and burnt out performing the same or higher-level job for less money and recognition.

If these situations have been allowed to fester, some employees could potentially form a long-lasting impression of their employer, damaging the company’s reputation. Competitors might be “chomping at the bit” to offer your best workers an even better career.

Companies need to start gauging their employee contentment and engagement as the economy picks up.

Now is the time for employers to assess their company climate and take action if needed to reiterate the mission of the company and their desire to maintain the loyalty of their employees.

Focus on enhancing the current employee experience. This starts with an effective on-boarding program. Begin to shape the candidates’ expectations during the recruiting process. No promises to the candidate should be made unless they can be delivered.

Simple things can make a big difference: Google, for example, provides well-publicized perks such as on-site recreational facilities, dry cleaners, and a policy that allows employees to bring their pets to work. These benefits make the day-to-day grind much more enjoyable.

Career development, flextime, wellness programs, matching donations to charities, and flexible spending plans are just a few other perks that help build loyalty. The important thing here is to know what is important to your particular employment population. Identify with your employees, and tailor your approach.

Be candid with your employees, and reward them in creative ways. As special recognition for a job well done, pay an employee’s house note for a month, or send them to see their favorite artist in concert. Treat them to something they wouldn’t normally do for themselves. Offer “well days” to celebrate when something good happens out of the blue, like an engagement. Send a note to their spouse in appreciation for their support if the employee’s position requires travel and time away from home.

The key is starting now and building it into the fabric of the company. Pick a few things that resonate with the philosophy of the company and build it into the daily employee experience. The employer-driven market we have today will soon be a candidate-driven market. Building employer brand takes time and dedication over the long haul. The investments made now will pay off down the road as competition for the best of the talent pool will intensify. Your forethought and consideration of your employees now could very well set the stage for them to remember all those gestures and provide incentive for them to hold fast the next time a competitor reaches out with a seemingly superior offer. You might find these same employees staying put and even bragging about your organization at upcoming dinner parties. **HRO**



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