

The ADVOCATE

Employees want to demonstrate their value in the workplace, survey says

By Richard Lee
STAFF WRITER
Appeared on March 21, 2009

Employees may be working a little harder to show employers their commitment as the global economic crisis takes its toll on the workplace.

A survey of 469 employees conducted by Towers Perrin, a Stamford-based global professional services firm, revealed that workers increasingly understand that their jobs are on the line and as a consequence are trying to impress their employers.

"In an economic downturn, employees want to lock down the things they need to provide stability and security for themselves and their families. A steady paycheck and set of core benefits, including health care coverage, typically top that list," said Emmett Seaborn, a Towers Perrin principal and head of intellectual capital development for the firm's Human Capital Group. "What's also notable, though, is employees' sense of what we might call 'shared destiny' with their employer. They understand their stability rests on the organization's performance and success, and they're willing to commit to helping drive that success as much as they can.

"For instance, 76 percent of the respondents in the December survey agreed they were personally motivated to help their company succeed, up from 69 percent just four months earlier," he said. "This suggests they are willing to work hard for their organizations in an effort to keep the company and in turn, their jobs, safe in the long term."

Employees from companies across the country participated in the survey, which provides the most current insights into how U.S. workers are feeling about the economic crisis and its impact on their personal and professional lives.

It updates an earlier online survey conducted by Towers Perrin in August and shows significant shifts in workforce sentiment, Seaborn said.

"Obviously, people care tremendously about income during a period like this," he said. "But the emphasis shifts, from maximizing it to stabilizing it. Today's work force is quite sophisticated. People know the stability of their income depends on the stability of their company. They're willing to give in the short term to get in the longer term. That's why we actually see less dissatisfaction with pay during periods like this. It's part of an implicit agreement that we'll weather the storm together, and the rewards will come later."

The survey mirrors what staff at the Business Council of Fairfield County gleaned from many of its 400-plus corporate members who employ 20,000 workers, said Lisa Mercurio, director of the Fairfield County Information Exchange, a unit of the council.

"The findings reflect what we have been hearing from member firms and HR leaders, and that is the need for managers and senior leaders to keep employees aware of the big picture, to communicate changes in strategy and to engage them to help meet emerging business priorities and challenges," she said. "The concern for any business in a disruptive time like this is that new opportunities are missed because a business plan or strategies have not adjusted to a changing marketplace."

Like Seaborn, David Lewis, founder and president of OperationsInc, a Stamford-based human resources firm, believes that most employees understand that their fate is tied to that of their employers.

"It's my contention that employees go into best behavior mode for fear that they will be the next laid off," Lewis said, adding that many work for companies trying to secure their futures by making staff cuts, tightening budgets and freezing wages and bonuses. "Smart employees are making the fewest waves. More are willing to work more hours at less pay."

Some employees want to move to other companies, but few jobs exist or competition for open positions is so stiff that obtaining one of those jobs is like winning the lottery. "There's no place to go," Lewis said. "Their spouses are saying, 'Stick it out. You just have to deal with it.'"

Employees' depleted retirement accounts also appear to be altering their plans to retire. Nearly two-thirds of those polled believe they may not be able to afford to retire when they want to. Of those polled in August, 14 percent said they planned to retire in the next few years. In the December survey, that number dropped to 9 percent.

"This change could have a profound effect on the workplace over the next several years," said Max Caldwell, a Towers Perrin principal and head of its global work force effectiveness practice. "As older employees decide to stay in the work force, advancement opportunities for younger workers will be increasingly limited. Baby boomer, Gen X and Gen Y cohorts will likely interface more often and for a longer period of time. While this allows organizations to benefit from having three generations of knowledge and perspective, it can also lead to intergenerational conflict."

The results of the survey are being sent to thousands of Towers Perrin corporate clients.

"We work with our clients on these issues. This is only the starting point," Seaborn said. "This has been one of the most discussed of all surveys we've done this year."

In the global employee surveys that Towers Perrin has conducted for more than a decade, views of senior management have been mixed, and establishing connections with employees remains a key challenge for many top executives, Caldwell said.

"They suggest that more leaders are stepping up to the plate in terms of providing a well-thought-out rationale for their actions and explaining that rationale clearly to workers," he said. "Employees always want sincerity, honesty and strategic direction from their leadership. But those things are particularly critical in unstable economic times when fear and cynicism are rife. Leaders who maintain open lines of communication now will reap the benefits of a more engaged work force, not only during this difficult time, but also into the next period of growth."

Though the December survey showed that workers are more motivated to help their employers, the disenchantment level had risen from 32 percent in August to 40 percent in December. "It's troubling. It predicts a financial decline," Seaborn said.

In some fields such as hedge funds, where it has been estimated that 20,000 jobs could be lost globally in 2009, the employment situation has been demoralizing, Lewis said. "You've got organizations where the writing is so clear on the wall. It drastically impacts morale," he said. "There's no way to stand on your chair and say, 'All is well. Go back to work.' "