

Innovation on a dime: Businesses reap large rewards for little to no cost

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Guest Columnist

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Challenging times present a great opportunity for businesses to institute and highlight innovative practices that can help gain a competitive advantage. Workplace flexibility is a form of innovation that businesses can implement for little to no cost and experience large rewards. Flexibility is helping Kentucky employers weather the current economic climate, compete on the national stage for talent, and bring attention to Kentucky as a state with innovative places to work.

One way Kentucky businesses are becoming nationally recognized for their innovative workplace flexibility practices is by applying for the Alfred P. Sloan Awards for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility. For the third year running, Kentucky employers have the opportunity to apply for this prestigious award. In 2009, 38 Kentucky businesses were named award winners, receiving national and local recognition for their innovative use of workplace flexibility. In 2010, that number will hopefully be increased. Jennifer Swanberg, executive director of the University of Kentucky's Institute for Workplace Innovation stated: "Innovation through flexibility comes in many forms and practices. Workplace flexibility is about how, when and where work gets done. Many organizations offer forms of flexibility and don't realize what they are doing is innovative and that they can become recognized on a national level for their practices."

Research consistently finds that workplace flexibility helps an employer's bottom line through improving employee health, engagement, retention and recruitment and helps improve customer satisfaction and sales. In addition, workplace flexibility also helps employees achieve work and personal goals. Businesses receiving the 2009 award can attest to how workplace flexibility has helped achieve organizational goals while helping employees succeed.

Phillip Moloney, partner with Sturgill, Turner, Barker & Moloney, said, "Management in today's times needs to think outside the box, and to trust its employees by allowing them greater freedom and creativity in performing their work more efficiently, effectively and conveniently."

Through offering employees greater flexibility in scheduling and telecommuting, Moloney said, "our firm has found that we can take care of our business and our employees by allowing them to be more fully productive at their work but also involved family and community members."

Frankfort Regional Medical Center, another 2009 award winner, offers flexibility to employees through self-scheduling, flexible hours, and job sharing. Chip Peal, CEO of Frankfort Regional Medical Center, stated, "Flexible scheduling has allowed us to align our hospital's goals with the career goals of our employees, creating a healthy environment that fosters growth and prevents burnout."

Providing a flexible work environment also allows Frankfort Regional Medical Center employees to take advantage of a tuition reimbursement program. This program has not only enlarged the pool of employees who can be promoted but also offers them greater career flexibility.

Applying for the Alfred P. Sloan Award is free, and the online application takes about 20 minutes to complete. To qualify, businesses must have at least 10 employees and have been in business for more than one year. If organizations have work sites in various cities, each location can apply. Formal flexibility policies are not required. Winners gain mention in the Congressional Record, in local media and are honored at a statewide award ceremony. In addition, all qualifying applicants receive benchmarking reports based on national data that can be

used as a tool to shape business flexibility practices. Applications are being accepted through April 16, 2010, and employers can visit www.iwin.uky.edu to apply.

The Alfred P. Sloan Awards are part of When Work Works, a national initiative with a community focus, that educates employers about the benefits of workplace flexibility and recognizes employers who practice workplace flexibility through the Awards. The initiative is supported nationally by the Families and Work Institute, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Institute for a Competitive Workforce, and the Twiga Foundation. The University of Kentucky Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin) is spearheading the statewide initiative alongside Greater Louisville Inc., which is heading the Louisville area initiative. In 2010, Kentucky is one of only five states, along with 21 other communities, participating in this initiative, including Houston, Texas; Chicago, Illinois; Seattle, Washington; Georgia; New Hampshire; Michigan; and Arizona. Kentucky is proud to be participating in this initiative among these prestigious communities.

Swanberg stated, "This award opportunity is unique for employers in that it is free to apply and helps to highlight Kentucky as an innovative, forward-thinking state whose employers are creatively motivating employees during challenging times while accomplishing organizational goals."

Lee Ann Walton works with Employer Engagement for the University of Kentucky's Institute for Workplace Innovation.

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