

COMMUNICATING CHANGE AS IT HAPPENS

By Dan Tipton

Across the country these days, HR professionals are even more popular than during open enrollment. The topic filling their inboxes and voicemail? **Health care reform**. As discussion continues on the implications of recent legislation, employers are addressing how to keep up with and communicate the coming changes within their organizations.

“It is a lot of information for human resource professionals to decipher and it’s going to come in waves,” said Jacob Aufschauer, Senior Director of Human Resources for Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA). “But now is the time for employers to begin a dialogue with their employees about the impact of health care reform in order to counter widespread misinformation and rhetoric. You have to be proactive.”

A 2010 Global Workforce Study conducted by Towers Watson & Co. in Stamford, CT gauged employees’ understanding and expectations of health care reform. More than two-thirds of respondents expected their benefits to cost more in the future. In addition, more than half expected the reform package to reduce their benefits and lower their quality of care.

To address employee anxiety and make health care information easily accessible, SEPTA implemented HR Connect, a program to encourage HR personnel to communicate with employees face-to-face on shop floors and in the field. “The program gives our HR personnel an opportunity to join employees in the field and talk one-on-one,” Aufschauer said. “We need to know what is being communicated effectively and what isn’t. Communication is an essential component of any successful company and it takes a lot of work.”

The vast array of benefits choices is accompanied by an equally large range of communication tools in addition to FAQs and other basics, such as group information sessions for managers and employees and even healthcare reform “clinics” and hotlines.

The Board of Pensions, PC, the board responsible for the Presbyterian Church’s (U.S.A.) benefits, holds quarterly staff meetings and weekly department meetings with question-and-answer sessions on upcoming changes. “Access and affordability are hallmarks to our program,” said Patricia Haines, Senior Vice President, Benefits. “With so many changes coming in, you have to provide a combination of broad context and incremental updates to help keep employees well informed at all times.”

At Carpenter Technology in Reading, managers of the 3,000-employee specialty alloy company have been recruited to help deliver information about health care reform to employees. During annual total rewards meetings, managers were presented with message maps detailing the 2011 changes as well as general information about what to expect in years to come, said Tammy Koch, Associate Vice President for Total Rewards & People Strategy.

Carpenter, SEPTA, and The Board of Pensions, PC also encourage employees to use the company intranet or other means to submit questions and comments related to the legislation. “It is difficult to get their attention. We are constantly competing against other media – Facebook, Twitter, television, etc...,” Haines said. “It’s not easy.”

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