

Paying for tuition can help small businesses develop, keep good staffers

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by Joyce Rosenberg

NEW YORK (AP) - 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 that the company will pay for law school for the staffer now studying for the LSAT.

Human resources professionals say that 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 that 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 that 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.