

HR Magazine - July 2002: Competitive Practices: Reflecting the Wide World of HR

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By Bill Leonard

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Judges who reviewed the entries for *HR Magazine's* 2002 Innovative Practice Awards saw proof that creative HR programs are truly global. This year's three winning HR departments include one in New Zealand, the first outside the United States to win this award.

Awards for the three winning HR departments are presented each year at the Annual Conference and Exposition of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). The 54th annual conference was held in late June in Philadelphia.

"The quality of entries this year was again impressive. While the entries were spread across many HR functional areas, the majority—and not surprisingly—were in the performance management and development areas," says James W. Gray, SPHR, one of three judges for the awards and vice president of human resources for AstenJohnson Inc., of Charleston, S.C., a major supplier to the paper-manufacturing industry.

All of the judges found it difficult to narrow the field of 43 entries to just three winners. In the end, the judges selected HR departments that marketed themselves well and provided strong evidence that their programs added value to their organizations.

"In my mind it was their ability to fully explain what they were doing, the ability to tie their program to their company and the ability to quantify their results in some sort of financial or numerical terms," says contest judge Donald M. Herrmann, SPHR, an HR management consultant in Dayton, Ohio. The winners "clearly demonstrate ... how individual organizations can improve and enhance the value of their human capital."

Debby Ogan, PHR, who also served as a judge and is senior vice president of human resources for Sterling Savings Bank in Spokane, Wash., reviewed the entries from the perspective of a CEO. "I asked myself constantly: 'What value does this program add to the organization and are they really showing me how it adds value?'"

Most entries had measures to show how they enhanced or helped the HR department, Ogan says, but many lacked tools to demonstrate their benefit to the organization as a whole. While the three winners "had colorful and well-written entries," Ogan says, "I also thought the entries were good because it's very crucial for HR to know how to market and sell itself within its own organization."

All three judges found it ironic that the best entry highlighting a workplace security program was not a U.S. company's response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks but a program in New Zealand developed in the aftermath of deadly workplace violence. The program captured the award for organizations with 501 to 2,500 employees.

The award winner in the category of organizations with up to 500 employees was the Human Resource Department at SIGMA Marketing Group in Rochester, N.Y. For organizations with more than 2,500

employees, the award went to the Human Resource Department for toy manufacturer Hasbro Inc. in Pawtucket, R.I.

SIGMA Marketing Group

A Welcome Change

The Human Resource Department at SIGMA Marketing Group in Rochester, N.Y., received the award in the category for organizations with up to 500 employees.

The winning program grew out of a question that SIGMA Marketing's HR staff could not resolve to its own satisfaction: Why do employers generally throw parties for departing employees but rarely, if ever, for new hires?

The HR department developed a new-hire orientation program called "The Road to WOW." The name was chosen to fit with SIGMA's internal recognition program, WOW (for "Weally" Outstanding Work).

"We have a great work environment here, and one that we feel is very unique," says Susan O'Connell, director of human resources for SIGMA Marketing. "So we wanted to create a program that would help us to maintain that environment and to keep any kind of office politics at bay as the company gets bigger."

The first step in the process, O'Connell says, is to make sure the right people are hired for jobs. The next step—even more crucial—is to ensure that new hires get a good start at SIGMA. "Our goal is to get the new hires excited about working here," she says. "We really strive to keep the process up-tempo and make the experience of starting a new job fun and exciting. Whenever you start a new job, it is typically a stressful time, and we do our best to make all our new hires feel welcome and help them adjust to their new workplace."

It would be virtually impossible not to notice when a new employee starts work at SIGMA. HR sends an all-staff e-mail announcing the new hire and then throws a welcoming party at the new employee's workstation or office—complete with balloons and bagels. "Food is a great incentive for people to get together and talk," O'Connell says. "So we will put a basket of bagels or muffins at the new employee's desk and invite the rest of the staff to visit and have breakfast."

Each new hire also receives a "Traveler's Road Book" of information about the company, including an organizational chart and the names and numbers of people to call for help. The new hire is asked to complete a short biography that includes some offbeat and fun facts. The bios are posted on a bulletin board—called "Fellow Travelers on the Road to WOW."

In addition, each new employee is assigned a mentor who serves as a primary point of contact and helps the new hire get settled into the job. Each mentor receives a checklist of responsibilities and is expected to maintain contact with the protégé even after the new employee has become accustomed to the job.

"With this program, you really can feel the excitement when employees start a new job here," says Lori Blackwell, benefits manager for SIGMA. "It has also definitely strengthened the feeling of family among our staff."

SIGMA's program not only has boosted camaraderie, according to the company's HR staff, but also has helped increase HR's visibility and has raised employees' awareness of how the HR department operates. And because HR has improved the orientation sessions, employees get acclimated and

enrolled for benefits quickly. As a result, O'Connell says, HR now spends much less time walking employees through procedures and tracking down information to correct or complete HR forms.

"This program really is a tremendous marketing tool for the HR department," says O'Connell. "Through 'The Road to WOW,' we are really marketing our company to job applicants and, once a person is hired, we are then marketing the support and services that the HR department provides to employees."

Moreover, O'Connell says, the program has taught the HR staff quite a bit about the company's business, and her staff has tapped the marketing expertise of SIGMA's employees. "We are a marketing firm, and that has really helped us to understand how this program really needed to be sold both to employees and upper management," she says. "Once everyone understood and bought into what we were doing, then the program really clicked and began to exceed our original expectations."

O'Connell says the HR department has measured the orientation program's success through employee feedback and through HR staff members' informal observations of how new hires react to the program. "Compared to a couple of years ago, before we implemented 'The Road to WOW,' we have definitely seen that people get acclimated to their jobs and fit in much quicker," says O'Connell.

With 152 employees, "the company is small enough now that we can get a good feel on how it's working just through conversations with employees and other informal feedback," O'Connell says. As the company grows, she says, the program's effectiveness might be determined by tracking new hires' billable hours as an indicator of productivity.

Accident Compensation Corp.

A Safer Place to Work

The Human Resource Department for the Accident Compensation Corp. (ACC) in Wellington, New Zealand, received the award in the category for organizations with 501 to 2,500 employees.

When violence erupts in a workplace, the initial reaction is usually: "We never thought it could happen here." On June 24, 1999, that reaction resonated throughout ACC when employee Janet Pike was stabbed to death by a deranged man whom she was helping to file an insurance claim. Pike was conducting a routine interview with the claimant at her desk when he attacked.

The killing sent shock waves throughout New Zealand, but it had an especially profound effect on ACC's 1,900 employees. Because ACC is a government corporation that provides comprehensive no-fault personal accident insurance for all of New Zealand's nearly 4 million residents, its employees have close contact every day with people engaged in the sometimes-emotionally charged process of filing claims.

"We're dealing with people's lives and their livelihoods here," says John Saunders, general manager of people and services for ACC. "The people whom we work with have also been hurt or injured in some way, so it can be a very tense situation when someone files or checks on a claim."

After the stabbing, ACC's management obtained a full review of the agency's safety and security procedures. The review showed that ACC had a well-planned workplace safety program but that its employees had not bought into the program and didn't care to follow its safety and security procedures. "We understood right then and there that we needed to change our employees' attitude and heighten their awareness about workplace safety," Saunders says.

The result was WorkSAFE, a revamped safety and security program in which ACC employees are trained extensively in how to recognize and handle various types of aggressive behavior and threatening situations.

“We discovered that our employees weren’t very clear or consistent on what the definition of an incident truly was,” Saunders says. “There were actually plenty of times when one of our employees might have been threatened or a claimant used some inappropriate language, but the employee just shrugged it off because it happens all the time. We really had to address the bounds, and make employees aware of what a threatening situation truly was. Small things can blow up into serious situations very quickly, so employees need to report even the smallest and seemingly most insignificant incident, and that’s a message we really have to hammer home.”

ACC staff members appear to have taken the message to heart. Before WorkSAFE was implemented, Saunders says, only five or six threatening incidents were reported per year. Now, ACC employees are reporting 30 to 40 incidents every month.

WorkSAFE is a series of safety-oriented programs that include rules, procedures, training and online publications. The programs are designed to help ACC staff members understand their own behavior and how their behavior can affect others, and to sharpen their skills in coping with other people—co-workers as well as customers.

The task of designing a new training regimen to shake up the status quo and refocus employees’ attitudes fell largely to Saunders, employee relations adviser Tony O’Rourke and Deborah Ebbett, ACC’s manager of training services. Ebbett worked to create training procedures and was instrumental in developing new workbooks for managing circumstances such as aggressive/threatening behavior both in and out of the office, abusive/threatening phone calls and claimants who have suffered brain injuries. She also worked on videos, a workshop on street-wise communication and a half-day session on interviewing claimants.

Some training sessions were designed to surprise participants. For example, in a session on interviewing, a man acting as a claimant began cursing wildly, jumped up and suddenly threw his chair, smashing it against a wall. The session shocked several employees, says Ebbett. “But we wanted to make it as real as possible—including the language and an unexpected violent act.”

Both Ebbett and Saunders say they got the results they wanted as word of the training session spread among employees. “They were telling their colleagues, ‘Be prepared when you go to this session, because it’s real,’ ” Saunders says.

The WorkSAFE program has several key effectiveness measures and goals. Managers are directly accountable for the program’s success. They oversee the training of their staffs and serve as coaches and mentors. WorkSAFE also has become a key indicator of ACC’s performance relative to goals set by the New Zealand government, which include lowering injury rates throughout the nation and providing excellent service to premium payers.

WorkSAFE also has become a model workplace safety and security program for other employers in New Zealand. Saunders says he has been working with several organizations on how they can implement a similar program in their workplaces. And he is passionate about making the program succeed. “Never again on my watch,” he states.

Hasbro Inc.

Diversity with 'Play Values' The Human Resource Department for toy manufacturer Hasbro Inc. in Pawtucket, R.I., received the award in the category for organizations with more than 2,500 employees.

Last year, Hasbro Inc. launched a new diversity program, D@H=p3, which stands for "diversity at Hasbro equals people, products and profitability." The program focuses on what Hasbro's management calls the company's "play values"—community, innovation, communication, competitiveness and fun. Hasbro is one of the world's largest toy makers, so the term "play values" is key for the corporation.

After Hasbro decided to develop a new diversity training program for employees, the company's organizational effectiveness and diversity group went to work, designing the program with feedback from an employee opinion survey and focus groups. The result was a half-day workshop offered to employees beginning in May 2001. By March 2002, it had been given to all 8,000 employees.

The program includes three diversity exercises. The first is a take-off of the popular television game show "Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?" It focuses on the positive impact that diversity can have on a business. The second exercise is an adaptation of Hasbro's Pokemon trading card game, and it helps participants understand how individual differences in culture and background affect an organization. The third exercise, using Hasbro-manufactured toys such as building blocks and Lincoln Logs, focuses on building communities and on the individual's responsibility to help his or her community succeed.

"The workshop has been a huge hit among our employees," says Kim Janson, director of organizational effectiveness and diversity for Hasbro. "We like to call the workshop a 'learning in spite of yourself' program."

Janson says most employees have entered the workshop with a show-me attitude: "What can you teach me about diversity that I haven't already heard or seen?" She adds that many seem to be asking themselves, "How can I ever survive four hours of being lectured to about diversity?" But they exit laughing, she says, "talking to each other and commenting on how much they enjoyed the session."

The diversity workshop facilitators are Hasbro employees who have gone through an extensive "train-the-trainer program." The trainers' program carefully outlines the workshop's objectives and drills facilitators on how to help workshop participants achieve certain results:

- Better understand diversity's impact on Hasbro's business, products and competitiveness.
- Explore the kaleidoscope of diversity.
- Increase the understanding of one's own frame of reference and that of others.
- Practice having conversations about diversity.
- Identify actions and opportunities for increased business effectiveness at Hasbro through diversity.

"We are truly achieving all these goals and more through this workshop," Janson says. "Recently, someone attending the workshop said to me, 'You know, you should really change the name of this program from "diversity" to "community building." I thought that was great, because this is precisely what our program is really about—building a community within Hasbro, which we all can feel good about."

Employees embraced the workshop enthusiastically. It set a Hasbro record for the quickest completion of a companywide training program, Janson says. "The program really did gather momentum after the first few sessions. Employees began signing up based on their co-workers' recommendations. Many employees, after attending the workshop, asked to be involved in future workshop sessions or with any additional diversity work that my staff is doing."

Janson adds that evaluations of the workshop indicate that the company has hit the right note with the diversity training. "The workshop averaged a score of 4.4 on a 5.0 scale of evaluation, which is really better than we ever hoped for," she says.

"The real challenge we now face is how to continue and build upon this success," Janson says. "It could be a tough act to follow, but I think we've learned a lot on what our employees want and need, so we're ready to meet that challenge."

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