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Beat holiday staffing blues by cross-training, scheduling days off early

Stock Lookup

Monday, September 13, 2004

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By CYNTHIA R. NELSON
Courier-Post Staff

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Summer's almost over, and it's a good thing since your office resembled a ghost town in August with almost everyone on vacation.

However, even though the leaves have yet to drop, now is the time to plan for the winter holidays to avoid the "uh-oh" moment when it suddenly becomes apparent that 90 percent of the staff has been approved for the same days off.

"It happens a lot during the holidays. Issues occur more often than not with duplication of time off requests," said Mary Massad, director of human resources development at Administaff, a human resources firm that works with businesses throughout South Jersey.

"So many companies look at vacation as people simply wanting time off and many times they don't consider the effect it has on the business when those people are gone," said Massad, noting that many companies find themselves understaffed and thus ill-equipped to handle client demands.

"It has happened to us, and it has happened to our clients," she admits, but adds, "there is a lot you can do to prevent situations like that. I can't stress enough, that communication is the key."

Massad advises clients to have clearly documented vacation policies, which are publicized to employees, that address how time off is accrued, when it may be used and what the policies are regarding requests for peak times of the year.

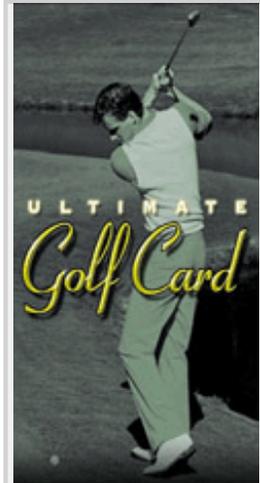
Many employers require that Christmastime vacation requests get turned in weeks, even months ahead.

Take workers at Food Sciences Corp. in Mount Laurel.

"We limit the number of people out at one time from within a department or with a specific job function," said Laraine Knauss, director of human resources. "The

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employees know this and plan accordingly, especially since we have a 'use-it-or-lose-it' policy. For those desiring to take a week off around a holiday, or even a single day, they know they need to submit their request early."

No matter how much advanced planning, it's likely that at one time or another, every business will find itself with a staffing dilemma. Whether it's due to illness, a snowstorm or simply a scheduling snafu, the "uh-oh" moment does not have to derail your business too much if you have made plans to address such a situation.

"Cross-training is a must," agrees Joe Santana, co-author of the book *Manage I. T.*, and director of training and organizational development at Siemens Business Services.

"To keep a smooth-running operation while some workers are out of the office I recommend following the practices of European organizations that mandate four-to-six-week vacations. In these countries cross-training is a must."

Knauss agrees, noting that cross-training becomes even more important at Food Sciences when employees use personal days or sick days because they are not required to give advance notice.

"In almost all areas, we have individuals who can effectively fill in for a day and keep productivity going," Knauss said. "We've learned to split jobs where necessary to not overburden the covering employees. It takes a real sense of teamwork."

Just remember: Everyone in the office is critical to day-to-day success, not just the head honchos, experts say. And don't forget to take into consideration the little things that can be more problematic if not addressed. Take mail delivery, for instance.

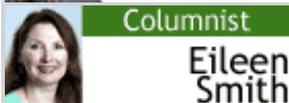
"When our courier is out, we have to scramble to get someone to go the post office to pick up the mail and go to the bank as well as handle the variety of other 'out of the building' errands he handles," Knauss said as an example.

Another way to combat absences is to keep handy the number for a temporary employee agency. Of course, address continual absences that do not follow your documented policy so you can avoid the situation in the future.

And in the case of too many requests for the day after Thanksgiving, experts say that employers have to decide in advance - and publicize well - how they will resolve conflicts if too many people request the same time off.

Seniority is the most-used method to handle duplicate time-off requests.

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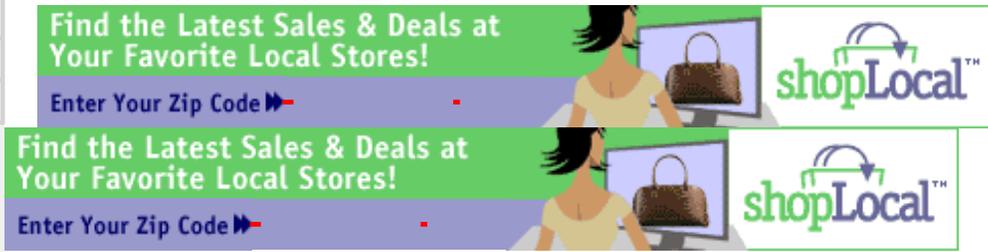
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