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Learning Fosters Psychologically Healthy Workplaces

Natalie Morera - 3/28/11

There's no easy road to learning. It's a two-way street — learning and development — which can lead to a healthy workplace.

The American Psychological Association (APA) recently awarded eight companies with their Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards (PHWA). The companies were rated on five different criteria: employee involvement, health and safety, work-life balance, employee recognition, and employee growth and development.



According to David Ballard, head of APA's Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program, having opportunities for growth and development in an organization can build employees' knowledge, skills and abilities. In turn, this can be applied to new situations that can increase motivation, job satisfaction and the ability to manage job stress, because employees have the necessary resources to do their jobs.

“All this can translate again for the organization as well. It improves organizational effectiveness [and] work quality, and the organization also can be positioned as an employer of choice,” Ballard said. “It can attract and retain the best employees and that's what it takes to have a competitive advantage today.”

In a survey conducted by the APA, 53 percent of working Americans reported they have participated in workplace training. Among the PHWA recipients, it was 74 percent of employees. In the same survey, 74 percent of employees at PHWA recipients also said they were satisfied with their employer's training and development opportunities, while just 44 percent of overall survey respondents were satisfied. In addition, 32 percent of overall respondents said they were seeking employment elsewhere, compared to only 6 percent of employees at PHWA recipients.

“Employees are looking for something that's meaningful for them, something where they can experience growth,” Ballard said. “Whether that's growth within the position they're going to be in for some time, using it as opportunities for career advancement or personal benefit, or getting value and developing themselves, it's something that's important to employees.”

Barrie Gross, former in-house employment law attorney and founder of Barrie Gross Consulting, an HR training and consulting firm, said a business that offers many training opportunities helps keep people engaged in their jobs, to some extent, by giving them chances to learn new skills, new information and new ways to do things.

“This can, often times, spur on an excitement that might have been missing because employees felt bored in their jobs, or perhaps didn’t understand the bigger context of why they were doing what they were doing,” Gross said. “Training can help revitalize employees’ interest in their jobs.”

Ballard said that recent economic changes have trickled into the work environment — for the better.

“On the employer side, they’ve come to realize that human capital is the biggest value they’ve got,” he said. “If they don’t develop and use that to the fullest potential, then it’s not only doing the employee a disservice, but it’s going to hurt business results.”

Ballard cited the following as best practices for companies looking to provide employees with a healthy work environment:

Good assessment: There are assumptions of what employees need, but employers should ask and assess what they want. What works with one organization may not work with another.

Tailoring: Once an assessment is conducted, employers should tailor workplace practices to meet identified needs.

Strategic implementation: Resources and support systems should also be built around identified needs. If the company is going to focus on training and development, compensation and reward structures should be set to support what they’re trying to accomplish, rather than working against them.

Evaluation: Employers should continue to evaluate and improve, based on feedback from employees and results.

SumTotal Systems, a talent management software company, supplies Softscape software to one of the PHWA recipients, The MITRE Corporation, a non-for-profit defense consultant.

Bill Docherty, senior director of product management at SumTotal, said that an effective employee learning and development program has proven to be one of the best ways to engage employees and build employee investment and the organization’s success. The payoff is employee retention, productivity and efficiency, among other benefits.

“Employees want to feel that they’re empowered with the information they need to be effective at their jobs,” Docherty said. “That’s what I think learning does for companies.”

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