

HUMAN RESOURCES CONSULTING AND THE A Key to Client Worksite Compliance

Whitney Bower, Lauren Kersten, and Liz Warren

When people think of human resources, they often think of payroll, benefits, rules and regulations, and the everyday compliance items that must be handled. At Employer Services Corporation, we handle these items, but we believe the true value of HR consulting is the strategic component that leads to results in increased productivity, culture changes that impact engagement, and assistance to help clients become employers of choice.

Our strategy includes a staff of human resources consultants (HRCs) whose dual role encompasses the day-to-day transactional activities as well as acting as strategic partners to business owners and managers. An HRC provides best practice advice that will help deliver bottom-line results.

Our goals are to help business owners increase time spent on growing their businesses, ensure HR compliance, and decrease employment liability by providing advice about HR best practices and procedures. HRCs take responsibility for the day-to-day transactional HR activities, allowing clients to focus on growing their businesses. Such activities include assisting with unemployment claims, disciplinary actions, documentation, labor law compliance, filing the EEO-1, updating employee handbooks and job descriptions, and other human resources administrative functions.

In our strategic role with clients, HRCs partner with business owners and managers to conduct HR assessments, create HR strategic plans that align with the goals and objectives of the business plan, and facilitate leadership development, culture transformation, and succession planning. In addition, many clients wish to become employers of choice and they use ESC's strategic services to begin that journey.

One of the components of human resources consulting that we focus on with our clients is the HR prevention management system, which we call the "PEOPLE Cycle." The PEOPLE Cycle is the "life" of an employee throughout her career with the organization. The process begins from the moment a client identifies the need for this employee, and goes all the way to when the employee leaves the organization, and even some possible steps beyond that.

Recruit, Interview, and Select

Once a staffing need is identified, it is important to have a clear understanding of the open position and how it will affect the organization. The first step in the PEOPLE Cycle is recruiting and interviewing. We recommend the client have an established written recruitment plan and mandate training for individuals who will be part of the interviewing process. The HRC is able to provide training for both new and seasoned managers about interviewing

compliance and questioning strategies that will contribute towards finding the best candidate for the position. Our team of HR consultants also assists the client with adopting standardized behavioral and skill-based interview questions tailored to the key competencies imperative for a successful match. Many candidates have mastered the interview process and say all the "right" things. This is the point where it's imperative to evaluate the culture fit and non-teachable characteristics. Last, within this part of the PEOPLE Cycle, we assist hiring managers with strategic selection decision questions to choose the candidate for the position and to appropriately communicate the decision to non-chosen candidates.

Provide Orientation

The hire and orientation process of the PEOPLE Cycle, often referred to as the onboarding process, is designed to successfully convert new hires into productive members of the organization. Onboarding includes sourcing, selecting, orienting, assimilating, and retaining new employees. From the moment a candidate applies for a job opening, the onboarding process begins. Many leaders believe the onboarding process is nothing more than having the new employee complete the required paperwork, but this process is so much more. Six best practices can help senior leaders with the onboarding process and boost productivity:

- Integrate onboarding into a process;
- Partner with HR and the boss or sponsor;
- Extend onboarding to at least six months;
- Focus on the executive's network;
- Put out the welcome mat; and
- Offer transition coaching (Cashman & Smye, 2007).

This process provides the employee a higher chance of being successful with the organization. The leaders of the organization have a responsibility to the company as a whole to ensure that the employee is given the necessary tools to be successful. For an onboarding process to be successful in retaining employees and reducing turnover, it should include more than just the necessary paperwork. In addition to a comprehensive selection process, we always recommend implementing a program to assimilate new employees with their job duties, co-workers, and the culture of the organization. Employees who are provided with training and given expectations upfront are more likely to succeed in the long run. We help clients with employee handbooks that explain everything from the company non-harassment policy and the at-will statement to the dress code and the procedure to request leaves of absence. We recommend that up-to-date job descriptions are explained and given to employees. Having a process to introduce new employees to team members of other departments and provide an overview of how their individual jobs contribute to the business as a whole

PEOPLE CYCLE

makes the employee feel welcomed and promotes a positive work environment. Providing a written training schedule helps ensure the employee is properly trained, even in busy times. Conducting a short evaluation after 60 or 90 days of employment is a great way to provide essential feedback to new employees (even if they are doing a great job, they might not realize it until you tell them!), and get feedback on your onboarding process from them as well.

Manage. Coach. Discipline

This part of the PEOPle Cycle is perhaps the most important and the only one that continues from hire to separation. Managers should provide direction, support, and feedback to their employees, emphasizing open, two-way communication. Coaching should be part of an organization's culture and be clear, consistent, and ongoing. It helps employees grow professionally and provides direct feedback about areas for improvement.

Clients often tell us that it is difficult for them to have tough conversations with employees, so they avoid them until the situation becomes so intolerable that it has to be addressed. HRCs help clients with the conversation and offer best practice advice and support, as well as encourage the manager to exhibit "managerial courage" and address situations directly, with actionable feedback and respect. This is more of an art than a science, but with practice, business owners and managers gain confidence and see results.

If coaching an employee proves to be unsuccessful or a more serious offense occurs, we recommend using disciplinary action to inform the employee of the wrongdoing. During an unemployment hearing, an administrative law judge once said, "If it's not documented, it didn't happen!" Disciplinary action should be documented in the form of a written warning or final warning, letting employees know the details of the offense, including an action plan, and informing employees that their job is in jeopardy and another offense will result in disciplinary action up to and including separation of employment. Having a witness to the disciplinary conversation is essential and is also beneficial in the event an employee refuses to sign the document. Having proper disciplinary documentation is extremely important in protecting your business from potential litigation, including state unemployment, Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC) discrimination claims, and wrongful termination lawsuits. In addition to disciplinary forms, other documentation should be saved if applicable, such as timesheets, witness statements, or surveillance recordings. The ideal outcome of disciplinary action is that the employee will acknowledge what she did wrong and make strong future efforts to avoid this wrongdoing and preserve her employment, and often times that is the case. However, there will be times when the corrective action was not successful in improving the behavior and separation from employment is the next step.

Separation

Separation includes both voluntary resignations and involuntary terminations. We recommend conducting exit interviews for employees who are resigning to help identify turnover trends and areas for improvement in company HR processes. We ask questions such as, "How was your relationship with your manager?" and "If you owned this company, what is one thing you might change?" Employees often do not speak up about concerns in the workplace until they have already decided to leave, so taking interview responses seriously and making changes in your business based on them may help reduce preventable turnover in the long run.

Involuntary termination occurs when an employee is failing to meet performance expectations, when some type of misconduct occurs, or when there is a lack of work and a reduction in employees is necessary. Our clients often have us assist in the separation meeting and it is a best practice to always have a witness. In addition, we recommend keeping the meeting brief, respectful, and fact-based. For all types of separations, we strongly recommend documentation—a resignation letter and signed exit interview for voluntary terminations and a separation notice with the reasons for separation and supporting documentation presented to the employee at time of termination.

After Separation

When employees leave your organization, it might be the last you hear of them; however, they may take action regarding their employment with you that will require you to respond. If they file for unemployment benefits, and were separated for anything other than a layoff or poor performance, you must provide timely information and documentation in response to the claim. A separated employee may also file a legal claim against the company, claiming harmful wrongdoing by the company such as discrimination, harassment, or wrongful termination. In that event, the burden is on the employer to prove that wrongdoing did not occur. This is one of the many reasons we emphasize strong documentation.

Human resources is an essential function of any successful business. Our clients often tell us they never realized how HR could benefit them until they saw the positive bottom-line results. Offering both transactional and strategic services and introducing the PEOPle Cycle to our clients helps them understand their role in the employment process and how this can affect their businesses.●

Whitney Bower and Lauren Kersten are HR consultants and Liz Warren is vice president of human resources for Employer Services Corporation, Amherst, New York.