



Wisconsin health care company offers parenting classes as employee benefit

Central Wisconsin is facing a workforce shortage.

In a statewide survey, 77 percent of employers reported that they're having trouble finding employees, according to Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce, the largest business trade association in the state.

Already facing pressure from market globalization to innovate and develop better, faster, less expensive ways to produce the goods and services that are in demand, local employers now face the difficult prospect of competing intensely with one another over a shrinking labor pool.

"Employers are looking for employees, and they're looking for ways to have some kind of advantage in hiring," Dr. Corrie Norrbom, Health Policy Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS), said.

WIPPS is part of a growing coalition of local businesses and community partners who are looking for an answer to the workforce shortage in an unexpected place: early childhood.

"In order to raise the next generation of local talent, there is growing consensus that we must increase our investment in supporting children from birth to early adulthood," Dr. Norrbom said. "This means supporting parents' ability to give their children the care they need, finding and keeping a job with a sustainable wage, and maintaining a healthy quality of life."

A model to support current and future workers

The community is investing in early childhood by offering LENA Start, a program for parents that uses regular feedback from LENA technology to help increase interactive talk with young children. Classes are offered at several locations through a public-private partnership that Dr. Norrbom coordinates.

In the fall of 2018, North Central Health Care (NCHC), a government organization that provides health care in three counties, joined the partnership and became one of the first companies in the country to offer LENA Start classes for their 750 employees.

The reasoning was twofold. First, by encouraging employees in their role as parents, the company hoped to create a family-friendly workplace that would incentivize team members to stay long-term.

Second, by investing in the cognitive development of young children, NCHC could support the development of a strong workforce for the future.

“You have to take the long view. If you’re a great employer, and you have programs like this, it creates a family attachment to an organization that spans generations. More than anything it’s an investment in your community,” CEO Michael Loy said.

A unique employee benefit

Seeking to remove barriers to enrollment, NCHC scheduled classes to take place over the lunch hour and offered an extra 30 minutes of paid time off each week to anyone who wanted to attend.

To start recruiting participants, the benefits department identified employees who had recently had children. In addition to a welcome baby basket, they sent an invitation to join the LENA Start classes.

Mr. Loy also promoted LENA Start via internal newsletters, stand-up briefings for employees at each campus, and fliers posted on bulletin boards.

“We had all sorts of employees attend — from pharmacy workers to food workers,” Loy said. “They were from all different economic stratifications within the organization, from frontline employees to professionals.”

Employees were also encouraged to invite their friends and family to join the class. At the final count, the class consisted of about 70 percent employees and 30 percent community members.

“Nice to get some guidance”

For Mike Jaeger, a Crisis Service Professional who works third shift, attending the classes gave him an opportunity to meet different coworkers and learn new conversational strategies to try with his daughter Adalyne.

“This definitely changed how we interact with our daughter. She’s our only child, and it’s nice to get some guidance,” he said.

Adalyne, who’s now 18 months old, was born prematurely. At the hospital, Mr. Jaeger remembers the nurses telling him to read with her regularly.



Seventy-seven percent of employers in Wisconsin reported that they’re having trouble finding employees.

"I read with her every night, but I didn't understand why because she wasn't responding," he said. "But now I know that just because she doesn't respond doesn't mean she doesn't understand."

Increases in engagement

Mr. Loy began to hear similar stories from other employees, who stopped him in the hallway to tell him about how the class changed their approach to interaction and the way their children responded.

"Participants went out of their way to say how much of an impact this had on them," he said. "They're greatly appreciative of the fact that we're allowing them to do it."

At the end of the year, North Central Health Care measured their employee engagement scores and found that they had increased significantly because of the new efforts to become a family-friendly workplace, Loy said.

"Being a parent can be a real challenge. It's the most rewarding, yet hardest thing most people do," he said. "Having an employer that's giving you the resources to help a child succeed — that's got to feel good. This will have a lifelong impact. It's not just a hundred dollar gift card that we're giving to someone to say good job; this program is amplifying the impact of our support for employees over months and years."

Mr. Loy sees the program as a way to help ensure that Marathon County and the surrounding areas remain a great place to raise kids, where talented people will want to settle down and start a family. Businesses who adopt the program can expect to see short- and long-term payoffs, he said.

"This was relatively low-friction for us to participate in, and it had a really tremendous upside. It's a low-risk, high-reward situation to improve your brand as a family-friendly employer," Loy said. "And it's a fun program — it's incredibly rewarding in terms of the experience of seeing the impact it has on the kids and the parents."



Mike Jaeger, an employee at NCHC, learned new strategies for interacting with his 18-month-old daughter Adalyne.

Learn more about LENA Start!



LENA Start is a program for parents that uses regular feedback from LENA technology to help increase interactive talk in order to close the early-talk gap, support kindergarten readiness, and build stronger families.

Visit www.LENA.org/LENA-Start for more information.