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Publix attributes proactive communication to engagement, retention success

As the economy strengthens and the job market becomes more robust, employees are beginning to have an upper hand in deciding where they want to work. At the same time, employers are going to have to begin reworking strategies on hiring and retaining the best talent, with competitive salaries high on the wish list for workers.

"I do think that in this calendar year we are likely to see some upward pressure on wages," says Laury Sejen, managing director, talent and rewards, at Towers Watson. "I think, given that we know competitive base salary is the top driver of attraction and retention among employees in the U.S., that it's the first thing that's going to have to give."

Also see: [Attraction and retention in 2015: What employers need to know](#)

According to Towers Watson research, base pay is the primary driving factor behind employees choosing to join a company, followed by career advancement opportunities and job security, respectively. Employers, meanwhile, say advancement opportunities are the top reason employees choose to join the organizations, followed by challenging work and the company's reputation.

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And while employees also cite base pay/salary, advancement opportunities and job security as the top three reasons they leave an organization, according to Towers Watson surveys, employers have a slightly different view. Employers surveyed say a lack of advancement opportunities is the top reason employees leave the company, followed by base pay/salary and the relationship with their supervisor or manager.

While the pressure on competitive salaries has lessened the past few years, Sejen advises employers to continue to review their offerings and ensure they haven't fallen behind.

Wages aren't the only issue, however. To really make a positive impact on employee retention, says Towers Watson's Managing Director of Human Resource Management, in its 2015 Benefit Strategies survey, says retirement and health care benefits are the most valuable non-health care benefit employers can offer in the next five years.

And putting financial wellness aspects aside, another avenue employers can explore is career management programs, Sejen adds.

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"Do [employers] have structures and programs in place that give managers sort of the knowledge, tools and resources they need to help manage the careers of employees who report to them?" she asks. "And from the employee view, [do] they have some visibility on how work is organized at the company?"

In recent research on career development, Sejen says both employees and employers agreed that there is significant room for improvement. "Those are some opportunities," she says.

Go-to employer

How are companies themselves working to ensure that they get the best talent, and are able to keep workers on the job as long as possible? One employer that has kept a watchful eye on the big picture is a popular Southeastern grocery chain, Publix.

The Lakeland, Fla.-based company operates stores in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee, employing more than 174,000 workers. The regional chain has been a go-to employer for years, evidenced by the 17 consecutive years the company has maintained a spot on Fortune Magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For," among other accolades and honors.

When it comes to the grocer's success, Maria Brous, Publix's director of media & community relations, says being a great place to work comes down to the employees themselves and the unique relationship the employee-owned company has with its workers.

Also see: [Execs say benefits more about retention than attraction](#)

"We aren't the only associate-owned company, but for us that is our secret sauce," she says. "They have skin in the game. We

know if we treat our associates well, they in turn will treat our customers well.”

Brous notes the average tenure of a store manager at Publix is 25 years, and more than 10,000 employees have worked at for the grocer 20 years or more. In addition, she adds, in the company’s 85-year history, there has not been one layoff.

Along with the 401(k) matching, full vesting options and tuition reimbursement programs, Publix truly is like a real family. “We share our story with our associates: Where we began in 1930, where we are today and what our future holds.”

And communication is key, Brous adds, noting the company takes a proactive approach to constantly educate associates on benefits available, from retirement options to the employee stock ownership plans.

Jonathan Day, director of enterprise consulting at Thomsons Online Benefits agrees, noting the importance of maintaining high levels of engagement throughout the recruitment and onboarding process, and maintaining that engagement through an employee’s first year.

Also see: [Retention rides on a well-communicated benefits plan](#)

“There is a natural drop off in engagement after the first six to 12 months when employees become embedded in their work,” he says.

Building a brand culture with your employees on day one is paramount, he says.

For example, an employee starts working at a new, savvy tech company — but when they start to enroll in their benefits, they’re suddenly buried under mounds of old-fashioned paper to enroll in their health and retirement benefits — they begin to think, “this isn’t the company I thought it was.”

What matters to workers

But, Sejen adds, it would be a miss if all employers focused on was drivers of attraction. “Employers need to be thinking about the broader aspects of what drives engagement and that includes some things that a lot of companies look at and say, ‘oh, that’s really soft,’ like leadership or the image of the company ... [but] those things matter to the employees. There’s an opportunity across all of these.”

And it can be quite a task, especially at a company like Publix, where Brous points out that she currently employees workers ranging in age from 14 to 95. But that doesn’t stop the company from making sure everyone is on the same page.

“The ability to have multiple generations working is amazing,” she says. There is much to be learned on both ends of the spectrum, from the mature worker sharing past experience to an equally important millennial sharing his or her passion and philosophy of giving back, as well as the overall expectations of their employees, she says.

To do so, Brous says the company uses a multi-vehicle approach for education, from internal newsletters and the company’s intranet to annual benefits meetings for all employees.

“We want them to take advantage of the programs that we have, that’s why they’re there,” she says. “Knowledge is power. We’re always looking for ways of communicating that to them and continue making them aware. There are different components that are going to attract and retain the different generations, and I think that’s why we’re always looking at those benefits that we’re offering and how we’re communicating that to them.”

Also see: [11 tips for communicating with and engaging Generations X and Y](#)

Employers must also find ways to overcome locational challenges. If you think about various locations, even managing within a single location can be time consuming and nearly impossible, Day adds. But with multiple locations spread across a number of states, tracking your communication campaigns is paramount, he adds.

An example, he notes, can be seen with a retail client of his. A specific campaign was launched in one location and saw high engagement, but the very same campaign with a different audience saw a lower percent. “Learn why you missed the mark with those people,” he advises.

Sejen notes retail in particular is “classically high turnover,” and Publix must be doing something right to retain as many employees as well as it does.

Focus on culture

More recently, the grocer began on Jan. 1 to allow same-sex partners of employees to receive health benefits on the employer’s plan. In the U.S., health care and wellness benefits ranks in the top seven drivers of attraction among U.S. employees, Sejen points out.

Brous says the grocery chain has been looking to expand its health insurance benefits to same-sex spouses for some time. She adds that after the Carolinas started to recognize same-sex marriages late last year, Publix had already begun looking at changing internal systems to smoothly transition all the behind-the-scenes work that needed to be done to provide the benefit to employees in other states.

As of 2014, the SHRM says 46% of employers offer health care coverage to employees with same-sex domestic partners.

Culture needs to be a focus, Sejen adds. “A company’s ‘desired’ culture needs to align with what they’re trying to achieve as a business. What are their objectives and priorities as a business? That needs to be reflected in the culture.”

Also see: [7 signs of a toxic culture](#)

And that is all related to the employee value propositions, Sejen notes, things beyond basic rewards. "What's the employee experience when they come in day after day, week in and week out? What's it like to work at the company?" she asks.

Companies can think about and articulate that combination of culture and employee value proposition, and then execute in terms of the way they're designing and delivering their total reward plans. "This will reinforce a company's culture and ultimately engage employees," she says.

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