

Executive Summary

In order to identify how to become an employer of choice, Lake County partnered with Lake Forest Graduate School of Management to conduct several employee feedback focus group sessions. The purpose of these sessions was to understand how current Lake County policies, programs and procedures impact employee recruitment and retention. The feedback sessions included employees from across several departments and classifications. (See appendix for employee groups and focus group questions.) Feedback from the participants focused on six major themes. The themes are:

- **Employer of Choice Attributes**
- **Benefits**
- **Management Knowledge, Skills and Abilities**
- **Compensation Improvement Program**
- **Career Development**
- **Attracting and Hiring Early-in-Career Talent**

Based on participant input, Lake Forest Graduate School of Management has drawn these conclusions:

- Lake County needs to focus on strengthening its brand, reputation and culture not only for the public, but also its own employees.
- The benefits package is generally good, and with some improvements, it can be an important recruiting and retention tool.
- Better pay is the most common reason people leave Lake County.
- Focus group participants generally like their manager and supervisor, but feel that their managers and supervisors need to improve their leadership skills.
- Lake County employees do not like the Compensation Improvement Program.
- People want support to improve and grow in their careers.
- To increase the number of early-in career hires, Lake County needs to be keyed into what motivates and attracts this population, and be open to offering those things.

Combined focus group responses to each of the six themes and the **Recommendations** that address them are detailed in the full report. Lake Forest Graduate School of Management is ready and able to assist you in the implementation of the recommendations.

Theme 1: Employer Of Choice Attributes

Participants identified a strong sense of security and stability as employees of Lake County. They felt that government was “not going anywhere” since it serves citizens, and there would always be work to serve the County.

Many participants felt good about working for Lake County because of its service-based mission. They felt the work was meaningful, particularly among those who work in healthcare, and they had passion to serve a population in need.

In terms of attracting new employees, the participants felt that Lake County had a stronger brand and reputation than neighboring counties in Illinois and Wisconsin; however, they believed that Lake County could do more to strengthen it. Suggestions included increased outreach to colleges and law schools; increased involvement in the community; and increased awareness of job opportunities at the County throughout the community. They felt there is often a negative connotation given to a “government job” among job seekers, but through educating potential employees on the opportunity they would have to contribute to the community as well as how they would be part of Lake County’s high quality services, Lake County’s brand and reputation would improve, making it a more desirable employer.

Nearly all participants said they enjoyed working with their co-workers, had great relationships with their peers, and felt a strong sense of family among colleagues. When it came to management and leadership, participants said there was a lack of trust, and they feared repercussions despite an “open door” policy. Participants said they felt people were not treated with respect by their managers, that managers did not recognize effort, and that managers did not have the skills needed to manage people effectively.

Participants said elected officials each ran their office according to his or her own objectives, and no two offices were alike. This created a feeling of fear, especially around election time, that newly elected officials could “clean house” and bring their own people in.

Most people felt that there was a certain amount of flexibility around employee expectations, but its interpretation differed from department to department, role to role, and manager to manager. For example, some departments allow employees to flex their time at the office, and others do not. It is frustrating for employees to adhere to a policy that is not applied consistently across the organization. Some groups mentioned that they worked on the weekends and were not allowed any flex time during the week.

Recommendations

- Design, develop and implement an employee value proposition (EVP) focused on building the brand and reputation of Lake County as an employer of choice.

Conclusion

Lake County should focus on strengthening its brand, reputation and culture for the public and its own employees. Employees are an organization’s best ambassadors.

Theme 2: Benefits

Many employees did not fully understand the benefits package. They attributed this to information overload at orientation, information being delivered in “HR speak,” lack of education on the full scope of what benefits are available to them. For example, one participant noted that she did not know she could leverage FMLA and missed the opportunity. They are also unaware of the laws that regulate these benefits. Some employees were completely unaware of the Compensation Incentive Program and other benefits. Focus group participants said that their managers were also not well educated on benefits, and as a result were not able to help their employees.

Despite the lack of knowledge about the benefits package, the focus group participants agreed that Lake County offered a good benefits package. They noted that the County still offers a pension plan, which is currently very rare among employers. Participants cited specific areas for improvement, including a better dental plan that would cover major procedures, a more comprehensive vision plan, paid maternity leave, and a larger tuition reimbursement plan.

In addition to increasing the tuition reimbursement plan, focus group participants felt the course approval process needed changing. They said managers did not understand course requirements and as a result would sometimes not approve courses required by their educational program.

While the benefits package may be attractive, it is not enough to keep people at the County. Participants reported that people left Lake County for opportunities in the private sector due to reasons like infrequent pay raises, lack of growth and development opportunities, infrequent promotions, and a lack of perks that appeal to a younger generation (fitness centers, daycare, flex time, a tuition reimbursement program that covered expenses, wellness programs, etc.).

Recommendations

- Improve dental and vision plans to make a more attractive benefits package.
- Streamline and clarify benefits explanation at new employee orientation.
- Provide manager education on benefits so they can answer questions from their employees.
- Use clear communication to educate existing employees on benefits.
- Increase the tuition reimbursement, and expand coverage to license attainment and maintenance.
- Offer additional work-life balance and wellness benefits.

Conclusions

Focus group participants had a very positive feeling about certain aspects of the benefits package offered by Lake County. Long-term and non-exempt employees felt especially strong regarding the pension plan. Participants felt that the benefits package was not a strong enough reason to stay at Lake County in light of other things, like better pay, more career growth opportunities, and better Tuition reimbursement programs in the private sector.

Theme 3: Management Knowledge, Skills and Abilities

In the discussion around why participants remained at Lake County and what could be changed to improve working conditions, a number of people talked about management knowledge, skills and abilities. Focus group participants, whether union, hourly or salaried employees, felt good about their bosses overall. They felt management did a good job of establishing a nurturing environment, but lacked skill in fostering an effective workplace.

Focus group participants said managers and supervisors had a poor knowledge and understanding of the HR policies of Lake County. They felt that management was inconsistent in the manner in which they applied these policies. Although they are online and available to read, it is hard to navigate the Web site. They also said policies on the Web site were insufficient because there was no supporting information or explanation to help clarify the intent and application.

Focus group participants said that receiving recognition from a manager was very rare at the County. This was the case with formal and informal rewards and recognition.

Focus group participants said that that they received little to no coaching or constructive feedback from managers. The only feedback they received was in response to mistakes or issues. Focus group participants said they would like to receive more coaching, feedback and guidance to help them do a better job. Additionally, participants wanted their managers to be more caring and better understand their work-life situation.

Many focus group participants felt that talent management training should be provided to managers. They felt that this would help managers and supervisors become more proficient at managing people.

Recommendations

- Provide managers and supervisors more guidance and training on Lake County's HR policies.
- Improve the online HR policy information navigation to make it easier to find information.
- Rework communication about management issues to ensure clarity and understandability among all employees (online and in workshops).
- Host management forums that explain when policies apply to everyone and where and why they may differ in specific departments.
- Reduce the perceived notion that each department is its own standalone organization.
- Provide management training and skill practice on:
 - How to improve general management skill and abilities
 - How to provide meaningful feedback
 - How to coach
 - How to give recognition and rewards

Conclusion

For the most part, focus group participants were satisfied with their managers and supervisors, but nonetheless identified areas for improvement. By enacting the above steps, Lake County managers and supervisors will be better contributors to the County's success.

Theme 4: Compensation Improvement Program

The response and comments about the Compensation Improvement Program were negative and uncomplimentary. The participants seemed not to understand the purpose of the program, why it was implemented, and why the process is the way it is. Focus group participants who were eligible for the program discussed bad experiences with it. Others commented that they were only aware of the program, and still others knew nothing about or had even heard about the program.

Focus group participants felt the program process took too long and that too much documentation was required. To be approved under the program for a small increase, people had to produce pages of information. A few respondents said that they had over 100 pages in their submission, and with a relatively small reward, the effort to apply didn't seem to be worth it.

When asked to provide more comments and insights about the program, some focus group participants said that in addition to the heavy emphasis on producing documentation, the program differed among departments and supervisors. In some departments, the program was not consistently applied. Participants said that it created a negative feeling when one person got an increase while someone who had a similar type of achievement did not.

Other focus group participants felt that the program was a purely Human Resources driven process, and that completion of the report was only a formality. They pointed out that Human Resources could not fully appreciate the information provided because it referred to department related deliverables, sometimes of a very technical and/or complex nature. One person said they turned in a CIP 100 pages long, and the next day, the increase was approved. The person doubted that the information was even read. This erodes trust in the process and the HR department.

Focus group participants discussed the practice of setting goals in addition to those required for their position. They believed it was just a way to add additional work to their existing workload. People questioned the value of the increased effort resulting from setting extra goals and doing the work for such a small increase. Also, it was hard to come up with additional goals for some positions, such as administrative ones, due to the limitations of their responsibilities.

Other respondents believed that the program took away the discretion of their manager and supervisor. They felt their managers and supervisors did not play as important a role in the process as they should, and that the final decision was not totally theirs when perhaps it should be. They believed that Human Resources had too large a role in the program.

Two eligibility factors were also cited as issues that made it hard to be a part of the program.

- If you are at the top of your pay scale, you are not eligible for the program.
- You need to be in your position at least three years to qualify.

Both of these factors were seen as unfair barriers and detrimental to the CIP.

Recommendations

- Reevaluate the CIP program addressing the issues stated above (documentation, additional work required, Human Resource's role and eligibility).
- Simplify the program so it is not so labor intensive and time consuming.
- Rebrand the program.

- Clearly explain what the County wants to achieve, and why this program is important. Conduct separate workshops for management-eligible employees to help them better understand the program and its purpose.

Conclusion

The Compensation Improvement Program is not appreciated or in good standing among Lake County employees. It is essential that a program aimed at rewarding desired behavior address employee concerns. This program may need to be re-invented.

Theme 5: Career Development

According to *LinkedIn Learning's* 2018 Workplace Learning Report, 94% of employees would stay at a company longer if it invested in their development. Having a career development program allows employees to improve and strengthen their skills and abilities to meet the organization's future challenges.

The focus group participants felt that career development was important for their own personal development as well as for positioning for a promotion. They were aware of internal training opportunities, but made no comments about the quality, variety, relevance or desirability of the training. In addition to formal training, participants commented that on-the-job development opportunities would be welcome and beneficial.

The focus group participants were mostly interested in career development as a means to attain promotions, and identify and pursue new career paths. However, they also felt that there were not many opportunities for them to get promoted due to the limited number of related positions. They talked about "career pathing," which had existed at Lake County, but is apparently no longer in use. This program provided opportunities and direction about how they might advance their career at Lake County. Some said their advancement options were limited because their department was small and opportunities to move up were few. Some believed that to obtain a promotion, one has to reach a certain level of tenure. Union people believed time, experience and jumping through certain "hoops" were required to attain a promotion. Generally, the group felt uninformed and confused about what they needed to do to develop their career at Lake County. All this was reinforced by what they believed to be a lack of succession planning.

Recommendations

- Create, explain and implement a succession planning process that offers a development plan and a possible career track for employees.
- Educate supervisors and managers on how to conduct career development discussions for their employees.
- Conduct a training needs analysis among employees. Involve employees in this analysis.
- Based on the needs analysis results, provide the training and market the courses.
- Provide on-the-job opportunities to help develop employees.
- Review the external education policies and processes.

Conclusion

People want to know how they can improve themselves and understand how to develop their careers. A vibrant and effective organization offers its employees skill building and education through training and on-the-job opportunities, and career advancement opportunities, such as promotions.

Theme 6: Attracting and Hiring Early-in-Career Talent

Sustainable organizations need to constantly attract and hire effective talent. Lake County wants to explore what it would take to attract and hire effective, early-in career talent.

Focus group participants felt that recruitment and advertising efforts were strong. They identified word of mouth and friend referrals, a strong online presence of job postings through LinkedIn, the Lake County job board, and professional organization Web sites as supporting the search effort well. The process of applying was easy and straightforward and had definitely improved from years ago. Participants felt that to improve recruitment, Lake County could adopt a more proactive approach by attending job fairs, recruiting from colleges and law schools, and using high school interns.

Focus group participants said that to improve the County's ability to attract and hire talent, there should be an increase in starting salaries. Additionally, the County should offer work-life balance perks like a fitness center, a bus shuttle to and from the train station, wellness programs, and healthier food options in the cafeteria.

Participants felt that to attract and retain employees, pay should be competitive. They said many people left for better paying jobs in the private sector, and may also have been motivated to leave due to a lack of development and career growth opportunities, slow pay increases which barely cover the cost of living, and lack of assistance to pay student loans and license fees. However, long term and non-exempt people did stay because of the attractive benefits package.

Recommendations

- Research the market to ensure that starting salaries are competitive and take necessary steps to implement a more competitive pay structure.
- Explore cost-effective tactics to provide perks that provide work-life balance for employees.
- Build a more proactive recruitment strategy that focuses on early-in career candidates.
- Create a "career pathing" program that will give employees a line of sight to how they might develop their existing or desired career at Lake County.
- Establish a strong mentoring program.

Conclusion

To attract and hire effective early-in career talent, Lake County needs to provide attractive options that go beyond salaries. It must be keyed into what motivates and attracts this population to join and stay at an organization.

Appendix

Questions asked

Methodology

Questions Asked for Focus Groups

Lake County Illinois Focus Groups

Question 1:	What are the top factors that you feel influenced your decision or those of others to take a job at Lake County?
Question 2:	In your mind, what are 3 top factors that make Lake County an employer of choice?
Question 3:	Do you think new employees come to work at the County seeking a long-time career? If not, what might they be looking for? If yes, what made them think they would find it here?
Question 4:	Why do you choose to continue working for the County?
Question 5:	Are you aware of the Compensation Incentive Program available to Lake County employees? If so, what are your thoughts and opinions about it?
Question 6:	Do you feel you are well educated about the total pay and benefits package that Lake County Illinois offers its employees? As an overall package, how do you feel about what is offered to employees?
Question 6b: (only for group that is 2 years or less of service)	<p>How did you hear about your position at Lake County and what did you think about the application process?</p> <p><i>Facilitator will pay special attention to listen for the following and will delve deeper into any/all of these items should they be brought up:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Posting of jobs</i> • <i>Job descriptions not clear</i>
Question 7:	<p>In your opinion, is there anything the County should do to attract, recruit and hire a greater number of high quality, earlier-in-their-career employees?</p> <p><i>Facilitator will pay special attention to listen for any of the following and will delve deeper into any/all of these items should they be brought up:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Increase starting salaries</i> • <i>Promote faster</i> • <i>Improve benefit plan</i> • <i>Be more flexible in pay increases</i> • <i>Consideration of lifestyle needs/flex hours/work from home</i>
Question 8:	Would you recommend to a friend that Lake County is a good place to work? Why or why not?
Question 9:	Think of someone you know who was a good performer, but left a County position. Why do you think he or she left?

	<p><i>Facilitator will pay special attention to listen for any of the following and will delve deeper into any/all of these items should they be brought up:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Salary</i> • <i>Benefits</i> • <i>Better opportunity for growth</i> • <i>Lack of career path</i> • <i>Lack of recognition for work done</i> • <i>Mentoring programs</i> • <i>Manager</i> • <i>Match between job description and actual job responsibilities</i>
--	--

Other possible questions to probe further if the topic arises:

- What factors about Lake County made you interested in interviewing for a position with it?
- How did you learn about positions at Lake County?

For managers only:

What, if anything, could the County have done to retain a top performer?

- As a manager, what could the County do better to improve hiring and retention in your department?

Methodology

In collaboration with Lake County the following methodology was used for the focus groups.

- Lake Forest Graduate School of Management met with the Lake County HR team to understand the purpose and goals of this initiative, and had several meetings to discuss and agree on a process and methodology to conduct the focus groups.
- Lake Forest faculty and the project team met with the heads of departments to ensure that there was agreement on the questions being asked of employees.
- Eight ninety-minute focus groups were organized with these participants:
 - Administrative Assistants
 - Employees with less than 2 years in the County
 - Employees with between 3 – 10 years in the County
 - Employees with more than 10 years in the County
 - Laborers/Skilled Trades
 - Attorneys
 - Engineers
 - Health Care professionals
- Lake Forest faculty conducted discussions with these groups and then did a thorough analysis of the feedback, from which 6 major themes emerged.
- Themes were organized and presented, along with possible recommendations for Lake County to consider.
- As per Lake County's direction, survey questions were created based on the themes, with the intention of launching a survey to all employees at Lake County. Data gathered from the survey will be incorporated into the final report.