

TRENDLINES

The Employers' Association's monthly whitepaper on essential Business/Human Resources practices

The Employers' Association (TEA) delivers reports for businesses that contain relevant and up-to-date information based on our work with hundreds of employers each month. TEA is known to produce a number of essential benchmark survey reports every year and we also compile data and observations that provide organizations practical perspectives on important business trends.

Differentiation

What you should know

Attracting and retaining employees is not getting easier as savvy employers are pulling out all the stops to entice the most qualified people and become “employers of choice.” Marketing departments are much more involved in recruitment than in the past – the days of talent acquisition specialists “posting and praying” to fill open positions is being replaced with well-planned and orchestrated communications campaigns that focus on WHY one would WANT to work somewhere. It is no longer enough to simply share details about the job because applicants want to know what is unique about this company compared to other employers they could work with, what kind of growth they might be able to experience, AND need more information about the stability of an organization.

Organizations are struggling to establish what differentiates them from one another and most are using very similar thoughts, statements, and considerations:

- Come work in a great place that supports employees
- Work with other creative and innovative people
- We provide competitive pay and benefits
- Employees care about each other and respect diversity
- Work in an organization that wants employees to succeed
- Make a difference in the world/your community
- Join a company that wants you and makes sure you feel wanted

These are (nearly) universal statements and they attempt to identify what employees expect from an employer BUT they do not differentiate the organization from its competitors.

What we know

We continue to find that an organization's culture is the most significant differentiator. Culture is the missing piece to the puzzle when others are offering similar pay/benefits, work schedules, DEI statements, community involvement, safety measures, flexibility, and advancement opportunities. The items bulleted above are demonstrable components of an organization's culture but culture is more than the “sum of its parts.” Culture is how the parts fit together to create something powerful, unique and greater than any of the individual components.

Employees clearly communicate their experiences and how the culture supports (or hinders) their ability to do great work through their responses to our Employee Engagement Surveys and Focus Groups. Participants continue to indicate they would be willing to work in an organization that pays less than others (as long as it is externally competitive and internally equitable) if the culture is significantly better. We hear in our HR Round Tables that, even in tough economic times, employees leave their organizations for less money (and sometimes, longer commutes) if they find a place to work that feels like a better fit (not the position but the organization) for both their short-term AND their long-term future. Unless an organization understands what their culture is – and what employees think it to be – they cannot communicate what differentiates them from their competition. Unless (and until) they ARE able to do so, they struggle to make a more compelling case for why they are the best place to work.

What it means

Current and future employees expect to work in a safe and supportive (physically and emotionally) environment that recognizes their value and worth AND rewards them appropriately for what they contribute. Simply sharing those universal organizational traits may not get as much attention as recruiters hope – which is why many organizations have linked Marketing and Human Resource Professionals into a new and unique partnership. Stating the “obvious” about an organization will likely not attract the best people to work for an organization. A filling station does not typically try to “woo” drivers to their location by posting a sign that says, “We have gas” next to other filling stations that also have gas on the same block – drivers already know they have gas and most even post the price (with the lowest price not always attracting the most customers). Similarly, describing and promoting an organization’s culture rarely can be summed up in a simple sentence because culture is complex and multifaceted. It can be shared with examples and testimonials that highlight the uniqueness of the organization. These organizations would not have statements like, “The people I work with are great” but more like, “I have never worked anywhere where I have received so much support for my ideas and suggestions.” The ability of an organization to analyze and understand its uniqueness is important and the ability to keep it healthy and accurately describe it to others is critically important.

What you can do

When an organization sets out to identify, “What makes us different” it is helpful to have something to guide the process. There are many models to analyze and describe culture and numerous ways to clarify an organization’s uniqueness. The Employers’ Association recommends the following focus areas:

- **Core Values**
 - Consists of the Mission, Vision, and Value Statements (Code of Ethics). It can help clarify what the organization stands for, how employees work with each other, and what is most important to the organization (and employees).
- **Management Practices**
 - Consists of how leaders lead and the expectations they set with employees. It includes whether leaders are honest, open, great communicators, supportive, proactive, thankful, etc.
- **Workplace Inclusion**
 - Consists of the degree to which people feel that they belong as well as support/opportunities for employees to advance in the organization (without inappropriate barriers due to various dimensions of diversity).

- **Employee Experience**
 - Consists of ongoing treatment and interactions with leaders and other employees. It explores if employees feel they are trusted, have freedom, feel motivated, and are encouraged to grow, learn, and innovate.
- **Employee Appreciation**
 - Consists of how and when employees are recognized by others for their work (by peers and/or leaders). It uncovers how people thank one another and show support for the efforts and outcomes of employees.
- **Emotional Environment**
 - Consists of feelings of safety and security as well as the relationships employees have with one another. It includes the degree of pride employees have in their work and the results they achieve as well as the commitment they have to the organization.

Additionally, leaders can ask employees, “How does working here compare to other organizations where you have worked?” and “What keeps you here?” These can provide a frame of reference for applicants and employees who have worked in similarly good (or bad) environments.

Showcasing an organization’s unique package of cultural dimensions can help the employer stand out from the other businesses vying for attention of potential applicants and current employees.