

Recession can make summer vacation scheduling more complex

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NEW YORK — Many small business owners are likely to find a perennial summertime challenge, keeping their companies staffed during peak vacation times, even harder this year.

Layoffs and jobs lost to attrition mean that many companies have leaner staffing, while employees still want to take time off. Owners may find this summer that they need to change their vacation policies. And those without policies may feel the need to create them.

Perhaps the biggest issue this summer is how many employees can be off at the same time. Owners who, for example, let three people be off at once last year may find that only two can go now.

A further complication is the fact that fewer companies are taking on extra help for the summer.

"Two years ago, you'd be calling a temporary agency," said Rob Wilson, president of Employco, a Chicago-based resources outsourcing company. "There's been a drastic reduction in temps filling in on vacation time."

Some owners might be tempted to cut staffers' vacation time, but that's something they should absolutely avoid. Instead, Wilson said, owners should encourage employees to take their time, let staffers know that they've earned their days off and that their work is appreciated.

"It's an opportunity for a business owner to build goodwill with employees," he said. "Let them take it, come back, be energized."

Still, some summer time-off perks like half-days on Fridays may be disappearing. Wilson suggested that owners forced to make such cuts give something back to employees, like pizza for lunch, or ice cream.

"It's a good morale booster, people appreciate it and it's not a big expense," he said.

And, in any economy, owners need to know how they're going to resolve the conflicts that arise when too many people ask for the same time off. In many small companies,

employees are able to sort out among themselves who will take a particular day or week off. Wilson said vacation scheduling can be an opportunity for team building - employees who can figure out their vacations together will probably be able to collaborate on work-related projects.

But vacation planning shouldn't be left entirely to staffers. An owner should have a written vacation policy that details for employees how they much vacation they're entitled to, how they accrue it and how they schedule it. A policy should include the methods of resolving conflicts, whether it's according to seniority or on a first-come, first-served basis.

Owners can find sample vacation policies online. The Business Owners Toolkit has a fairly lengthy sample policy at www.toolkit.com. It also contains policies including sick time, jury duty and parental and military leave. You'll need to register with the site to download the policy.

You can also get advice from human resources professionals about how to create a policy.

Wilson advises owners to be flexible in their policies. For example, if a young staffer has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to go to a family reunion, being rigid and sticking to a policy based on seniority is likely to hurt morale, and not just for that employee. Some diplomacy may be called for, and that means asking the more senior staffer to choose another time. Or, figuring out another way for all the work to be done while both staffers are away.

Meanwhile, many business owners are taking less time off this summer.

"We're seeing a lot more CEOs and presidents of companies in the trenches working more and cutting back on travel time," Wilson said. Many are probably concerned about keeping business coming in and also trying to save money, but the sacrifice they're making is something that employees notice and will appreciate, he said.