

Features

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The New (Ab)Normal, Part 2

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If you're hoping we're going "back to normal" we're not, especially regarding employees. If your goal is to attract and retain the best productively employed team, this article is for you.

"I got too much training," said no new employee anywhere. When asking new hires, "How was your first day?" many responded, "It was a blur—forms, many asking for identical information and legal gobbledygook thrown at me all day. I can't remember anything we talked about."

Capturing First-Day Enthusiasm

Employees are often more enthusiastic and open to ideas on their first day. Maximize that enthusiasm by making that time especially meaningful. Consider having any employment-related forms pre-filled out, based on information from their application or a fact sheet submitted when hired. Ask your employment counsel about the minimum paperwork that must be done the first day. Invest the rest of that day talking about your team, your vision, your company's focus. Leverage that first-day enthusiasm with passions the new employee can embrace and build upon.

Employees generally want their jobs to be meaningful. The first day, and frequently thereafter, impress on the new person all the benefits our industry brings to the world. Consider a "homework" project, perhaps a list of 15 benefits growing green things gives to the earth. Repeat and update often with your entire team. Remind them of their broader impact.

Stephanie Genrich of Genrich's Garden Center, Florist and Greenhouse in Rochester, New York, has new employees shadow her on their first day, including a complete tour to meet all employees. This gives an understanding of the company culture.

Stephanie sees another benefit: "After spending an entire day together, both of us have a good sense if the new employee will be successful. If it won't work out, let's part ways immediately, instead of waiting weeks/months for the inevitable. It makes life better for all concerned."

At Wingard's Market in Lexington, South Carolina, Andrea Snelgrove wants as much preparation for the new employee's first day as possible. When they arrive, Andrea is ready with Wingard's shirts, rain jacket, vest, radio, etc. Radio etiquette is discussed, especially how what's said on the radios is amplified and customers hear it.

Non-Negotiable Standards

Employees want to know the rules will be fairly and uniformly enforced. Historically not showing up for work, theft, assault and intoxication were misbehaviors warranting instant dismissal. Today, some are more nuanced and/or require specific written policy disclosures.

A North Carolina judge dismissed an employer's criminal complaint against an employee who used the company credit card for hundreds of thousands of dollars of personal charges over a decade. The employee said her boss gave her the card and she had sometimes paid back her personal charges. The judge ruled, while what she did was perhaps against policy, without written acknowledgement he couldn't accept the criminal complaint. The losses caused the retailer to close. Make sure your non-negotiable standards are written and employees have signed that they've received and understand them.

Marijuana & Psychedelics

One of the dramatic abnormal changes is society's attitude toward drugs. This is an ever-changing landscape with legal pitfalls for employers. Just because your local area has legalized certain drugs doesn't mean your employee can have them in their possession when they drive across the state line. That becomes a federal issue, above your local laws. Additionally, some truckers are under federal regulations barring them from using any drug, according to The Wall Street Journal's coverage of this changing landscape.

The old "normal" may have allowed you to say, "You look impaired." It's abnormal, but today that observation could be a HIPAA violation. Ask your counsel for a better question. Counsel might suggest, "I noticed you're slurring/stumbling. Are you okay?" Drugs deemed "recreational" in some areas may be medically prescribed elsewhere.

Make Me Feel Important

Everyone wants to feel important and part of a team. Company size impacts how this comes across. Vashti Kern and her father only have a handful of part-time employees at Bird's Botanicals in Kansas City, Missouri. This closeness builds the relationship between everyone on the team. Vashti is proud that they discard very little plant material. Any unsold overstock or plants needing TLC are taken home by employees for their own gardens.

"It's the little things that count," Stephanie at Genrich's reminds us. "When it's really busy, we let everyone know we'll bring pizza for breakfast tomorrow. We take hot cocoa out to the Christmas tree crew on a wintry day and in late June we have an end-of-year employee picnic with their friends.

"Employees and their guests are invited to help host our Best Customer Christmas Open House. Employees are paid for the time and guests are given gift cards to say, 'Thank you for volunteering.' It's over by 9:00 p.m. when everyone adjourns to a big dinner. These little things go a long way toward unifying the attitude of the team."

Stephanie knows some employees are kinesthetic learners who benefit from physical experiences. "In February/March, we work with our new employees to read together the tags as we pot up plants. This allows them to talk through each plant's uniqueness, plus shows them where to find relevant information. Later in the season, we ask the employee, 'Do you remember when we potted this?' That leads to more discussion about plant care and feeding. When the really busy season hits, they know a whole lot more than they think they do. This gives them confidence in their own knowledge, plus the awareness of where to get needed information."

The New Normal = Consistent New Complexities

Find competent local advisors who can guide you through the legal and practical consequences of changing employee regulations and attitudes. That will be paramount going forward.

Shifting Fringe Benefits

“I’ve never lost an employee over fringe benefits.” Jason Blanchette of Anderson’s in Newport News, Virginia, has broad employee fringe benefits, including a fully matched 401(k) contribution. “Only about 30% of our workers are taking advantage of it. It used to be over 60%. Newer employees say, ‘Give me more money now.’”

A new employee told a California retailer, “I don’t worry about retirement. I won’t have to pay all my student loan. When I need to retire, the government will be there to deal with it. I want money to live now.” While this has significant political and sociological overtones, it personifies the generational change in fringe benefit desires.

On June 30, 2023, research firm CivicScience reported in Inbox Insight that a growing number of people use health and wellness coaches who combine physical strength coaching with good eating habits and emotional well-being. Women and Gen Z adults, aged 18 to 24, show the greatest interest, with highest overall usage coming from the lowest income earners (\$50K or less per year).

Another example of this shift is “Grandternity Leave,” which gears time off tailored to the “over 50” employees who are more than a third of the workforce. Allowing grandparents to take time for a new grandchild is one manifestation of this shift. Older workers are usually perceived to be better trained with a more reliable work ethic. Cisco adopted the leave policy in 2017 focusing on “moments that matter” for employees. The Wall Street Journal reported on June 28 that 30% of Cisco’s benefit-eligible employees are over 50. For companies with daycare programs, many are allowing grandchildren of the employees to attend, lest the grandparents quit work to be full-time childcare providers. Menopause leave policy is becoming more common in Europe. It’s being offered in some U.S. offices of European-based companies. It’s likely the benefit will spread to U.S. employers to remain competitive.

It may be time to review Cafeteria Plans allowing staff choices from a variety of pre-tax benefits. Originally popular because they cut both employer and employee payroll taxes, they’ve proven beneficial by giving focused employee benefits to those wanting them. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future stories. He’s a Green Profit columnist and owner of the consulting firm McCurry Associates Inc. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 731-8389.

Did You Miss Part 1

If so, you can find the article, titled “[The New \(Ab\)Normal](#)” in the July issue of *Green Profit*.