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# The Star-Ledger

## Firms that educate keep best workers

Sunday, August 05, 2007

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**Associated Press**

NEW YORK -- With the start of the school year not far off, employees of small businesses might have a hankering to take some courses. And company owners might want to think about paying for them to take some classes -- the learning may help their careers and in turn, help the business retain its best workers.

Many companies are willing to pay for courses that will help employees upgrade their skills or learn new ones. Others go further, making tuition reimbursement an employee benefit that even covers courses not directly related to the job.

"For me, it's really straightforward: We value the employees we have here," said Kyle Corkum, president of Landquest, a land-development company in Raleigh, N.C. "We're not interested in having people come and go like a revolving door. We're trying to upgrade the capability and knowledge of our people."

Landquest is currently paying for a staffer to take a preparatory course for the Law School Admission Test, and it is paying undergraduate tuition for another employee. Its director of philanthropy is taking business writing and literature courses at company expense.

"We have 20 employees. If we lose one, we're in a tough spot. Everyone we've got is hand-picked, and we want them to stay for the rest of their careers," said Corkum. He added the company will pay for law school for the staffer now studying for the LSAT.

Human resources professionals say paying for employees' courses is a great motivator and retention tool for all companies, so a small business that offers tuition reimbursement will make itself more competitive when it comes to attracting and keeping good workers.

Beverly Kaye, an employee retention consultant in Sherman Oaks, Calif., said research has shown one of the top reasons why workers stay with their companies is they're learning and growing on the job. Taking courses helps that process along.

"I'm a believer in paying for anything that in any way helps them be more effective on the job," said Kaye, co-author of the book "Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay."

Kaye suggests owners take the initiative and offer tuition reimbursement to staffers rather than waiting for

workers to request it; employees will appreciate the goodwill behind the offer.

"It loses some of its panache if you wait for them to ask," Kaye said.

And don't presume to know what kind of course is right for a given staffer. Don't assume a graphics designer, for instance, should only be taking a computer graphics course.

"What you need is to understand what challenges and motivates each individual employee," Kaye said.

Joyce Gioia-Herman, president of the Herman Group, a management consulting firm in Greensboro, N.C., doesn't have employees now, but when she did in the past, all staffers, as long as they worked at least 20 hours a week, were offered tuition reimbursement.

"We wanted it to be something that would develop them, but we gave it a very wide latitude," she said. "If somebody wanted to take a course, for instance, in balancing their budget or some other real practical skill or ability they could acquire, that would help them feel better about themselves and their ability to function personally as well as professionally."

Tuition reimbursement isn't the only way to help employees learn; some businesses offer on-site learning.

Alfred Portale, owner of the upscale Gotham Bar & Grill in New York, has arranged for classes to be given at the restaurant, including English classes for workers who wanted to improve their language skills. Portale also has paid for individual language classes for some employees.

He also offers culinary education classes, including a wine program planned for later this year.

"I feel that people want to continue to learn in their positions," Portale said. "It's a very important component of the workplace -- if they feel they're learning, they're happy and stay on."

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