

Flexible workplaces a focus Chamber of commerce, UK institute partnering locally

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The Institute for Workplace Innovation at the University of Kentucky is expanding its Alfred P. Sloan Awards for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility into western Kentucky this year.

Jennifer Swanberg, executive director and founder of the institute, said Wednesday that she's hoping several Owensboro area companies will apply for the award.

Malcolm Bryant, president of the Owensboro-based Malcolm Bryant Corp., applied last year.

"It's an amazing program," he said. "It's something this community could capitalize on."

The program "recognizes companies that do great things," Swanberg said. "We're trying to engage businesses in learning about flexibility."

"They called and asked us last year if we would apply," Bryant said. "I think we got an honorable mention."

He said his company has promoted flexible work schedules for years.

"We're not in an 8-to-5 environment any more," Bryant said. "People have a lot more demands on their time today and they need flexibility at work."

One of his female employees had a baby that needed extra care, he said, "so she brought the baby in to work with her for the first two months. I can't imagine operating a business without a flexible schedule."

Flexibility, Bryant said, "is a cutting-edge way to manage today."

Jody Wassmer, president of the Greater Owensboro Chamber of Commerce, said the chamber is partnering with the institute to promote flexibility locally.

"After a company applies (for the award), they get a benchmark report showing how they rank nationally," he said. "It's a good way to tell how well you're doing."

Wassmer said employees today value a flexible schedule, and offering one helps companies recruit better workers.

"We're actively looking for local employers to apply," he said. "This first year, we expect a handful of local applicants. But we hope to grow it in the future."

Swanberg said she doesn't have data on what percentage of Kentucky companies offer flexible schedules.

But she said, "In order to thrive and not just survive, companies need to rethink how we work."

With today's high unemployment rate, some companies may not see a reason to try to attract workers. But Swanberg said: "Some of the more forward-looking companies are thinking two to three years ahead. And they want to be positioned well for the future."

She's hoping at least 75 companies across the state will apply for the award this year.

"The idea is that we can leverage Kentucky as a great place to work," Swanberg said. "This is an opportunity to show the country that Kentucky is doing some great things."

The 2009 winners include the northern Kentucky-based accounting firm of Anneken, Huey & Moser PLLC, which offers half days off on Fridays in the summer, an "escape weekend," two extra holidays and "fun days" during tax season; and Girl Scouts of Kentuckiana, where employees get paid days off that can be used for illness, doctor appointments, family matters or vacation time - and employees can bring their children to work if child care arrangements fall through.

This is the third year the state has offered the program.

Swanberg said Kentucky is one of only five states offering it statewide.

In 2009, 38 Kentucky businesses were named award winners and received national and local recognition "for their innovative uses of workplace flexibility as a strategic management tool."

There's no prize money or trophies, Swanberg said.

But the national recognition helps companies in hiring, she said.

Applying for the award is free.

The online application is available at www.iwin.uky.edu.

The companies must have been in business for at least one year and have 10 or more employees.

Applications must be received by April 26.

The Sloan Awards are part of "When Work Works," an initiative of the Families and Work Institute, the Institute for a Competitive Workforce and the Twiga Foundation.

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