

Making the Grade as One of America's Best Employers

By Ed Lamb

HR News readers should expect municipalities and state universities to rank highly on any list of top employers. Still, exploring what goes into achieving such a ranking can only help even more governments, educational institutions and other public sector organizations provide the best environments for their workers, as well as the greatest services to their constituents and customers.

Working from the *Forbes* 2016 ranking of the 500 best U.S. employers, we interviewed human resources directors and executives from the City of Austin, Texas; City of Los Angeles, Calif.; University of Utah in Salt Lake City; and County of Los Angeles, Calif. Each highlighted the following efforts and programs:

- Assessing employee engagement annually, then sharing and acting on survey findings
- Providing generous, family-friendly benefits, including full health coverage that extends to eye and dental services, flex time, telecommuting and choice of worksite
- Offering numerous and long-term internships that function as gateways to employment and pipelines for talent
- Leading on pay and job opportunities by consistently exceeding minimum wage, guaranteeing a living wage and going beyond Ban the Box to reach out directly to nonviolent offenders currently in jail or on probation
- Involving employees directly in developing new programs and benefits

- Training employees for supervisory and management positions
- Partnering with elected and/or appointed leaders to build an engaged and productive workforce
- Training supervisors and managers to express the organization's mission and values when dealing with employees
- Fostering and rewarding a sense of public service

Fully detailing all the positive things the cities, county and university are doing would be impossible, especially when it comes to wellness benefits and pay plans. You can learn more by visiting the websites listed in the sidebar. Short of that, consider what Austin's Acting Assistant City Manager Mark Washington observed about compensation: "We do hear some dissatisfaction with pay. Austin is known as the Silicon Valley, or 'Silicon Hills,' of Texas because of the number of high-tech companies and universities in the metro area. But as a government, we cannot match private companies with salaries. So we work each year to make adjustments to total compensation and improve benefits to better meet employees' needs with offerings other than just pay."

Cutting-edge approaches to employee development also merit quick mentions. Wendy Macy, who serves as the general manager for the City of Los Angeles Personnel Department, described the city's recent launch of Cornerstone, which is a fully integrated recruitment-to-retirements online system for "onboarding, employee evaluation, employee development and succession planning."

She continued: "Cornerstone will help to create a consistent employee experience across the city, from the day an employee

How Forbes Identified America's Best Employers

The magazine partnered with Statista to survey a total of 30,000 employees who worked at organizations with more than 5,000 staff members in 2015. Efforts were made to ensure respondents matched the overall U.S. population in terms of age, ethnicity, gender and education.

Each survey participant used to a 10-point scale to indicate how likely they would be to recommend their own organization to someone looking for a job. Respondents also answered questions designed to reveal how they viewed other employers in their industry.

Here is how the public sector employers interviewed for this article ranked:

- 22. City of Austin, Texas (www.austintexas.gov/department/human-resources)
- 32. University of Utah (www.hr.utah.edu)
- 39. County of Los Angeles, Calif. (<http://hr.lacounty.gov/>)
- 93. City of Los Angeles, Calif. (<http://per.lacity.org/>)

Other state universities and municipal governments that made the top-50 include Duke University, Florida International University, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill and Miami-Dade County. Several public health systems, public safety departments and federal agencies also ranked highly. You can view the full list online at <http://onforb.es/1WP-0gQq>.

starts to the day that employee starts planning their retirement. It is truly a comprehensive online training program with courses in supervision, leadership and software skills.”

In Austin, city workers looking to move up the career ladders can take part in what Washington calls “speed mentoring.” During regularly scheduled sessions, managers and supervisor meet with a succession of employees for 7- or 8-minute intensive Q&As and focused coaching interventions. Each speed mentoring session is planned with affinity groups and lasts several hours. Many get overlooked.

Don't Just Measure Engagement

University of Utah Chief Human Resource Officer Jeff C. Herring emphasized the importance of knowing what one is looking for when combing through data on employee engagement. One of the most powerful framing devices his HR team uses is “commitment,” which they further break down into continuance commitment, normative commitment and affective commitment.

As explained by Herring, continuance reflects a calculation that leaving a job with the university would incur more costs and inconvenience than staying. An employee committed to merely continuing is not engaged and will take another job for almost any marginal perceived gain.

Normative commitment reflects a feeling of obligation to stay on the job because co-workers and customers rely on your efforts. A normatively engaged employee can be counted on for attendance and basic performance but not for enthusiasm and innovation.

The university aims for fostering and increasing affective commitment, which can be captured from survey responses like “I love my job!” Herring and his team dive deep into why employees develop and maintain a personal sense of satisfaction in what they do. One of the core reasons revealed in the annual engagement surveys is that “so many see the value in what they do,” Herring said.

“At Utah, we’re literally curing cancer and healing the environment. We’re doing the research and educating the students,” he continued. “Custodians, counselors, faculty—they all can recognize that what they do enables all the great things the university accomplishes.”

Make Innovation Inclusive

One of the most significant ways found to develop affective commitment and engagement is to involve workers in developing and implementing new benefits, services and products. Austin has established Innovation Labs and started offering grants to city workers who propose ideas to better meet the needs of co-workers and residents. One of the first grants funded development of a local flooding app created by a public works engineer. The software triggers alerts to city crews and subscribers when waters rise and streets need to be closed.

Austin’s Mark Washington called the Innovation Labs “intrapreneurial” because it allows public sector workers to act like entrepreneurs. Los Angeles County also embraces this philosophy as part of its Executive Leadership Development Program (ELDP).

Operated in conjunction with the University of Southern California, the ELDP culminates with a group project to create a program that could be implemented at participants’ own worksites, across their departments or throughout the county. A notable success identified by County Director of Personnel Lisa M. Garrett has been the financial wellness program.

“We heard from one group that they saw all their co-workers getting physically healthy with our traditional wellness offerings but still struggling with their finances,” Garrett recalled. “So we told them, ‘Figure out what people need to know about managing their pay, saving for retirement, etc., and how we can share that information. They did.’”

The City of Los Angeles, surrounded but not outdone by the county, operates its own PerformLA program. The goal, according to Wendy Macy, is “to teach employees the various techniques that can be used to identify and implement innovative ideas, procedures and technology [with] an emphasis on innovation that has allowed

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employees at all levels to be empowered and engaged, encouraging them to deliver creative solutions to ongoing challenges.”

Make Meeting the Mission a Mission

Austin’s Innovation Labs grew, in part, out of its mission to be the best managed city in America and the Five Pillars of PRIDE that support the mission. As defined on the city’s HR websites

- **P stands for Public Service and Engagement.** We will partner with one another and with our community to provide the best service possible.
- **R stands for Responsibility and Accountability.** We take responsibility for achieving results and hold ourselves accountable for our actions.
- **I stands for Innovation and Sustainability.** We actively seek out good ideas that have a lasting, positive impact on our work, our community and our environment.
- **D stands for Diversity & Inclusion.** We recognize and respect a variety of perspectives, experiences and approaches that will help us achieve our organizational goals.
- **E stands for Ethics and Integrity.** Our actions will maintain the trust and confidence of the public and the organization.

Washington emphasized that new solutions to old problems are always needed because “there is no one-size-fit-all.” He also noted the best solutions often come from the individuals most affected and from those who have a stake in successful resolutions. By involving employees in identifying and meeting challenges, he said, more people commit to achieving Austin’s mission of great management.

Macy echoed this assessment of the importance of building a shared purpose for the City of Los Angeles when she said that “what has also resonated with our employees is that working for the city allows them the ability to make a direct contribution to the residents of the City of Los Angeles by serving and giving back to the community that they love.”

Herring, at the University of Utah, likewise called attention to sharing a mission when he described ongoing efforts to establish and reinforce a brand for his HR department as a group employees know

- Take care of you,
- Develop you, and
- Connect you

Herring cited connecting employees with the larger work of the university as one of the most important tasks because “connection reflects the understanding that it takes a community to produce a great graduate and high-performing faculty and hospital staff.”

Partner With Policymakers

The university president has actually led much of the HR branding effort at Utah because, according to Herring, “he is very good at recognizing that student success grows from employee engagement.”

The top executive at the Salt Lake City school is not alone. Los Angeles County’s Garret said that one of the first things she did after learning of the county’s *Forbes* ranking was send “a message to the Board of Supervisors that said, ‘A lot of this is due to your work.’” She particularly thanked the elected officials for acknowledging that county workers deserved generous compensation, continuous development and schedule flexibility because “what we do is not just a job. We change lives.”

Reinforce Purpose and Pride

Recognizing the importance of their jobs is what Herring believes helps public sector employees “avoid the Sunday Night Blues. They know they have meaningful work to do come Monday morning.”

He stressed that preparing supervisors and managers to instill and reward this sense of purpose and pride must be a priority for public sector HR professionals. Or, as he put it, “When we do training for supervisors [at the university], we start with general philosophy that HR’s job is managing supervisors. ... Once an employee comes to us in the HR office, it’s too late.”

Asked directly for advice on achieving the best outcomes with training other organizational leaders and becoming a “best employer,” Macy stated that a key for the City of Los Angeles was “constant communication with your staff and your clients.”

The goal of the two-way, open-ended communication, Macy said, must be to “learn about your employees. Find out where they want to go in their careers and what their purpose for coming to work is. Keep them engaged and encourage employee development. Let them know their contributions add value to the organization. Provide adequate training to your supervisors to develop employees. Identify and challenge processes and procedures that no longer provide use, are outdated or ineffective. Stay updated on current and future trends and promote a culture conducive to fostering and implementing innovative ideas by allowing for feedback and suggestions by your employees. Cultivate a culture and identity of approachability in which the employees and supervisors we serve feel comfortable addressing concerns to us, especially those concerns that may cause them to feel hesitant or uncomfortable.”

Los Angeles County’s Garrett summed all that up in a single sentence: “If people are our most valuable asset, make sure your budget and all your activities reflect it.”

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