

Employers of Excellence Dakota Scott

Overview describing the innovative practice

Summary: In light of the enhanced challenges many employers face recruiting and retaining employees, the Dakota Scott Workforce Development Board (WDB) piloted an “*Employers of Excellence*” program. It provides employers with objective data to use as benchmark information and to see how they compare to other employers. Twenty employers participated. Nine were honored - three from each category based on number of employees. The categories were based on number of employees: 0-50; 51-200; or 200+.

Background: The WDB had heard from numerous employers about their challenges recruiting and retaining talent. In considering approaches to help employers facing these challenges, the board felt it would be helpful to learn from organizations who had successful attraction and retention strategies. Thanks to Workforce Development Inc., (WDI) headquartered in Rochester, MN, the WDB was familiar with the *Best Places to Work* program. The opportunity WDI provided for WDB staff to hear from Gerry Hoeffner, founder of the program, proved to be extremely valuable. The WDB’s business services committee liked the overall concept and then researched the program, learning how it was used by WDI and getting feedback from the employers who’d participated. The WDB then worked with Hoeffner to implement the program locally. In this area, the program name was changed to “Employers of Excellence” to avoid confusion with the *Minneapolis St. Paul Business Journal* “Best Places to Work” program which has a much different design than Hoeffner’s.

Locally, the Employers of Excellence program offered three key benefits including:

- 1) **Confidential Report** - A total of 37 different measurements were analyzed based on objective information provided by the participating organization. Participants received a confidential, personalized report that analyzed data such as turnover rates, growth percentages, promotion percentages, and benefit packages.
- 2) **Recognition** - after tallying the scores - companies with top ratings within their categories were recognized as an “Employer of Excellence” at a community-wide recognition event
- 3) **Useful Insights** - attendees at the recognition event heard from Hoeffner, who is a subject matter expert about employee recruitment and retention and is also knowledgeable about generational differences and their impact on organizations.

Jobseeker impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for jobseekers)

Organizations participating in the Employers of Excellence program were interested in knowing where they stand on key metrics which lead to employee attraction and satisfaction. In a time of increased competition for applicants, who does a job seeker want to work for and why? Plus, relative to retention, if a person is happy with their job and employer, they might not become a job seeker! Thus, the information gleaned from the survey - and adjustments based on that data - is instrumental for organizations to best structure themselves to attract and retain employees.

The WDB learned from companies who were part of the WDI initiative that the program helped with employee recruitment and helped build awareness with job seekers. Locally, one of the award winners was Bankers Equipment who demonstrated on the program could make a difference. They celebrated the award by bringing in lunch for employees. Additionally, they promoted the fact they received the award on their website and in a national trade publication. They also reported that it provided management with an opportunity to educate employees about the benefits the company provides. Another participating employer noted that lessons learned from Hoeffner’s comments about generational differences completely changed the way he worked and communicated with one of his much younger employees which resulted in an immediate positive impact.

All award winners received a plaque and a 3 by 8 ft. banner recognizing them as an Employer of Excellence. Some companies used the Employers of Excellence logo on t-shirts they gave employees. The banners/plaques proved to be a great way for potential employees to see the organization as a recognized leader and employer. Additionally, the recognition materials such as the banners build pride within the organizations’ existing workforce.

Employer/Community impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for non-jobseekers)

- The confidential survey report employers received which showed how their results compared to other respondents was extremely valuable. One organization - who wasn’t an award winner - participated in the program just to have the benchmark data so they could do a better job recruiting and retaining staff.

- Award recipients received extensive promotion and publicity via general news releases; and from City and/or Chamber of Commerce publicity. Many put the awards info on their own websites.
- Regarding benefits, here's feedback from Michael Esch, an award recipient: "The Employers of Excellence program is a unique program we were excited to participate in. The survey itself was stimulating. It made us take a look at ourselves and helped spur us into thinking about even more innovative ideas to help grow our talent pool. The program engaged us to look at innovative methods to attract a higher skilled workforce. It has taught us many more best practices that we are formulating and adopting into our business. It is programs like this that help businesses of all sizes recruit, retain and recognize a good workforce. We were quite humbled by being recognized for the way we run our business."
- Another award recipient, Scott Feraro, Carlson Capital Management (CCM) wrote, "CCM's participation in the Employers of Excellence process was meaningful in several ways. The process itself was valuable, as we were concurrently engaged in the activities of opening and rolling out a new office. The examination of our processes as prompted by the survey, provided us with a degree of timely self-awareness that has proved useful to us in other areas of our practice. The awards ceremony itself was well attended and the participant population, diverse. It allowed for CCM to be noticed, not just among our industry peers, but to an uncharacteristically broad population with whom we share a community and occasionally compete for labor. The award notoriety and supporting information has been used in our local and regional marketing efforts as well as a meaningful accolade for current and future colleagues of CCM. It was an end-to-end, positive experience for us and we continue to derive value from the experience."
- Community impact: Approximately 60 people attended the awards event including local elected officials and numerous employers. It turned out to be a great networking event, an outstanding value-add based on information from Hoeffner in his keynote remarks, and another way to highlight the Dakota Scott WDB as a leader in the community. Additionally, there was demonstrated civic pride in having local employers recognized. For example, in Burnsville, award recipients received a congratulatory letter from the Mayor and the area's state representatives.

Identification of those involved, including collaborators

Core planning team was: Mark Lofthus, Economic Development Director, Dakota Electric; Skip Nienhaus, Economic Development Coordinator, City of Burnsville; Vicki Stute, President, Dakota County Regional Chamber of Commerce, Cliff Reykdal, Human Resources Manager, Delta Airlines, and Pam Oeffler, Director of Human Resources, Smead Mfg. This core team led the plan development for the Dakota Scott WDB's business services committee. This committee did a lot of work in a) learning from WDI about what went well for their program; b) getting feedback from participants and hearing about lessons learned; c) asking questions of the consultant; and d) developing the game plan for the Employers of Excellence program in the area.

Leveraging/alignment of outside resources

- Gerry Hoeffner - the President of Personnel Dynamics: He has two decades of employee development experience. He knows what he's talking about on this subject and is a fabulous speaker.
- Chambers of Commerce and City Community Development directors who helped promote the program and event. Some Chambers put the information on their Facebook pages; some put the info in their weekly email updates and some made personal calls to employers they felt should participate.
- LinkedIn, Facebook and Human Resource Groups - some of the avenues used to promote the program.
- City of Burnsville Communications Staff - press release preparation and distribution of information to 1,900+ people on their distribution list plus they featured the program on an electronic billboard.
- Dakota County Communications Staff - press release preparation and distribution
- Dakota County Community Development Agency; Scott County Community Development Agency, Inver Hills Community College and Dakota County Technical College were sponsors. They provided fiscal support for the program and helped promote the program to area employers.
- WDI who was wonderful in providing an array of information and answers to countless questions.

Ideas for replication/lessons learned

The program is very replicable using Hoeffner's model. Having a consultant with the proven, time-tested experience is valuable. What's important - and was noted by WDI and Hoeffner - is that the first year would be most challenging as it's a new concept which employers would need to learn about. While the program had extensive publicity, the key was direct contact with organizations. The success to getting applicants was thanks to direct communications from WDB members, and staff of Chambers, cities and WorkForce Centers. Another reality is that organizations really, really like the visibility associated with being selected as a winner!