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The Results of the 2004 Employer-of-Choice/Balance Work and Life Survey

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Background

Connecticut state government has a statute requiring the Commissioner of Administrative Services to develop a human resources strategic plan. One component of that plan is to include “approaches for improving the image of state employment and state employees as perceived by the residents of this state, potential candidates for state employment and state employees” (Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 5-199c.). In 1999, the state embarked on addressing this component, in part, by benchmarking with other employers in two areas that were receiving popular attention in the human resources literature: organizational strategies to attain “employer of choice” (EOC) status and organizational strategies designed to help employees balance work and life (BWL). The benchmarking strategy was to conduct an Internet survey of private and public sector employees, using numerous list serves to distribute survey invitations. From the survey, we hoped to gain a sense of what was being done in the areas of EOC/BWL and to identify promising practices that we should consider adopting. We wish to share the results of the most recent survey in this article.

Balancing Work & Life

DAS used information from the HR literature (e.g., the practices of employers listed in annual “Best Places to Work” articles, and similar sources) to construct survey items. In the area of BWL, we inquired into fifteen program or practice areas. These were 1) cafeteria insurance/benefits plans, 2) compressed work weeks, 3) flextime programs, 4) telecommuting, 5) on-site fitness centers or paid fitness memberships, 6) on-premises child care, 7) loan programs (e.g., student loans), 8) job sharing, 9) educational leave, 10) sabbaticals, 11) wellness programs, 12) EAP, 13) bring kids/friends/family to work day, 14) voluntary purchase of extra leave, and 15) voluntary reduction in work days/weeks. Respondents were to choose among 5 forced choice options regarding their involvement with these programs or practices. Their choices were a) they were never tried, b) they were tried/abandoned, c) they were experts at the program/practice, d) the

program/practice was a part of their operations or e) the practice or program was “on the drawing board”.

Knowing that programs and practices like these are sometimes controversial or are questioned on their ROI, we also asked what the effect of the program or practice was for the organizations that used them. This was operationalized by asking if there was a) greater customer satisfaction, b) greater profits, c) reduced unscheduled leave, d) attraction of high quality employees, e) increased productivity, f) greater employee satisfaction and/or g) lower costs. We also asked for explanations and any details of allied programs or practices they used that were not asked about in the survey for BWL.

These results are shown in Table 1.

Becoming or Staying an Employer of Choice

The EOC section (Becoming or Staying an Employer of Choice) was more extensive respecting the number of activities that interested us. There were 24 in total. They were 1) distributing printed or electronic materials designed to present a positive image to potential recruits, 2) performing succession planning for hard to fill positions, 3) reducing the cycle time for filling hotly recruited positions, 4) building close recruiting partnerships with colleges and universities, 5) building internships or similar entry level programs for recruitment leverage, 6) increasing the visibility of the organization to potential recruits, 7) offering career development opportunities as a benefit to employees, 8) improving relations with and understanding the needs of applicants/recruits, 9) contributing to civic improvement and community involvement, 10) partnering with customers to evaluate and reform/revise recruitment strategies, 11) building a deserved reputation as a great place to work, 12) evaluating and correcting the reasons why valuable employees leave, 13) promoting employee celebrations and reward programs, 14) rewarding managers for increasing the value of their employees to the organization, 15) recruiting where applicants are located rather than expecting applicants to come to the organization, 16) using recently hired employees (non HR) as recruiters, 17) evaluating and trying to correct reasons that employment offers are refused, 18) holding special events or conferences to attract potential job candidates, 19) becoming a part of organizations or groups (e.g., board or commission members, advisors) that have been or could be good sources for potential job candidates, 20) combining employment information with any/all marketing materials, 21) bringing recruitment directly to organizations representing diverse clientele, 22) using externships and employee transfer programs to enrich employee work life and career options, 23) offering employee workplace rotation programs or geographical relocation programs, and finally 24) using computer technology solutions for the recruitment and selection of employees. We asked not only how much in the way of resources were being invested in these practices but also asked how much they were a part of their way of doing business. These results are shown in Table 2.

The Connecticut Department of Administrative Services has hosted this survey three times since 1999 with the most recent being the spring of 2004. One of the biggest

changes for the survey administered the spring of 2004 is that government employers made up 94 percent of the survey respondents, with the vast majority of respondents being municipal. The remaining 6 percent were 3% private for profit and 3% educational institutions. In the original 1999 survey, only 42 percent were government employers. While this change in employer representation was not anticipated, it does afford more direct insight into the practices of public sector employers. The sizes of the represented organizations were as follows:

Less than 100 employees: 3%
 101-500 employees: 26%
 501-1000 employees: 26%
 1001-5000 employees: 32%
 5001-15000 employees 0%
 more than 15,000 employees 13%

Table 1. Prevalence of Programs for Balancing Work and Life (2004)								
Prevalence		% of Employers Using Program who Reporting These Effects						
Program	% Using Program	Lower Costs	Increased Employee Satisfaction	Increased Productivity	Attracted Higher Quality Employees	Reduced Unscheduled Leave	Increased Profits	Increased Customer Satisfaction
EAP Program	97	17	29	17	12	16	1	7
Flextime	81	5	36	15	20	22	0	2
Wellness Programs	77	21	31	13	13	15	2	5
Purchase Extra Leave	77	67	33	0	0	0	0	0
Compressed Work Week	66	6	37	16	14	20	0	6
Cafeteria Plan Benefits	59	17	45	3	21	0	3	10
Telecommuting	55	6	43	14	6	29	0	3
Bring "Someone" to Work Day	55	4	52	9	17	9	4	4
Job Sharing	47	12	42	8	19	19	0	0
Fitness Center	38	12	31	19	15	15	4	4
Educational Leave	38	0	50	13	25	6	0	6

Work Day/Week Reduction	29	17	33	17	17	17	0	0
On-Site Child Care	22	8	42	0	42	8	0	0
Sabbatical	13	0	50	25	0	25	0	0
Special Loans	13	0	75	0	25	0	0	0

Table 1 rank orders the BWL practices based on the percent of respondents using the practice. The results were not terribly surprising. Employee assistance programs, flextime, wellness programs, leave programs and compressed workweeks were the most prevalent. Less common were special loan programs, sabbaticals, on-site childcare facilities, and workday or workweek reduction programs. By far, the main effects of these programs were increasing employee satisfaction. Of course, this was assumed to be the principle reason for having the programs in the first place. However, a number of practices were reported to have resulted in reduced unscheduled leave and lowered costs for the organizations. Further, childcare centers, educational leave, cafeteria plan benefits, and flextime were attributed to be practices that attracted higher quality employees.

A notable percentage of respondents reported that they have “tried and abandoned” certain of the BWL practices. These were on-site fitness centers or memberships (9%), on-site childcare centers (9%), sabbaticals (7%), wellness programs (6%), bring family/children/friends to work day (10%) and the purchase of extra leave time (10%).

Some respondents clarified or added practices they used in response to the survey:

- *Sick leave sharing is a very popular program. It is totally voluntary and very loosely structured*
- *In general, we are pretty family-friendly. Employees are seldom told they cannot take time off for an activity related to their child as long as they have the benefit time available & it will not cause an overtime situation. Employees can use their sick time banks to cover illnesses & doctor appointments for family members.*
- *Leave without pay -- In some circumstances, an employee's job (or comparable level job) may be held while the employee takes an extended leave of absence.*
- *We encourage employees to further their education through a tuition reimbursement program, and while we do not have a formal program where employees take off for schooling, supervisors do try to be flexible with scheduling employees enrolled in higher education courses.*
- *Departments have more flexibility to develop individualized programs than are available to all employees throughout the organization, such as on-site fitness centers, compressed workweeks, etc.*

The EOC data are rather interesting. They have been rank ordered in Table 2 in a way that starts the list with those activities used by the largest percentage of respondents.

Table 2. Prevalence of Activities for Becoming or Staying an Employer of Choice (2004)								
EOC Activity	Degree to which employer recently invested resources or effort into the EOC activity				Degree to which the EOC activity has been a part of the way organization usually does business			
	% “Great”	% “Moderate”	% “Some”	% “None”	% “Great”	% “Moderate”	% “Some”	% “None”
Promoting employee celebrations/rewards	24	28	38	10	31	35	35	0
Distributing printed or electronic materials to present positive image to recruits	26	13	55	6	31	28	38	3
Increasing visibility of the organization to recruits	13	17	53	17	12	15	69	4
Using computer technology solutions for recruitment and selection of employees	17	27	37	20	25	29	42	4
Building reputation as great place to work	20	27	43	10	27	31	35	8
Offering career development opportunities to employees	27	17	40	17	22	33	33	11
Correcting reasons employees leave	10	23	53	13	19	30	41	11
Building internships or similar entry level programs	17	17	40	27	24	12	52	12
Improving relations with/understanding needs of recruits	7	24	48	21	12	36	40	12
Reducing the cycle time for filling hotly recruited positions	14	38	21	28	15	31	38	15
Building close recruiting partnerships with colleges	10	17	40	33	15	8	62	15
Recruiting applicants on their home soil	10	17	41	31	17	21	46	17
Recruiting for diversity at appropriate organizations	20	12	40	48	26	9	43	22
Contributing to civic improvement and community	27	20	37	17	31	15	31	23

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Putting employment info with marketing materials	7	17	40	37	8	19	50	23
Joining organizations with potential job candidates	7	30	33	30	13	25	38	25
Performing succession planning for hard-to-fill positions	10	7	53	30	11	11	52	26
Partnering with customers on recruitment strategies	13	3	30	53	17	4	43	35
Special events to attract candidates	7	21	21	52	9	30	22	39
Correcting reasons employment offers are refused	3	13	33	50	4	17	38	42
Rewarding managers for value of employees to organization	3	7	33	57	5	14	36	45
Using recent hires as recruiters	3	7	30	60	4	4	35	57
Using externships/transfer programs to enrich employee life & career options	3	3	20	73	4	9	26	61
Offering employee rotations/geographical relocation programs	0	0	20	80	0	9	27	64

These responses were very instructive for our organization. What they convey is that an organization that is not promoting employee celebrations/rewards, distributing printed or electronic materials to present positive images to recruits, increasing visibility of the organization to recruits, using computer technology solutions for recruitment and selection of employees, building a reputation as a great place to work, offering career development opportunities to employees, correcting reasons good employees leave, building internships or similar entry level programs, improving relations with/understanding the needs of recruits, reducing the cycle time for filling hotly recruited positions, building close recruiting partnerships with colleges, and recruiting applicants “where they are” are woefully behind the rest of the world in their EOC practices (remember, we are referring mostly to other governments, here).

Discussion

With these data are some indicators of promising along with tried and true practices for employers helping employees balance work and life and for trying to achieve employer of choice status. We will prepare a future article showing practices and activities that have remained the same and that have changed over time during our administrations of this survey in 1999, 2001 and 2004.

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