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SERVING SOUTHWEST MISSOURI

Opinion: Female professionals seek more than paychecks



It is the short-sighted employer that overlooks half of the available workforce by failing to thoughtfully implement attraction and retention programs for women. A suitable paycheck is appealing, but in and of itself it simply is not enough to retain many female professionals who continue to struggle with work-life balance, inhibited career advancement and obstacles to full professional integration.

A year after Sheryl Sandberg's conversation-changing bestseller "Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead," people continue to demand employer commitment to the support, growth and advancement of women.

Employers nationwide are searching for ways to demonstrate that commitment, but only a few will distinguish themselves with successful program implementation.

Innovative employers are accomplishing employee buy-in, boosting morale and strengthening retention of women through defined mentoring programs, goal-focused accountability groups and corporate social responsibility initiatives.

These employee benefits are not prohibitively expensive, consist of manageable risk and appeal to all genders.

They play a pivotal role in rebranding employers from solely a paycheck provider to a personal and professional development resource, which is crucial for retaining female talent.

Defined mentoring programs are instrumental in integrating women into professions and industries, and they address the common problem of inhibited career advancement for female professionals. A mentoring program typically pairs a less experienced professional with a more experienced professional in the same field for career guidance. In the absence of a defined program, however, many employees gravitate into informal mentoring relationships that frequently exclude female professionals despite the best intentions of the employer.

A formal employer-sponsored mentor can serve as a woman's advocate, adviser and corrector. Employers frequently make the mistakes of assuming formal mentors and mentees must be of the same sex and displaying indifference to ineffective mentor-mentee relationships. Effective employer-sponsored mentoring programs should focus on women's retention and advancement, pair female professionals with successful colleagues regardless of gender, have written guidelines to accomplish career advancement, affirm the relationship's effectiveness at scheduled intervals and have a termination date

with a formal evaluation of the outcome.

A mutually beneficial mentor-mentee relationship almost certainly will continue informally long after the formal end, which encourages employee loyalty and career advancement.

It also eases transition issues as the mentor can help ensure the mentee has fully integrated into her professional responsibilities.

Goal-focused accountability groups for women are also an increasingly popular trend after the success of "Lean In," yet employers have been slow to adopt it, in part because many of the groups deliberately focus on personal development. This is a missed opportunity.

Employers can develop simple policies that support accountability groups while incorporating employer-focused outcomes. These groups can easily take the place of the frequently touted and often ineffective year-end employee self-evaluation. An employer-driven, goal-focused accountability group permits an employee to define career success for herself, articulate specific action steps and evaluate the outcome at the end of a specified time period. The employer then has the opportunity to directly contribute to the employee's success through guidance and support of her action steps. An employer's plan for her success and goal achievement increases her morale and loyalty, making her more likely to continue with her employer in the event another opportunity presents itself.

Corporate social responsibility initiatives demonstrate commitment to community support as well as accountability for its impact on and contribution to society. CSR initiatives can range from an office community service day for a local nonprofit to a multimillion-dollar investment in Third-World literacy. Successful CSR policies incorporate employee input and values and consequently increase the employee's sense of a buy-in to the employer's goals and achievements.

An employer can set itself apart by actively incorporating the social development passions of its professionals. The end result is a mutually beneficial relationship whereby the professional obtains the financial and goodwill support of her employer to assist with her personal desire to help a particular cause or organization.

Strong employers want to be more than a paycheck provider and certainly benefit from the contributions of female professionals.

Employers should consider these formal mentoring programs, goal-focused accountability groups and CSR initiatives as low-cost, effective ways to attract and retain that top talent.

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