

UK roundtable partners with business to promote employers of choice

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Work-life Columnist

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Over the past month, CEOs of local businesses and others have informed me that recruiting qualified talent to work at their companies is becoming harder than ever. The growing challenge of finding good people with the right skills seems to cut across local industries — trades, health care and knowledge-based organizations. "In order for us to continue to grow our business, we need highly qualified workers with a journeyman's license," said Gwen Vujakovich, CEO of Fayette Heating & Air. "It has become very difficult to find licensed workers. To address this problem we've created two approaches: develop local talent and expand recruiting efforts outside of Fayette County into other regions and other states." To address immediate business needs, Fayette Heating & Air has had great success in recruiting highly skilled workers to Lexington. Meanwhile, they are collaborating with Bluegrass Community and Technical College, local high schools and area workforce development agencies to create initiatives that will give workers the technical and soft skills necessary for a lucrative career in the heating and air business. Like Fayette Heating & Air, to compete in a global marketplace for talent, Kentucky and its employers must undertake a number of strategies to be successful. One of these is to create innovative workplaces that result in companies becoming known as "employers-of-choice" regionally, nationally and internationally.

Traditional employee benefits are no longer enough of an incentive to attract and keep top talent. Recent research by international consulting firm Towers Perrin suggests that factors such as work/life balance, company reputation, opportunities for growth and development and input into decision making are drivers of recruitment, retention and engagement. Becoming an employer of choice requires organizations to be bold, innovative and open to new ideas. The UK Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin) spearheads an initiative that engages Kentucky's workplaces in developing the types of workplace solutions that create employers of choice. In January 2008, iwin launched the Innovative Employer Roundtable. The roundtable is a select group of Kentucky employers committed to workplace strategies that simultaneously benefit employers and employees. "We view the Innovative Employer Roundtable as Kentucky's premier employer learning community, where organizational leaders gain knowledge of cutting-edge trends and have the opportunity to discuss the implications of this information for their organization," according to Lynn Bertsch, iwin's director of employer engagement.

The Innovative Employer Roundtable also has a broader vision — to contribute to Kentucky becoming a "state-of-choice." By providing companies with the knowledge, tools and resources to become employers of choice and the opportunity to learn from leading experts and each other in addition to assistance in adopting innovative strategies, workplaces become employers of choice. The more companies in Kentucky that are employers of choice, the more likely that Kentucky will become known as a state of choice where businesses want to expand and relocate, and where people want to live and work. Ultimately, said Bertsch, "We strive for a roundtable composition that includes organizations located throughout the state, of various sizes and from a range of industries. The roundtable currently boasts 13 partners from around the commonwealth." The Institute intends to cap the membership of the Innovative Employer Roundtable at 40 partners. The Roundtable's most recent partner, the Commonwealth of Kentucky, is represented by both the Personnel Cabinet and the Cabinet for Economic Development. Having the commonwealth on the roundtable demonstrates our state's commitment to workplace strategies and solutions that benefit our workforce and our economy. In a recent press release, Personnel Cabinet Secretary Nikki Jackson stated, "They [iwin] are equally interested in the individual workplace as they are in assuring Kentucky's ability to court and secure viable businesses and talent from around the world." What does it take to become an employer of choice? To guide our efforts at the Institute for Workplace Innovation, we've developed an employer-of-choice model. The model includes eight dimensions, which represent factors of successful organizational culture. Research demonstrates that practices within each of these categories

are associated with recruitment, retention, employee engagement and better employee health. Yet the implementation of practices will vary by industry, occupational category and demographic group. Moreover, each workplace will have its own unique set of circumstances that will drive the priority areas. Nonetheless, when organizations create cultures that promote innovation and employee participation in developing workplace solutions, businesses, employees and the commonwealth win.

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