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ARE THEY BRINGING GUNS TO WORK?

Despite the struggling economy, stores around the country are reporting an interesting phenomenon: gun sales keep going up. Some attribute this trend to the fears and stresses coming from the challenging economic times, and others have said the anticipated tightening of gun control under the Obama presidency is a factor.

There has also been a proliferation of new laws addressing the possession of firearms, which has employers (especially HR people) being hit between the eyes as they address the impact of these in their workplaces.

Gun owners with handgun carry permits can now, in many states, bring their guns into parks, bars, schools, and the workplace. Laws have passed in at least nine states prohibiting employers from banning employees from coming to work with their legally possessed guns in cars parked on employer property. Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, and Oklahoma have all passed such laws. These laws have been attacked by opponents as illogical and dangerous but, like it or not, they have been surviving opposition. Many are dismayed at the growing number. This activity raises serious concern and questions about an employer's continued ability to protect its workplace and its employees from the dire consequences of gun violence.

In the past, employers were able to use their discretion in adopting policies and procedures that best addressed the safety needs of their unique workplaces, while keeping their employees safe. With the increasing number of "guns at work" laws, employers are losing their power to manage this issue as they see fit.

Statistics show that a significant number of workplace incidents have involved employee-owned weapons. Based on this and other safety considerations, employers have implemented violence-prevention measures and policies that totally ban guns in their workplaces. Such policies often encompass the employer's total premises, including parking lots and garages. Other employers provide lockboxes for the secure containment of guns that are allowed to be brought to the workplace.

For the most part, the new parking lot gun laws are similar in content. They generally provide that employers may not prohibit employees who legally carry handguns from keeping them locked in their cars parked on company property. Some laws reach further and prohibit employers from asking their employees about whether they have guns locked in their cars, or taking disciplinary action against those employees who do.

At the moment, there are several affirmative steps employers can take to protect their workplace. Despite what any parking lot gun law may say, there is currently no law that prohibits private employers from banning weapons *inside* the actual workplaces, adopting policies to this effect, and disciplining individuals who violate such policies. In fact, courts have upheld employers' actions to this effect. The following checklist can be used to gauge where you stand and what steps you can take to protect your workplace:

- **Know your state law(s).** If you're in a state that requires employers to grant parking lot access to guns, do not implement policies that prohibit such access. If your state does not have a parking lot gun law, you can, at least for now, maintain a broad policy prohibiting guns, including in your parking lot.
- **Implement strong "no guns at work" and monitoring policies.** Employees should know that you take workplace safety seriously and that being discovered with a gun in the workplace will cost them their jobs. Your policies should make clear that employees have no expectation of privacy in their work areas (including desks and lockers), and that these areas are subject to search at any time, without notice.
- **Review and reinforce security measures.** Depending on the individual needs of your workplace, this may mean, among other things, requiring access codes/security badges for entry, hiring or adding security personnel, and/or installing metal detectors at the entrances.
- **Rely on your EAP's expertise.** Consider providing anger management training and emphasizing your other EAP initiatives to help boost morale and remind employees that they can seek support and help, if and when needed.

- **Pay attention.** Finally, effective workplace security requires constant vigilance by all employees. Employees should feel comfortable bringing any suspicious or inappropriate workplace conduct to the immediate attention of a manager. Management, in turn, should be trained to react swiftly and effectively when any worrisome situations arise. We are living in stressful times. When large-scale layoffs are everyday news and tensions are running high, employers cannot afford to ignore the new parking lot gun laws and their implications. Though employers' ability to prevent gun violence is somewhat limited, taking smart, preventive measures now can prove to make the difference in keeping your workplace and your employees safe.

SPECIAL NOTE: *Among the states that have enacted some type of guns to work law, most have also enacted companion laws that limit an employer's liability for an employee's gun related injuries. No doubt in reaction to opposition over the increased liability these laws subject employers to, they provide little comfort to employers. It is unclear how much protection they will actually provide and how workers' compensation claims will be handled.*

As if an employer's task in figuring out how to comply with these new "guns to work" laws weren't difficult enough, related bills in many states complicate matters further. Some states have passed laws allowing guns to be carried in bars and restaurants, as well as state and local parks. These laws also raise issues for employers. It is unclear whether an employee working in a bar or restaurant is allowed to carry a legally concealed weapon, as the law would seem to allow, even if it would be in violation of the employer's policy banning weapons in the workplace. This is frustrating at best and definitely problematic for employers. We will have to wait and see how the courts will decide when these issues are challenged. Bottom line: take the actions that you are legally allowed to take to keep your workplace as safe and secure as you can.

Q & A

As many of you know, HRA offers a service that allows our clients to have unlimited access to our consultants via the phone and email. Recently we have been receiving a number of those calls around the topic of I-9 documentation, so we thought we would take an opportunity to answer some of these questions here.

When are employers required to re-verify I-9 documents? What about when an employee has a name change?

No, a name change does not create a situation where the employee's eligibility to work in the U.S. is questioned. Just because they got married, divorced, or legally changed their name does not change whether they are legally employable in the U.S. It may be a good idea to note their name change on the current I-9 form (you can write their new name in the margin at the top of the form) so that if you are audited you can easily match I-9s with your payroll list of active and/or former employees.

Employers are required to re-verify employee's documentation only when the employee's employment authorization has expired. Re-verification should occur no later than the actual expiration date of the work authorization document. If the employer fails to re-verify the work authorization, then the employee is not entitled to continue to be employed. In cases of permanent resident aliens, an expired green card does not necessarily mean that the employee is no longer allowed to continue working in the United States and therefore should not be re-verified.

Employees who are on temporary work visas are encouraged to file for an extension on the visa at least 90 days prior to the expiration date of their authorization form. If the USCIS fails to respond within the 90 days, the employee is automatically entitled to an additional 240 days in which he/she can continue to work in the United States.

When re-verifying documents, section 3 of the original I-9 form may be used *only* if it was completed on the current version of the I-9 form, which went into effect on April 3, 2009. If the original I-9 was not completed on the current version, the employee should either fill out section 3 on the current version of the I-9 or complete a new I-9. In either case, the employer must attach the new I-9 to the old one.

When does an I-9 need to be updated?

If an employee leaves the organization and is rehired within three years of the initial I-9, and the original form used is the current version of the I-9, the employer would just update the original I-9 using section 3. However, if the original I-9 is not the current version of the form, the employer will need to use the current version of the I-9 to update section 3 and attach to the old I-9 or have the employee complete a new I-9 entirely. If upon reviewing an initial I-9 form it is determined that the work authorization has, in fact, expired, the employee must present current documentation, which must be inspected by the employer and updated in section 3 or by completing a new I-9.

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If an employee gave a receipt for a document upon initially completing the I-9, he or she has 90 days to show the employer the actual document. At that time, the employer should use section 3 on the current version of the I-9 to update the information, or line through the old information (so that it is still legible), insert the new information, and sign and initial the change.

What about making a current employee fill out another I-9 form if he or she completed the form using an expired document or one of the items from List A that are no longer valid?

No. According to the Department of Homeland Security, USCIS, employers do not need to have their current employees routinely complete new I-9 forms. However, employers will need to have current employees complete a new I-9 form if an older version of the I-9 form was used *and* the current employee's employment/work authorization document expires. Permanent Resident cards that expire after an I-9 form is completed do not need to be re-verified.

When updating or re-verifying current employees' I-9 forms, the employer must use the latest version of form I-9. Employees should be allowed to choose any of the forms listed under the List of Acceptable Documents and should present a document listed under List A or C that shows either an extension of the original work authorization or that a new work authorization has been obtained. The employer must then enter that information under section 3 of the latest version of the form I-9 and attach the new form to the older version of the I-9 form. When the employer needs to re-verify a current employee's expired work authorization, check to see that the documents the employee presents are not among the documents that were **removed** from List A of the List of Acceptable Documents when the Form I-9 was revised, and that all documents presented have not expired.

Is supervisory training about all of this really necessary?

It depends, but we strongly recommend it, especially if they will ever be the ones telling an applicant about the I-9 process. Employers should have provided hiring managers and supervisors training on the new Form I-9s to ensure they are in compliance with the new Form I-9 that took effect in April 2009. Key consideration; employers no longer can accept expired documents. The documents presented for use in the Form I-9 process must be valid and reliably establish both identity and employment authorization. If a document does not contain an expiration date, such as a Social Security card, it is considered unexpired."

Supervisors need to be aware that different rules apply to new hires coming from U.S. territories like Puerto Rico vs. new hires from other countries. For example, driver's licenses from Puerto Rico are acceptable List B documents, but driver's licenses from most foreign countries (except Canada) are not, which is a distinction that some employees do not realize.

Some employees are confused by the fact that Canadian new hires may present their driver's licenses to establish their identities, while new hires from other neighboring countries, such as Mexico, may not.

One important reminder is that employers who use the old form on or after April 3 may be subject to civil money penalties.

If you have any additional questions, we are happy to assist you. You can also address specific questions around I-9's with the USCIS's Handbook for Employers, which is available online.

DON'T BE AN EEOC STATISTIC

The numbers speak for themselves. The year-end statistics from the EEOC reported that 75,768 discrimination charges were filed against private-sector employers in 2006. It is important to know that this was the first increase in filings in four years. Jump forward to 2008 and the total number of charges filed with the EEOC had jumped by 25% to 95,402.

Experts agree that different factors are driving the increase. The faltering economy may have had some effect, but that's hard to quantify. Many also suggest that with the large number of layoffs, more employees may feel that they were discriminated against. And, of course, on the other hand, people don't want to rock the boat in fear of losing their jobs or the chance to be rehired.

There have also been changes to the EEOC's practices. With the EEOC's online intake survey, it's a relatively easier process to determine possible incidents of workplace discrimination and to file complaints. The Commission's web site has made information more accessible, such as what constitutes discrimination and how to file a complaint. With greater awareness and exposure comes a larger number of complaints.

Statistics show that the EEOC has the largest backlog of cases in more than 20 years. One of the factors driving this is the decline in staffing. People are leaving after working for the Commission for 30 years or more; as they retire the Commission is losing the core of its experienced investigators and the backlog is growing. If you look at the pending inventory and record number of charge filings, we also need to know that in 2008 the EEOC resolved 81,000 charges. This year, the Commission will receive some budget increases (in the sum of \$5 million) to improve their resources, and plans to hire 75 new investigators and six more mediators.

With workplace changes on the rise, it is vital that employers evaluate the policies and procedures they have in place to combat discrimination. Employers also need to educate and train their supervisors on the best ways to handle internal discrimination complaints properly.

As a first step, employers should create a clear policy explicitly prohibiting workplace discrimination and harassment. The policy should include a statement that such conduct won't be tolerated and will lead to corrective action up to and including termination.

In addition, the policy should state unequivocally that any form of retaliation against an employee for making a discrimination or harassment complaint is itself considered a form of discrimination and likewise is prohibited and subject to disciplinary action. The numbers of retaliation claims are rising faster and are more expensive, so specific attention must be paid to this risk.

The policy should specifically set forth the classes protected under state and federal laws (such as gender, race, religion, and national origin) since some employees may not be aware of the extent of the law's protection (e.g., in some states, sexual orientation is a protected characteristic, as well as HIV-positive status).

Furthermore, a specific section of the policy should be devoted to defining harassment by providing a description and broad examples of conduct that would qualify. It's also important to point out to employees that harassment may occur regardless of the gender of the employees involved, and that harassment that occurs off-duty and off-premises, but affects the work environment, is also prohibited by the policy.

The policy should also delineate a complaint procedure for employees to use when they feel as though they have been victims of discrimination or harassment.

The complaint procedure should be designed to encourage reporting inappropriate behavior. Multiple individuals should be identified as being responsible for receiving discrimination and harassment complaints so that employees may bypass an individual who may be the perpetrator of the conduct or somehow involved in the discrimination or harassment.

The policy should indicate that while complaints will be kept as confidential as possible, information may be revealed on a need-to-know basis throughout the course of the investigation. Finally, employees should be encouraged to submit their complaints in writing to capture as much detail as possible.

The policy also should inform employees of their option to file a complaint with the EEOC and any state enforcement agencies, and provide the contact information for those agencies.

The policy should be distributed to every employee, and it should be posted in a conspicuous location in the workplace. Annually, employees should be asked to reread the policy and to sign an acknowledgment form certifying that they read it and understand its provisions.

In conjunction with developing a written policy prohibiting discrimination and harassment, you should also provide training to your employees, especially supervisors. There are several reasons to conduct such training.

- First, training reduces your exposure to discrimination and harassment claims. The U.S. Supreme Court has created an affirmative defense for employers who demonstrate a good-faith effort to prevent and remedy such conduct.
- Second, training can prevent discrimination and harassment claims by enabling supervisors to identify and promptly address such issues.
- Third, training encourages supervisors to engage in solid management practices and teaches them to avoid the creation of harmful evidence.

Your non-supervisory employees should receive training on the policies prohibiting discrimination, harassment, and retaliation as well. Their training would also encompass how to report or complain about discrimination, harassment, and retaliation and the procedure used to investigate such reports or complaints.

Your supervisory employees should receive more comprehensive training. Not only should they be trained on the organization's policies prohibiting discrimination, harassment, and retaliation and the corresponding complaint procedure, but they also should be trained on the following subjects.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

- Explain to supervisors how and when they may make a disability-related medical inquiry.
- Explain to supervisors that all medical information related to an employee's disability or medical condition must be kept confidential.
- Train supervisors on how to spot issues related to an employee's disability and job performance.
- Train supervisors on the obligation to engage in an interactive dialogue to identify reasonable accommodations for qualified individuals with disabilities.
- Train supervisors on the appropriate areas of inquiry in the interview/hiring process, keeping in mind anti-discrimination policies and the ADA.

Performance Review Process

- Train supervisors on the value and need for providing honest and objective performance evaluations. They should not gloss over or score higher if an employee is underperforming.
- Explain to supervisors that performance evaluations should be concise and accurate. When appropriate, they should always cite specific examples.
- Remind supervisors to be consistent to avoid the appearance that they have targeted any one individual for heightened scrutiny.
- Caution supervisors about using judgmental comments or hyperbole in the performance evaluation.
- Instruct supervisors to refrain from statements that establish commitments.

Documentation

- Inform supervisors that all non-privileged documents can be "discoverable" during the course of litigation, including any supervisory notes they are maintaining.

The best advice for employers when dealing with the EEOC is to work them before formal charges are filed, and use the Commission's guidance on how to comply with the law and what to do when charges are filed. Once a charge is filed, don't approach the problem as an adversarial relationship with the EEOC and their investigators. Should you have additional questions or need help with an EEOC claim, give us a call and let us help you.

THOUGHTS TO THINK ABOUT

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

- Winston Churchill

"The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate."

- Joseph Priestley

"Every rejection is the fuel for what you will be."

- Diane von Furstenberg

"All growth is a leap in the dark, a spontaneous, premeditated act without benefit of experience."

- Henry Miller

"All my growth and development led me to believe that if you really do the right thing, and if you play by the rules, and if you've got good enough solid judgment and common sense, that you're going to be able to do whatever you want to do with your life."

- Barbara Jordan

"Laughter gives us distance. It allows us to step back from an event, deal with it, and then move on."

- Bob Newhart

RETURN-TO-DUTY: MANDATORY DIRECT OBSERVATION OF SPECIMEN COLLECTIONS

While not a fun prospect, there has been an important change here. Employers who test employees under the Department of Transportation's Alcohol and Drug Testing protocols need to be aware of a final rule that was effective August 31, 2009. This final rule reinstates the requirement for mandatory direct observation of specimen collections for all return-to-duty and follow-up testing in the case of employees in the transportation industry who have failed or refused to take a prior drug test. This is true even if there is a collective bargaining agreement that prohibits or limits the use of direct observation collections.

Brief History. The direct observation requirements had been introduced in June, 2008. There was a temporary administrative stay arising out of litigation challenging the requirement. In response to that challenge, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia unanimously held that direct observation drug testing is permissible for these tests. Informing the Court's decision was the recent development of a number of available "cheating devices" and the incentive for employees to use these devices to cheat on required return-to-duty and follow-up drug tests. The Court also held that employees subjected to this testing program cannot argue that this testing is an unreasonable search and seizure in violation of the Fourth Amendment because, among other factors, there is a diminished expectation of privacy in employees who have failed or refused a prior drug test. The Department of Transportation believes that conducting all return-to-duty and follow-up tests under direct observation is the most prudent course from the viewpoint of safety.

Now, it will be your turn, if you're covered by these requirements, to work with your drug screen provider to be sure they help you stay compliant. Don't forget to communicate the changes to employees. The last thing you want is an employee who is surprised by the requirement to have someone present when they provide their urine sample.

FEATURED SERVICE:

Individual Sensitivity Coaching Services

In response to claims of harassment or inappropriate behavior, more and more employers are requiring sensitivity training as part of the corrective action process. Frequently, this is used in cases where the behavior is inappropriate but could not be confirmed, or it was not necessarily found to have been illegal. While this training can be provided in a typical classroom type environment, it can be much more effective when the individual is coached in a private and confidential setting. One strong benefit to this type of approach is the ability to customize the coaching to the specific situation.

While each situation is different and may require some different steps, here is an outline of the approach our coaches utilize in providing Individual Sensitivity Coaching services:

- A meeting is held with the appropriate manager(s) overseeing the individual's work. During this session, specifics of the situation will be reviewed, as well as the outcomes desired and the organization's expectations of the individual's future behavior.
- The coach may choose to have the individual go through an assessment, which provides a profile of the individual's communication and behavior styles. This assessment tool helps identify the individual's strengths, needs, and possible stress behaviors. We have found this step to be very helpful for the individual and coach in identifying areas of improvement along with specific feedback to assist in improvement areas and facilitate a more effective interaction.
- The actual session(s) with the individual will cover the specific inappropriate behaviors. The discussion with the individual will review why they are being "coached," their commitment to learning and understanding what happened, and what needs to change in the future.
- Depending upon the situation, the first session will include a review of discrimination and harassment. Such a review will include:
 - Illegal harassment and inappropriate behaviors that may become or lead to harassment.
 - The range of behaviors that can be perceived as harassment, from the more minor incidents through actual force.
 - The responsibilities of the organization and individuals in regards to preventing discrimination/harassment.
 - How to handle the situation if discrimination/harassment occurs.
 - What is or may be perceived as retaliation.
 - The organization's policy regarding discrimination/harassment.
- Actual case studies are reviewed to help reinforce the learning and understanding of the review. If additional sessions are held, case studies and other exercises are provided for the individual to complete and bring to discuss at the subsequent sessions. Such exercises may include examples of inappropriate behaviors, examples of how different behaviors or language can be substituted that would not be perceived as offensive, development of action plans for future changes in behaviors, etc.

- Communication skills may be included in the sessions, which would address specific situations, such as gender communication information and tips, other diversity communications, etc. Additional options can include conducting a personality profile instrument with the individual to help them better understand themselves and how they interact with others.
- The individual is provided many opportunities for questions and clarification regarding their behavior or others' in response.

The primary goal of Individual Sensitivity Coaching is not to attempt to change an individual's attitudes or values, but to assist them in understanding and engaging in appropriate workplace behavior.

Sessions with the individual are confidential unless an issue is raised that the coach feels may expose the organization to even more risk. Otherwise, the organization is provided with a general statement that the agreed-upon coaching occurred and that progress is being made.

Issues that can be addressed through such training include:

- Sexually inappropriate behavior and comments
- Racial or other discriminating behavior and comments
- Generally inappropriate/bullying behavior (such as yelling, berating employees, lack of follow-through or accountability)
- Other work behaviors that would not require counseling/therapeutic services.

If you think there is a situation in your organization that could benefit from outside assistance, please give us a call (503) 885-9815.

HR AND BUSINESS BY THE NUMBERS

Some more stats and numbers you can use – for budgeting, reports, supporting initiatives, your presentations, and sharing with co-workers:

Screening Applicants? The number of companies using social networking websites to screen potential employees has doubled in the last year, and what they have found has killed the hire for more than a third of candidates, according to a **CareerBuilder** report.

Its survey of more than 2,600 hiring managers found that 45% are searching sites to research job candidates, up from 22% a year ago. Another 11% say they plan to start using social networking sites for screening.

Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace are the top sites being screened, but 11% of hiring managers are searching blogs and 7% are following job applicants' Twitter postings.

The report 35% of employers decided not to hire someone because of what they found out about them on these sites. Top reasons for choosing not to hire a candidate based on their social networking content include posting inappropriate photographs, content about them drinking or using drugs, bad-mouthing previous employers or clients, and showing poor communication skills.

Applicants need to be aware that the use of social networking sites can also increase odds of getting hired, with employers citing a good feel for the candidate's personality, a profile that supports their qualifications, and a candidate who showed creativity as reasons for deciding to hire someone based on their online postings.

Job fairs. Those looking for qualified candidates need to know that, according to a survey of human resources executives released by Chicago-based outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, the least effective way to land one is through job fairs.

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being most effective, the executives rated job fairs an average 1.6. Networking was deemed most effective, with an average rating of 3.98, and 48% of respondents rated networking 5.

The second most effective way cited was use of social/professional networking sites, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter, which had an average rating of 3.3.

COBRA users double. Enrollments in COBRA, which allows separated workers to temporarily continue their former employer's health coverage, have doubled since the federal government started a program that pays 65% of the premiums, according to an analysis by Hewitt Associates. Under the original COBRA legislation, laid-off workers had to pay roughly \$8,800 a year for COBRA health care costs. Under the federal economic stimulus package, they are now only responsible for about \$3,000 of costs.

Salaries. As organizations have resorted to massive cost-cutting measures to deal with the economic downturn, 2009 has so far turned out to be the worst in 33 years for U.S. employees when it comes to salary hikes.

The challenging economic conditions have forced nearly half (48%) of the organizations to freeze salaries in 2009, which is up from 2% in 2008, according to Hewitt Associates.

Hewitt's survey of 1,156 large organizations shows that base salary increases dropped below 3% in 2009, the lowest base salary increase in 33 years, amid a bleak employment scenario where the unemployment rate is increasing and people are needing to work for less. Base salary increases for salaried exempt employees (all non-executive employees for whom overtime pay is not required) were just 1.8% in 2009. Executives received increases of 1.4% in 2009, while salaried non-exempt employees (those for whom overtime pay is required) witnessed a 1.9% rise in base salaries so far in 2009.

Even though these numbers are dismal, they should be helpful when budgeting for next year.

Diversity programs. A recent Twitter poll revealed that 53% of respondent's diversity programs have slowed due to the economy, with 20% saying they weren't affected at all and another 20% saying programs have come to a halt. Disappointingly, that puts the results of diversity programs at a 73% disadvantage. With the economy in a holding pattern, now is a good time to prepare for the economic upturn, and consider what actions will be needed to continue diversity enhancement efforts.

CLIENT ACCOLADES

Hats Off!!! George Fox has recently been named by Forbes.com as one of the best Christian Colleges in the west. George Fox University is listed among the top 60 colleges in the United States in Forbes' August 2009 ranking of "America's best colleges." That means they scored high in areas that include students liking their courses, achieving post-graduate vocational success, graduating in four years, and graduating without a lot of debt. It also factored in faculty who competed for nationally competitive academic awards.

Yippee!!! Have you heard? Burgerville went mobile! They now have a 24-foot-long truck from which they sell a limited menu. This will allow the organization to participate in community events much more easily. They can also visit areas where they do not have one of their 33 stores. If you want to find out where they are going to be, you can follow them on Twitter (BurgervilleUSA).

Kudos! While most organizations have been struggling with just staying even over the past several months, one of our clients, **YoCream**, has been growing. And when we say growing, we mean a lot! In the past nine months, YoCream has seen a growth in sales of more than 25%, and this report marks the 13th straight month of sales increases. Congrats, YoCream! Must have something to do with how wonderful your products taste!!

Awesome!!! Who lives in the Northwest and hasn't heard of the Hood-to-Coast Relay? Well, HRA has, and so have several of our clients. Participants in this year's "Mother of all Relays" came from all 50 states and 36 countries. But that's not all! Some of our clients participated as well. The list includes **The Standard, Special Districts Association of Oregon (SDAO), Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Lucy Activewear**, and – guess what! **HRA was represented by a team as well!** Staff members who participated include Tina Weber, Joan Sampson, Harriet Saxe, Melissa Sambuceto, Erika Wilson, and Deborah Jeffries. Our warmest "Job Well Done" to them all!

Please let us know what activities are going on in your organizations, as well as any achievements and awards your organization has reached/received. We want to help spread the word, and give you a pat on the back, too!

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.

SEPTEMBER

Apple, Baby Safety, International Self-Awareness, Leukemia and Lymphoma Awareness, Library Card Sign-Up, National Chicken, National Piano, and Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month.

Sept. 6-12	Suicide Prevention Week	Sept. 17	Constitution Day
Sept. 7	Labor Day HRA Offices Closed	Sept. 19	Talk Like a Pirate Day
Sept. 9, 16, 23, 30, & October 7	Beginning Supervision Series Tualatin Office 8:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.	Sept. 20-26	Pollution Prevention Week
Sept. 10	HRA Workshop (Breakfast Briefing) Oregon Legislative Update Tualatin Office 8:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.	Sept. 22	Autumn Equinox
Sept. 13	National Grandparents Day	Sept. 25	National One-Hit-Wonder Day
		Sept. 27	World Heart Day
		Sept. 29– October 1	71 st Annual NHRMA Conference Oregon Convention Center (Portland)
		Oct. 8	Oregon Annual Payroll Conference 8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Keizer Renaissance Inn – Keizer, OR Visit www.apaheartor.org to learn more

The Commerce Company is offering programs this Fall that are likely to be of interest to HR professionals:

Sept. 17	Retirement Plans: Costly Mistakes and Essential Solutions Presented by Jeff Bean, Principal, JD Bean & Associates, PC.
Oct. 1	Investigating and Resolving Alleged Employee Misconduct Presented by Susan Eggum, Principal, Cosgrave Vergeer Kester LLP
Oct. 15	Communicating with Employees: Handbooks, Intranets, even Twitter Presented by Judy Clark, SPHR, President, HR Answers, Inc.
Oct. 29	401(k) Plan Testing: The Never Ending Story Presented by Paul Hattwig, OKA, Premier Retirement Services, Inc.
Nov. 12	Cut The Costs, Keep The Benefits: Leveraging Plan Premiums Presented by Eric Graham, President, Montgomery & Graham

Programs will be held from 11:30 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

Cheatham Hall | World Forestry Center | 4033 SW Canyon Rd | Portland

\$12 per session if payment is received/postmarked by August 1st

To register, visit www.thecommco.com, call (503) 203-8585, or email CommerceConcepts@thecommco.com

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ON MY SOAPBOX

Some people refer to it as “The Labor Day weekend.” Others call it “The last weekend of summer.” For some, it is that last push to get everything lined up for the kids’ return to school. For some, it is simply a three-day weekend that is to be enjoyed camping (but not this year since it was so wet!) or in the backyard with a BBQ.

But none of these labels apply to the recent Saturday-to-Monday experience at my house. It was supposed to be a weekend of watching sports (PGA golf, Mariner baseball, U.S. Open Tennis), cleaning out my home office, and a little feet-up reading time. It began as many weekends do, with a little bit of sleeping in, a pot of black coffee, and an English muffin. But as I turned on the TV, that all changed. It kept clicking on and off, no picture and no sound, just clicking. It had done that once or twice before, seeming to need to click a couple of times before generating a beautiful, HD picture. But this time, it wouldn’t stop, and more importantly, it never really turned on. I stood there for several clicks, tried turning it off and starting over, but nothing changed. I was beginning to feel uneasy.

I headed out to the front room where the second TV was located. Surely, I could just turn this one on, and everything would be much better in my holiday weekend world. Lo and behold, it began clicking on and off, but it wouldn’t really turn on. It continued clicking while I began to think about magic spells, curses, and the dreaded phrase, “planned obsolescence.” Finally, that set came on after about four minutes of the unpleasant and scary clicking.

So one set was working (sort of) and one wasn’t. Thinking that there must be an easy answer, I began what was to become a three-day search for TV nirvana – a state characterized by turning on a TV and having it show both picture and sound, and turning off a TV and having an absence of both; but feeling assured that if I once again hit the power button, the TV would, in fact, appropriately respond.

I started with a phone call about resetting the TV through our Verizon provider. That led to a phone call to the store where I purchased the units, who told me that on an expedited basis they could come out to “just take a look-see” in about a week. That led to a phone call to a TV repair service that provided disquieting news; the manufacturer of the TVs I had purchased knew there was a problem with the power supply and that it had the ability to affect the digital display, but didn’t want to do a recall because of the cost and adverse publicity. The weekend went downhill from there.

You don’t want all the details, but suffice it to say that I spent an inordinate amount of time on hold for the store where the TVs were purchased and their technical gurus, TV repairmen, phone and internet providers (since my TV is part of a consolidated service plan), and automated voice response advisors. I have learned to hate those last ones. If the answer to their question is not one they have programmed into their system, it doesn’t know what to do with you. At one point, I was just saying “no” over and over again, and it responded with, “It’s great that it’s fixed – glad we could help – goodbye.” I thought I was going to burst into tears like a frustrated 2-year-old.

So what is the point of sharing this weekend gone awry? I experienced the highs and lows of customer service during these three days. I had a TV repairman who said, “It doesn’t matter that it’s a weekend, or a holiday. Our company name is Accelerated TV Repair and that’s what we do. No extra fees and no wait for us to come out and try to help.” He was there within 90 minutes. Now it’s true that he never told me they didn’t accept credit cards, and the damage to the circuits was more than he thought, but his willingness to come out and be of assistance right away truly impressed me, and was one of the few bright spots.

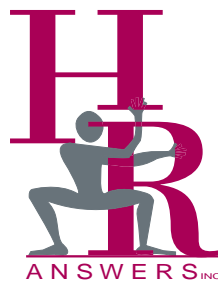
The technical folks at the store where I spent good and significant money for these two flat screens were another story. You would recognize them as the folks in bright blue shirts and currently on TV commercials, saying something about customer happiness. They said the soonest they could get to me was one week, and it would be \$185 for showing up at the door, irrespective if they could do anything. And they seemed to think I should be grateful that they could work me in that soon, as they continued to say they were giving me expedited service.

The automated services that tried to force me into pre-programmed answers and said “goodbye” to me if I couldn’t answer according to their formulas; well, all that does is reinforce my belief that those services aren’t service at all. They will NEVER be allowed within the hallowed halls of HRA!!

We talk a lot about client service here – what does it mean, how will we know if we are providing it, what do our clients have a right to expect of us. Suffice it to say, any negative experience where information provided is wrong, advice is offered with an inappropriate tone, or a caller feels rushed through a complicated situation and doesn’t feel like they got all their questions answered in a manner that they understood, is just unacceptable. We hope never to have you experience any of those, but if you ever feel that we have come up short in our client service to you, you simply must let us know so that we can make the necessary adjustments, and take action to ensure that whatever happened is remedied.

We get lots of compliments from our clients, but we want to ensure that we have earned those every time we talk or interact with you. Please help us by telling us about your experiences with us! We never want anyone to feel the way I did this last weekend. It was awful, but it was very impactful and instructive; and it will serve to guide our interactions with clients.

- Judy Clark, President



“Whatever the Question”

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