



Benefits Managers Turning to HR Blogs for Advice and Insight

Are benefits managers following blogs or social media to help them make informed decisions, and if so, which ones are they following? Which human resources bloggers do they trust and what kinds of information are they seeking?

By Lisa Beyer

Keeping up with complex benefits issues, health care reform and wage litigation has human resources managers turning to a virtual water cooler in the form of blogs and related social media sites for advice or to initiate feedback about their own ideas.

Jonathan Corke, a field marketing manager with Livonia, Michigan-based WorkForce Software Inc., says he follows several blogs as a source of information because they often articulate new and emerging ideas on HR and benefits.

In addition to his company's internal blog written by a labor lawyer, Corke says he follows "FMLA Insights," "BlogERP" and "Steve Boese's HR Happy Hour."

"I read Steve's blog because he's an educator and writes in a way that makes ideas easy to understand. I'm a student of human resources because the more I know, the more valuable I am to my employer," Corke says.

In addition to HR and benefits-related forums on LinkedIn and HR-focused websites, the more reliable blogs are typically written by industry insiders.

Boese, an HR technology instructor at the Rochester, New York, Institute of Technology, hosts "HR Happy Hour," which dispenses HR and benefits talk via an array of online media including his blog, Twitter account and through the online Blog Talk Radio.

Benefits companies also are finding a growing audience online seeking tips and insight. Portland, Oregon-based Standard Insurance Co., a provider of financial services including disability insurance, launched its Workplace Possibilities blog in February. Written by consultants, nurse case managers, vocational counselors and experts specializing in disability issues, the blog offers tips and ideas on managing disability-related issues.

“This blog is an extension of Standard’s Workplace Possibilities program where we work in a partnership with clients on their disability cases so their employees can return to work as soon as possible,” says Alison Daily, director of Workplace Possibilities.

Solutions for getting employees back to work after an illness or surgery, as well as tips and resources for ergonomic solutions that will accommodate a back or other injury are among the regular topics.

“Our readers are learning what’s possible and feeling empowered to take actions they might not have taken before,” she says. “Sometimes the solution to a disability issue is simple, but people don’t think about it.”

A 2010 study by consultants the CARA Group Inc. polled 125 professionals from diverse industries and found that 98 percent of survey respondents agree that social media are changing how they learn and access information. More than 80 percent said they use social media and networking tools to advance their professional skills.

Miami-based human resources professional and speaker Sharlyn Lauby’s “HR Bartender” blog has fielded questions from readers about developing compensation plans, managing the Family and Medical Leave Act and providing sick pay benefits, among others issues. The blog is a valuable reference to HR managers, especially those in smaller organizations.

One reader commented: “We’re a startup company looking for advice on how to competitively pay new hires ... obviously we can’t use the content we find on the Internet because that usually applies to larger companies.”

Bloggers like Lauby have the experience and expertise to effectively blog about diverse human resources issues. Yet Gerry Crispin, co-founder and principal of consulting firm CareerXroads, offers up the age-old caution: Don’t believe everything you read—especially in a blog.

“There’s been a shift in the way we get information, and we can no longer trust traditional sources for a number of reasons,” says Crispin, who estimates there are roughly 200 HR-related blogs. “People are getting information from blogs which may not be any more reliable from a news point of view. When I grew up, you learned to examine information and assess it; I don’t think that’s being taught anymore, and it’s a critical skill.”

Though small firms can glean valuable perspective from benefits-related blogs, HR managers at large companies also say they turn to social media for insight. R.J. Morris, corporate staffing director for McCarthy Building Cos. in St. Louis, a commercial builder that employs 1,500 people nationwide, says he checks about 30 HR-related blogs a week. Morris says he benefits from seeing examples of what his peers are doing.

“It’s helpful to see how health care reform is impacting all of us, and I’ve also been interested in the strategies companies are using around wellness programs,” he says.

Morris says he also tracks blogs on employee engagement and retention issues.

Mike Ryan, senior vice president of marketing and client strategy for New York-based Madison Performance Group, is also a regular reader of several blogs including “Generations at Work,” part of the “Delaware Employment Law” blog; “PositiveSharing”; Six Degrees From Dave”; and the “HBR Blog Network” of the Harvard Business Review.

“These are all well-researched and even when the entries are not specific to HR, you will find something of value that ties into the workplace conversation,” Ryan says. He offers a tip for finding blogs of value: keep an open mind about what the HR conversation should be about. “If you see HR as a strategic function, you’ll find a lot of blogs that add to the conversation.”

The good blogs will take complex legal information and make it understandable to HR managers, says Mike Haberman, vice president and director of HR services for Omega HR Solutions Inc. in Marietta, Georgia.

“Readers of our blog say they are looking for clear explanations about compliance issues,” he says. “Topics such as ADA are critical to human resource managers, and they depend on bloggers to provide ‘nonlawyer’ talk about those issues.”

Jennifer Benz, chief strategist of Benz Communications in San Francisco and a blogger, believes social media only work as a resource when they provide meaningful information. She tweets one or two daily benefits tips and invites benefits and HR managers to re-tweet the tips directly to their employees, with or without attribution.

“Benefits managers are really busy, so my goal is to provide them with tips that are immediately actionable,” Benz says.