

HUMAN RESOURCES

DIALOGUE NEEDED
FOLLOWING INCOME CUTS

Our health service faces new challenges of maintaining morale and motivation after the series of income cuts imposed through last year's government decisions writes employment specialist, Gerald Flynn.

The health sector has come through many challenges over the past five years with successes in community care, cancer treatment and primary health services. A new challenge is the personal one of retaining individual motivation on lower net incomes.

Employment specialists see significantly reduced earnings as damaging the 'psychological contract' that lies at the basis of most employment relations. In many employments, people would respond by taking whatever opportunities are open to them to find an alternative job either here or abroad.

The health service is somewhat different in that most of the 105,000 people working in the sector also have a commitment to patient services, which is often much stronger than mere 'customer focus' in the private sector. There is frequently more of a team focus, which knits the capabilities of different people in ensuring patient well-being, than is found among those who operate in individualist roles.

THE 'PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT'

In these challenging times, the call for effective people management has never been louder. HR managers are amongst those on the frontline when it comes to maintaining that delicate employer/employee relationship and trust – the so-called 'psychological contract' – and delivering high performance in a period where reduced incomes, potential redundancies and other belt-tightening measures may become fairly common, even in the public service.

The extensive negotiations on modernising and improving efficiencies in the public service – from education and justice to health and local authority sectors – late last year may provide a basis for rebuilding public services in tandem with improved exchequer finances.

"While economic data may suggest some recovery on the way, employees report plunging job satisfaction levels as well as falling standards of living over the last six months." This bleak picture is painted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) based on its employee outlook surveys.

CIPD Ireland director, Michael McDonnell said that "despite the resurgence in the stock market and the gradual appearance of economic green shoots, the 'real' economy as experienced in people's day-to-day lives has yet to witness any signs of recovery, with people under increasing pressure both at work and in their personal finances. Employees are more than twice as likely to say their personal standard of living has worsened over the last six months, as they are to say it has improved." At the same time the CIPD net employee job satisfaction score has dropped substantially from 46 plus to 37 plus since early in 2008.

FALLING JOB SATISFACTION

Mr. McDonnell added that the fall in job satisfaction, which has been marked across both the private and public sectors has been accompanied by an increase in the proportion of people reporting they are under excessive pressure at work – either every day or once or twice a week – rising to 42 per cent from 38 per cent last year.

He said that "employees are also more likely to say that they have seen increases in stress and conflict at work, as well as bullying by line managers as a result of the recession."

This is a common feature in many workplaces according to the research by the CIPD personnel managers' institute. It calls on us all to be aware of the added stresses and to try to avoid it impacting on patient services or in how we interact with colleagues.



◆ Gerald Flynn – employment specialist with Align Management Solutions

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◆ Michael McDonnell, Director of CIPD Ireland says “job satisfaction and personal finances are under stress.”

The reality is that HSE managers have no more influence on government policies than do the trade unions leaders so we have to maintain our morale and consider the improvements in health services which lie ahead after the worst cuts or ‘adjustments’ are absorbed.

FLEXIBILITY AT WORK

One positive outcome is that we now have a general picture of the agreed transformation of public services envisaged by all those who are focused on delivering quality health services through flexibility and further capital and current investment over the coming years.

My work with many private sector organisations over the past decade has witnessed the depressing impact of compulsory job cuts, abandonment of defined benefit pensions, reduced core pay rates and longer shift roster patterns. They have often been accompanied by voluntary departures even when third-party interventions by the Labour Relations Commission and Labour Court, and trade union accommodations, helped soften the worst impacts.

The challenges and changes which Aer Lingus, Waterford Crystal, Guinness, Iarnród Éireann, Halifax and many other organisations have all faced over the past 15 years will be echoed in the health

sector. With a skilled and professional workforce and unions that have already proposed a path for ‘transformation’ to enhance services and value for taxpayers, we can already see (and ahead over troubled waters,

This is why engagement is always more fruitful in securing productive improvements for patient services than trying to prevent the inevitable changes which is ahead. I have met many painters who tried to prevent the introduction of the roller brush; printers who resisted computerised type-setting, and dock workers who pledged to fight to the death against the use of containers – all in vain.

Bearing in mind the importance of engagement, and as people try to cope with tighter budgets and pay cuts, it would seem prudent for an organisation like the HSE to become actively involved in an engagement programme and employee attitude surveys.

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