

PEBA'S 27TH ANNUAL FORUM EMPOWERS AREA LEADERS
By Renée L. Rosenfeld, CEBS, SPHR

“The Power of Leadership in Challenging Times” was the theme of this year’s Annual Forum, and what a timely topic it was. The Philadelphia Marriott Downtown was abuzz with 80 vendors and over 250 participants, and the focus of maintaining market share and employee motivation in a down economy resonated throughout the day.

Eli Massar, Co-founder and Board Chair of PhillyCarShare, provided the keynote address and spoke candidly about managing in difficult economic times. He admitted that the car sharing concept represents a shift from traditional vehicle ownership, as it reduces dependence on private vehicle ownership for people who don’t drive regularly. As employers seek ways to cut employee driving reimbursements and lease costs and reduce insurance and depreciation exposure, PhillyCarShare’s 400-car fleet enables conscientious employers to reduce expenses while creating convenience for employees.

In the morning, I selected the session on “Positioning Human Resources as a Strategic Business Partner.” Presenters **Jamie Honigman** and **Scott Gaul** of Aon Consulting and **Keith Black** of Covance Shared Services talked about the importance of HR accountability, and they shared a number of proven strategies: make the HR function 80% value added and only 20% functional; champion a customer service orientation; automate and centralize HR functions; and deliver an annual report on HR cost savings. Especially in today’s turbulent markets, HR officers must position themselves as key components in a firm’s potential success. The speakers offered seven steps to achieve HR optimization. Among them was gaining a clear understanding of your organization’s vision, analyzing HR benchmarks and best practices, developing an action plan, and measuring, calibrating and continuously improving.

Not surprisingly, a capacity crowd attended the mid-day Legislative Update. In the hour allotted, speakers **Lisa Barton** and **Ben Delancey** of Morgan Lewis touched broadly upon legislation we’ve been hearing and reading about: COBRA, CHIP, Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity, Michelle’s Law, the HEART Act, GINA, and changes to Public Transit Benefits and to executive compensation limits and reporting requirements.

For the afternoon session, I chose “Cohesive Approach to Absence Management,” with facilitators **Jim DiGuiseppe** of Valley Forge Benefits and **Walt Kanhofer** of Main Line Health. The presenters walked participants through a Main Line Health case study: their approach to absence management from the ‘80s to today. They recommended the following best practices for disability management: early intervention, focusing on complex claims (including ongoing claims analysis/reporting, and duration measuring against accepted clinical guidelines), implementing early return to work programs, absence coordination between vendors, employees and management, and selecting a vendor that offers a multi-year rate guarantee.

Jim and Walt also suggested that HR/Benefit managers carefully analyze plan design, consider adding a cost-sharing component to STD and LTD premiums, develop metrics, and streamline FMLA administration. A critical consideration for employers: refrain from upsetting the apple cart along the way. In other words, don’t change programs so dramatically so that employees feel less valued.

The highlight of my day was the closing address, presented by **The Honorable Michael Nutter**, Mayor of Philadelphia. Mayor Nutter gave participants hope as he explained that as leaders, we must realize that it's not about us alone -- it takes a team to make things happen. His goals for the City of Philadelphia are four-fold: fiscal integrity, public safety, education, and controlling pension and healthcare costs. Mayor Nutter offered several employee benefit suggestions that make sense in today's financial arena: implement a hybrid DB/DC plan to deal with deep pension fund losses, convert from a tuition reimbursement to a tuition pre-payment approach so employees can afford to continue coursework, and increase employee cost sharing for health care plans due to escalating premium increases. His final words echoed the sentiment heard throughout the day: employers must do the right thing, make the tough decisions, and invest in employees.

PEBA's 27th Annual Forum ended, as always, with a drawing for prizes of all shapes and sizes. A heartfelt "thank you" for helping to make the Forum successful is extended to the following: Sponsors Aetna, Buck Consultants, Charon Planning, Gallagher Benefit Services, Lynal Benefits, Trion, and Valley Forge Benefits Consulting; Committee co-chairs **John Hodemy** and **Arlene Weissman**; Committee members **Rebecca Cantwell**, **Robert Gross**, **Sharon Kazaras**, **Jennifer Kilpatrick**, **Mary Longstreth**, **Dennis Mahoney**, **Remy Richman**, **Marilyn Paluba**, and **Melissa Schweizer**; PEBA's Executive Director, **Susan DeMinico**; and PEBA staff members **Roz Coleman** and **Joy Wilson**.

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