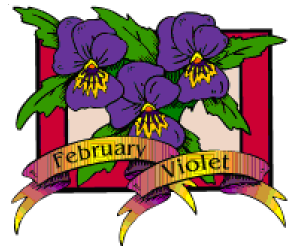
HR Answers

advantage

February 2009



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THE HRA NEWSLETTER: WORKING FOR YOU

Our Advantage newsletter has been around for 23 years, and is still one of our most popular products. We frequently receive compliments on its content from clients and friends who look forward to reading it each month. Our goal for the newsletter is to be informative, educational, and tip-worthy. Our audience is broad, with readers across the country and covering all industries, and includes supervisors, human resource professionals, and business owners.

What this means is that there's a lot of territory for us to cover in each issue. While we occasionally hear from some readers that the newsletter is a bit too long, we also hear from others that they would like more in-depth coverage on particular topics. In the future, we'll strive for a happy medium. Also, if you're paying attention, you'll notice some subtle changes in upcoming issues. We'll still publish the newsletter monthly and it will cover the same type of topics, but we anticipate that it will include more legislative and legal updates than ever before (starting with this current issue), due to the activities of the current federal administration and what we understand is still to come. We encourage you to watch for these updates, and to pay attention to the Alerts that we send out by email and that we post on the HRA website as well.

Another change you'll notice in the newsletter is that we'll include more links to in-depth or additional information, rather than including it as complete text. This will have the effect of allowing our readers to choose those areas of information that interest them the most, and shortening the articles for those who wish to simply scan the content.

Please offer your feedback and ideas for content. We always appreciate hearing from you.

IT'S 2009 AND IT'S ALREADY EXCITING!

If You Haven't Heard…..The Legislative and Legal Update

Business owners and HR professionals have been busy already this year with the amendments, and new or pending legislative/legal activity. For those who missed something or are just playing catch-up, here are some of the recent goings-on you'll want to know about so you can plan accordingly, rewrite or update your materials, and of course make sure your supervisors are aware of, since they serve as agents on behalf of your organization.

Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009. *CLICK HERE* for the background on this law. This law (S. 181) rejects the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co.*, holding that the charge-filing deadline on Title VII compensation discrimination claims begins to run on the date of the first allegedly discriminatory pay decision.

The new law amends Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 to provide that the charge-filing periods (300 days in most states and 180 days in states that do not have a fair employment agency) would commence when: (1) a discriminatory compensation decision or other practice is adopted; (2) an individual becomes subject to the decision or practice; or (3) an individual is affected by an application of a discriminatory compensation decision or practice (including each time wages, benefits, or other compensation is paid). Thus, the statute of limitations restarts each time an employee receives a paycheck based on a discriminatory compensation decision.

In addition, the new law provides that an unlawful employment practice occurs when "a person" is affected by a discriminatory pay decision or other practice. This broad language could sanction pay discrimination charges filed by non-employees so long as those individuals claim they have been affected by the discriminatory practice.

The law is retroactive to May 28, 2007, the day before the *Ledbetter* decision, and applies to all pay discrimination claims pending on or after that date. The implications of the retroactive effective date are uncertain (individuals who had refrained from filing compensation discrimination claims in the months since *Ledbetter,* legislation could increase potential liability for damages, and the legislation may permit plaintiffs whose cases were dismissed on statute of limitations grounds to reassert their claims).

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As employers there are many things you do need to know. The broadened statute of limitations for wage disparity claims is expected to increased litigation! Employers will want to reduce the risks of liability and should consider the following activities:

- Audit current pay documentation practices
- Develop specific criteria for compensation decisions
- Review compensation decisions
- Revise document retention practices
- Train supervisors and managers
- Conduct periodic statistical analysis of compensation data

CLICK HERE for the detailed information on these activities.

E-Verify Delayed Again! *CLICK HERE* to read more about who caused the delay. The new rule requiring federal contractors to use the E-Verify employment eligibility system has been delayed yet again. The new effective date is May 21, 2009. The extension was granted following the memorandum from the president's Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, stating that agencies should consider extending the effective dates of all regulations that were published in the Federal Register but had not yet been implemented. So that the new federal administration can review the E-Verify requirement, current court proceedings challenging that mandated use of E-Verify have been put on hold.

New I-9 Form - But Wait! Sometimes it just doesn't make sense, but don't use the new I-9 just yet! Regardless of what you may have read or heard earlier, an announcement on February 2, 2009 has changed the effective date for using the new I-9. Organizations' use of the revised Form I-9 has been delayed until April 3, 2009 by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announcement. The change in the effective date for implementing the revised form now makes it a risk for employers to switch over prior to April 3rd. Civil monetary penalties may be charged for using the revised Form I-9 prior to its effective date.

Until April 3rd or another USCIS announcement, organizations should continue using the current Form I-9.

ECONOMIC STIMULUS HAS HR IMPACT (COBRA)

Updated February 23, 2009

Although aimed at aiding the faltering economy, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) does contain several provisions affecting the workplace. A key HR provision is the temporary expansion of the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA).

COBRA Subsidy – Eligible workers will receive a 65% subsidy toward their health care coverage premium for up to 9 months. The Treasury Department will administer the subsidy, providing employers or health plans, if they administer COBRA benefits, to receive a credit against payroll taxes for the cost of the subsidy. The subsidy would terminate upon offer of any new employer-sponsored health care coverage or Medicare eligibility.

Employee Eligibility – Individuals who have been involuntarily terminated between September 1, 2008 and December 31, 2009 and with annual incomes less than $125,000 (single) or $250,000 (couples) are eligible for the COBRA premium assistance, along with their families. Qualified individuals who initially decline COBRA coverage would be given an additional 60 days after they receive notice of the special election period to elect to receive the subsidy. The election period begins on the date of enactment of the ARRA.

Special Enrollment – The bill allows group health plans to provide a special enrollment right to allow eligible individuals to elect different coverage under the plan in electing COBRA continuation coverage.

Notice Requirements – COBRA notices must include information on the availability of the premium assistance. Model notices from the Department of Labor are due 30 days after enactment.

Effective Date – These provisions are effective for premiums the first calendar month following the date of enactment.

Editor: Deborah Jeffries, PHR, CPC. Advantage is published monthly and is designed to provide information on regulations, HR practices and management ideas and concerns. The intended audience is managers, supervisors, business owners, human resource and employee relations professionals. If you have questions about the content, an opinion about the information, questions about your subscription, or if you need additional Advantage binders, please give us a call at (503) 885-9815 or e-mail djeffries@hranswers.com.

Oregon readers: Oregon has a comparable state law which covers employers with less than 20 employees. However, these requirements also apply to Oregon's small (less than 20 employees) organizations [ARRA Title III Sec. 3001 (10) (B) Cobra Continuation Coverage].

Unemployment Compensation:
Extension of Benefits
This provision extends the time period in which workers are able to collect their unemployment benefits. The recently enacted *Unemployment Compensation Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-449)* created a temporary emergency unemployment compensation program. As opposed to the original program termination date of March 31, 2009, the ARRA would terminate the Emergency Unemployment Compensation program on December 31, 2009. Under this proposal no compensation under the program would be payable after May 31, 2010. The benefits and administration costs would be funded through the general fund of the Treasury rather than the Federal Unemployment Tax Act (FUTA) surtax.

Expansion of Benefits
An increase of $25 per weekly benefit would be available to all individuals receiving regular unemployment benefits, extended benefits, or emergency unemployment benefits. The $25 additional weekly benefits would be available in states that enter into an agreement with the Labor Secretary.

Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC): The work opportunity tax credit is currently available on an elective basis for employers hiring individuals from one or more of nine targeted groups. The amount of the credit available to an employer is determined by the amount of qualified wages paid by the employer. The ARRA expands the WOTC by creating two new categories of individuals eligible for the credit: unemployed veterans and disconnected youth who begin work for the employer in 2009 or 2010. The proposal is effective for individuals who begin work for an employer after December 31, 2008.

Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA): Extends TAA benefits for two years for employees who lose their jobs through increased imports or offshoring to certain foreign countries.

Executive Compensation: Would limit compensation for the highest paid individuals at companies who receive assistance from the *Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP)*. The bill includes a sliding scale of restrictions placed upon the highest earners dependent upon the amount of relief a company receives. The limits would only apply to employees who are required to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission and would restrict the size of a bonus, which can be no more than a third of the total annual compensation an executive receives. Additionally, the ARRA would ban "golden parachutes" to departing executives, and bonuses must be paid back to the Treasury under certain circumstances. Limits are also placed on "excessive expenditures," including entertainment, the use of corporate jets, and office renovations. Lastly, it would require that TARP recipients hold an annual shareholder vote on approval of executive compensation.

H-1B visas: Prohibits organizations that receive funds under the TARP or certain federal loans from obtaining H-1B visas for two years unless they have taken good faith steps to recruit U.S. workers for the job in which the H-1B is sought. TARP beneficiaries would be required to offer the job to any equally or better qualified U.S. workers who have applied.

Whew! And just think: they are only getting started.

A THREAT FROM WITHIN – EMPLOYEE FRAUD

It is easy to think embezzlement and fraud happen to others, to bigger businesses, or to government agencies. But fraud can happen in any business. It can happen when cash flow is tight, and it can happen in years when an organization experiences a loss.

According to the *2008 Report to the Nation on Occupational Fraud and Abuse* (© 2008), by the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, Inc., "Small businesses are especially vulnerable to… fraud. The median loss suffered by organizations with fewer than 100 employees was $200,000. This was higher than the median loss in any other category, including the largest organizations. Small businesses also suffered the largest losses in the 2006 study. Check tampering and fraudulent billing were the most common small business fraud schemes. Lack of adequate internal controls was most commonly cited as the factor that allowed fraud to occur."

It is important to understand how to protect your business and recognize some typical warning signs. Three factors lead to fraud: **opportunity**, **pressure**, and the ability to **rationalize the crime**.

Opportunity exists everywhere. Safeguard your business, and create an anti-fraud environment with proper internal controls. Internal controls create checks and balances and division of responsibility. The likelihood of fraud occurring is greatly reduced if it is presumed the crime will be discovered, and if it takes two employees working together to commit it. Opportunity is the only fraud risk factor the employer is able to control.

Pressure develops when something in the employee's life creates a demand. This could be such things as the loss of a spouse's job, a gambling problem, the feat of losing a job, or an employee simply living beyond their means. Pressure is something the employer is not able to control; as a result, it is something the employer should evaluate. If necessary, an increase in monitoring of controls related to specific employees may be required.

Rationalization occurs when the employee attempts to justify the fraud. This can be rationalizing that they are just "borrowing" the money, or that they feel they are "owed" the embezzled funds. Rationalization of the crime is something an employer cannot control.

To reduce the risk of fraud, it is important to hire quality employees and create an anti-fraud environment. When hiring an employee, it is important to inspect their resume for employment gaps and inconsistencies. Also, perform background checks on applicants that you intend to hire. Ask applicants to sign a waiver releasing former employers from any claims related to those references, and inform former employers of the waiver before asking for a reference. Many fraud perpetrators are not convicted of their crimes. If they are not convicted, a good way to uncover the fact is from previous employers.

Next, it is important to create an environment where it is perceived that controls exist. If an employee believes they will be caught, they are less likely to commit fraud. Review your business processes and determine the inflows and outflows of cash, assets, and credit. Determine how those processes could be compromised and implement internal controls to mitigate the risks. Become involved: review the vendor list, the master payroll list, bank and credit card statements; perform surprise audits, and ask questions of your accounting staff regarding anything that does not make sense. Follow up on any unclear responses and do not allow the employee to "brush off" the question. If you are not satisfied with the answers you receive, this would be a good time to involve your CPA.

Warning signs of employee fraud include:

- Marked personality change
- Irritability or defensiveness
- Working late or odd hours
- Employee doesn't take vacations
- Unexplained wealth
- Living beyond means
- Financial difficulties
- Divorce or family problems
- Addiction or gambling problems (current and past)
- Customer complaints
- Late payment notices or fees
- Rising costs with no explanation
- Employee with too much control
- Employee unwilling to share duties

One more thing: if payroll and HR are combined, it is a risk because the hiring and paying are centralized. There are many very honest people filling this combined role, but it is something auditors warn about and it is worth considering.

Many businesses experience fraud. To reduce your risk, implement and monitor internal controls to create an environment where the opportunity for fraud is minimized. Be aware of the pressures employees are experiencing and the rationalization they may attempt. Look for "fraud warning signs" and stay involved. It's your business, and at the end of the day it is your responsibility to ensure it is being protected.

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WORD FROM THE WISE™

Be the Best Choice NOW: Pro Organization, Not Anti-Union

After yet another political campaign where many candidates seemed to spend a lot of time criticizing each other rather than showing why they were the better choice, maybe it's time to consider more positive and productive strategy, and then take that strategy to the workplace. Many employers are likely to get that opportunity and should consider taking that strategy step now, rather than waiting.

Part of the reason and motivation for taking that step now is pending federal legislation that is expected to pass sometime this year and, when it does, it will open up hunting season for unions. The Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) provides that unions can represent employees based on signed authorization cards, even without an election. And while the other aspects of EFCA also carry weight by imposing certain risks and time limits with negotiations, and increasing penalties for violation, employers must initially consider this first step as a built-in defense to union attempts to represent the organization's employees. After all, if you stop the union at the door, then the other two pieces of EFCA can be more easily avoided.

How do you best avoid the involvement of a third party like a union? By being the best choice for your employees. It's by not only eliminating the need for involvement by an outside party, such as a union, but - more significantly - by showing that your organization and employees most benefit by keeping the relationship directly between each other. Demonstrate that you are the BEST choice for interaction with your employees and that a third party just adds unnecessary complexity and mixed interests, and slows communication, flexibility, and responsiveness. Demonstrate how well you work to create and maintain the best working environment for your employees that you can, rather than pointing fingers at the potential third party.

What actions should you consider?

- Review your policies, especially those dealing with employee interaction, and make sure that your management team is open and seeking ongoing communication. It's not just about the employees coming to your management team; your management team must circulate and be accessible to your employees.
- Increase that communication by keeping employees updated on the workplace and business. In such a difficult economy and work environment, employees feel insecure and it's your communication that can ease that feeling. Regularly conduct workforce meetings and disseminate information. While written or electronic communication can be good, nothing beats face-to-face meetings where questions can be asked and answered.
- Identify style or performance issues within the management team, then address those issues. It's often poor management that leads employees to seek an outside party to help interaction or assert some influence. Management training can help with increasing key supervisory and leadership skills, but only after first assessing what specific issues or needs exist.

Don't wait! Years ago, an employer learned that a union was attempting to organize employees. Once the employer reacted by taking some positive steps, he was comfortable that the union attempts were defeated. He received a major surprise when the union was able to take credit for the employer's positive steps by showing that the employer reacted only after he learned of the union. A few months later, the employees voted the union in to represent them. The same risk exists for non-union employers today, except that it's not the potential of the union making the effort that creates this risk, it's the potential passage of EFCA.

Don't wait until the announcement comes that the EFCA has passed before you take positive steps. If you do, someone will point out you are being reactive, which hurts your credibility. Instead, take steps now to show that you are the BEST choice for your employees. Take these steps by being pro-organization, pro-workforce and pro-direct interaction. Show your employees that you care. Not only does it reduce the likelihood of union success with your employees, but you immediately benefit by increasing the culture, environment, and enjoyment of your workplace. Make the effort, it's worth the results.

BENEFITS OF SMILING

Strong emotions at work are not unusual. However, learning to master your emotional outbreaks so that they don't harm your career is essential. But how can you get some space around your emotions? In his book, *Work as a Spiritual Practice,* author Lewis Richmond (*www.lewisrichmond.com*) recommends that you try a smile—or at least a half smile.

Richmond does not suggest that you break into a toothy grin, but instead that you try a gentle slight upturn of the mouth—a sort of half smile—the one that images of the Buddha often depict. While this might seem simple or feel a little silly, Richmond points out that research shows that emotions and facial expressions are wired both ways. That is, we make facial expressions in reaction to emotions, but we also experience some emotion in response to facial expressions. When researchers wired electrodes to subjects and asked them to imitate certain facial expressions, scientists found that a facial expression devoid of any emotion still caused a physiological reaction in subjects, Richmond says.

So if you can squeak out a half-smile when you're mad at someone, there's a chance that you might be able to break the emotional pattern you're experiencing and move into a more positive space.

If you have trouble smiling there is a way to fix that. Use a smile stick. Yes, you heard correctly. A stick with a big old toothy smile on it. We have them if you want them. Just let us know – they're only $3. (*P.S. Deborah uses hers all the time for pranks and training sessions*).

THOUGHTS TO THINK ABOUT

"I, not events, have the power to make me happy or unhappy today. I can choose which it shall be. Yesterday is dead, tomorrow hasn't arrived yet. I have just one day - today, and I'm going to be happy in it."

— *Groucho Marx*

"The value of experience is not in seeing much, but in seeing wisely."

— *William Osler*

"Every day that we wake up is a good day. Every breath that we take is filled with hope for a better day. Every word that we speak is a chance to change what is bad into something good."

— *Walter Mosley*

"The important thing is this: To be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we could become."

— *Charles Du Bos*

"Everything is always impossible before it works."

— *Hunt Greene*

"Our minds can shape the way a thing will be because we act according to our expectations."

— *Federico Fellini*

"Daring ideas are like chessmen moved forward. They may be beaten, but they may start a winning game."

— *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

INSPIRING THROUGH RECOGNITION

In these troubled economic times, we all need something to feel good about. Employees do need to hear and see recognition from their peers, managers, supervisors, and, yes, even executives.

The cost of praising someone is nil—but a recent study has found that the payoff can be huge. Here are some time-tested positive ways leaders can inspire employees to do their best at a time when we need them the most.

Show your appreciation. When employees want to be praised, it means they care to be seen as competent, hardworking members of the team. Good managers want satisfied, motivated, and productive staff members. A *Personnel Today* survey of 350 HR professionals has found that the greatest factor in workplace productivity is a positive environment in which employees feel appreciated. The survey reports that two-thirds of the respondents said they felt a lot more productive when they received recognition for their work, while the remainder said they felt a little more productive.

Just *feeling* productive can be motivating in itself. When workers don't feel productive, frustration sets in, according to 84% of the survey respondents, and 20% said they felt angry or depressed when they weren't able to work as hard as they could.

Here are several suggestions on how to provide praise most effectively:

- **Sincerity.** It has to be honest and it has to be given when and where it is due. Remember: if the employee feels the praise isn't genuine, it will have the opposite effect.
- **Publicly is Ideal.** Your goal is to encourage the employee to keep up the good work, while simultaneously encouraging others to put out greater effort. Praising in public is a good way to raise general morale and reinforce your expectations.

- **Specific Praise.** Identify exactly what it is the employee has accomplished, what they have done, or how they demonstrated the behavior you wanted, etc. It is too general to say, "Good job" or "Well done, Susan." If your praise is too general, the employee does not know what part to repeat. They do not fully understand, from your perspective, what they need to continue to do. Remember, what gets recognized gets repeated.

A recent Gallup poll revealed that approximately 70% of Americans haven't received recognition in a one-year period. A United States Department of Labor study found that the #1 reason people leave organizations is that they don't feel appreciated. As American psychologist Abraham Maslow stated in <u>A Theory of Motivation</u>, people thrive on recognition as a form of self-value when they feel that their contributions make a difference.

Consider the rewards that are most important to your organization. Jot down the kind of effort needed to bring those values from the abstract to the concrete. Build those efforts into job descriptions so that employees become accountable for the action steps. Recognize those who achieve the best results—whether by praising them in public or giving a keepsake at the company celebration, complete with a speech about the employee's commitment to excellence and the results it brought to the organization as a whole. Their peers will see what excellence is all about.

Make recognition a policy, not a perk. Take time to develop a system of rewards for everyone within your organization. Include pinnacle rewards for high lifetime achievers, like McDonald's coveted President's Award, as well as more ordinary incentives, such as bonuses. Educate and communicate to the entire staff about the program. This means post it for all to see and promote it frequently in a variety of ways.

Recognize them with fanfare. When bestowing an honor on a high-achieving employee or team, make it a celebration. That could mean a department or team party or special outing, inviting family members to be at an awards lunch/dinner, or stopping the workday early to hold a special ceremony.

Remember the spouse. For marathon efforts—such as large-scale projects or regional sales turnarounds—remember to recognize the employee's significant other. After all, without the support of the employee's partner, he or she wouldn't have delivered such terrific results. A note home, a special gift for the partner, or a gift card to a restaurant for the couple or family to use are just a couple of ideas.

Respect the front line. Be sure to include those members of the staff that have the face-time with your clients/customers. They are the voice/face of your operation and will boost your brand better than anyone else if you make them feel appreciated for all they do.

Boost team spirit. Recognizing teams or departments is also important. Find ways to bind the employees together in pride. A plaque, a magnum of champagne, and a Friday afternoon off are all ways you can tell a group of employees, "You did this together, and you excelled."

Make rewards meaningful. This goes along with specific. Find out what matters most to the employee. What is their favorite thing? Is it sports, movies, music, collectables? Not only will you recognize them but you have tapped into something personal, which shows you are paying attention.

Recognition from the top means the most. A personal phone call or thank-you note (handwritten, of course) from the CEO, Executive Director, or General Manager often will have a positive impact on an employee.

Suppliers, Vendors, and Clients, too. When you create a culture of recognition, your gratitude and appreciation should be shared with others outside your walls. Don't forget to thank loyal vendors and clients for their excellent contributions, with a letter, a paperweight, or even a charitable gift in their name.

Recognition does not have to be expensive, but it does need to be done. It needs to be part of your everyday activity. The one thing each of us can do more of for recognition and a positive workplace is to say "Thank You" to those around us who make our work life easier!

FOR YOUR CALENDAR

Open up your Daytimers, computer calendars, Palm Pilots, and of course those Blackberries. The following is a look at upcoming events, special days and other diverse and fun activities you will want to be aware of and get scheduled. To register for our workshops, please call any of our offices, send an e-mail to Melissa Sambuceto at MSambuceto@hranswers.com, or simply register online at www.hranswers.com and click on the "Workshop Registration" tab at the top of the homepage.

FEBRUARY

African American History, American Heart, Chocolate Lovers, National Time Management, and International Friendship Month.

Feb. 17-23 International Friendship Week

Feb. 18 **HRA Workshop (Tualatin)**
What You Need to Know About the New Lilly Ledbetter Law
8:00am – 10:00am

Feb. 24 Mardi Gras

MARCH

March 26 **HRA Workshop (Tualatin)**
EFCA – Being Pro Employer
8:00am – 10:00am

APRIL

To help you plan ahead, here's a look at what we have planned so far for April and beyond.

April 2-May 7 **HRA Series (Tualatin)**
Beginning Supervision Series
8:30am – 12:30 pm

ON MY SOAPBOX

I am often asked, or it is suggested to me, that I "ought to write a book." My usual comebacks are, "I've been thinking about that," or "I will when I get the time," or "There are so many stories that I can't tell," or some such remark. Well, I have been thinking more and more about the various book themes that might be possible.

My favorite so far (beyond the compilation of my Soapbox offerings) is something I have tentatively titled, "Learning HR – By Doing Everything Else." I am not sure that is the final title, but then I am not even sure that the book is ever going to be written. The premise behind that working title is that we learn HR the practical way to best handle all those human issues that comprise the core of our work, through all the situations and experiences we have had.

Here's an example of what I mean. When I was 14 years old, my mom suggested that I could make the summer a learning experience and volunteer at OHSU. She thought it would give me a "work" experience, be a good, productive way for me to spend some time, and begin my development of a work ethic and my understanding of workplace requirements. I don't know who she called (I don't remember her ever saying that she knew anyone "up on the hill"), but it was only a few days later that she announced that I "would get to work three days a week" (emphasis was on the "get to"), helping out in Central Supply.

Now, I don't know how much you know about what that department does/did at the time, but it provided all of the surgical trays used for operations, sterilized all of the re-usable masks, needles, syringes, instruments, (remember this was before disposable anything), etc., and supplied all the nursing floors with sterile items for use with patients.

My job on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, from 7:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., was to take the huge bags of masks that had been washed, untangle all the ties, repair/sew any tie that had loosened or separated from its mask, fold each mask carefully according to specific instructions, put a piece of steri-tape on it and place it in a tray to be sterilized. I also got the chance to wash syringes and needles, ensuring that there was no blockage in any of them. That entailed testing each needle, identifying if it was too bent to be re-used, straightening it out with pliers if it had a little bend or angle to it, cleaning out whatever was stuck in it, finding the right plunger to fit each syringe, then placing all the needles and syringes, rack by rack, in a large washer (about two feet across and four feet high), and then setting it up for a long wash cycle. Once the washing was completed, then I had to assemble all the parts, put steri-tape on them and package them for sterilization. I had some other duties, but rarely did it feel like those lasted nearly long enough to relieve the boredom that sometimes set in with my regular tasks.

So what does this have to do with HR? As I have reflected these many years on that first experience with something other than baby-sitting or working on the Church Sunday Bulletin, I have realized how much I learned that has been very beneficial to me in my chosen profession. I learned how much each job, no matter how repetitive or tedious it may be, contributes to the overall good of the organization. Just imagine if I didn't clean out all the "stuck" material from a needle, or if I didn't assemble the syringe and plunger correctly. That could have caused a problem for a patient, or at the very least, an inconvenience for the nurse or doctor needing to use them. It would have caused concern about the credibility and capability of the Central Supply department if issues continued to surface. If I wasn't able to untangle the masks, and believe me, there were some times when the mass of knots seemed Gordian, or didn't make sure that my sewing was meticulous, the replacement costs could have increased far beyond what was budgeted. I learned that every job matters; no task is insignificant. I also learned that by doing those tasks, I freed up other more qualified and capable staff members to do things that required more knowledge and thinking. Those lessons have stayed with me all these years. They have been the cornerstones of my beliefs about job design, recognition of employee work, and the importance of communicating how each job contributes to the overall objectives of the organization. (I also learned how smart mothers are, but that's a whole different story.)

I'll bet if you think about your experiences, what values they helped you develop, and what they taught you about human behavior, work circumstances, and approaches that are successful and not, you will find that some of your best learning has come from unlikely places or incidents. It is these things that we draw on when we encounter unique or complicated tasks or interactions.

- Judy Clark, President

HR ANSWERS INC.

"Whatever the Question"

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