

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Workers Beware

By Douglas E. Welch

As if there weren't enough problems facing high-tech careerists today, some companies have taken it upon themselves to create several new pitfalls. Each of these "policies" shows a consistent disregard for employees, their careers and their lives outside of the workplace. Despite recent gains in developing a balance between profits and employee well-being, all workers are facing a new set of challenges.

I Don't Care

First, any company that engages in the policies detailed below is delivering a clear and constant message to its employees: I don't care. While making money is surely the main purpose of any company, many businesses forget that they make that money on the backs of their employees. Without employees, there would be no company and no profits. Instead, we are returned back to the days of callous management and ever-grasping stockholders who care little—and know less—about the people who generate company profits. When hard times come, there is no balance to the burden. It is heaped upon the employees in an effort to boost profits and line executive pockets.

If you find yourself in one of these companies, get out. Find another job, start your own business, do whatever it takes to free yourself from uncaring people. You may find that there *are* better jobs out there. You might even begin to send a signal to some of these companies that respect is required if they want the use of your talents. Companies that refuse to offer this respect will find it more and more difficult to find the talent they need. You win, either way.

Vacation— What Vacation?

I have written in the past about the importance of taking a vacation from your work, whether it is a long weekend with friends and family or a two-week holiday to somewhere special. A vacation allows you the time to stop and evaluate your work and life without the constant pressure of deadlines, harried coworkers and customers. Without a vacation, most people become more and more worn out, both mentally and physically, until something happens that *makes* them take a vacation. By that time, they spend their entire vacation simply recovering instead of reflecting.

It is bad enough that companies often apply subtle

(and not so subtle) pressure to prevent employees from taking their vacations—now they are taking overt action. Recently, several companies have announced weeklong "forced vacations." The entire workforce is essentially "laid off" for one week and is forced to use their vacation time. Unfortunately, if a worker has already used his vacation time, this shutdown becomes a week off with no pay. Worse still, there is usually little or no warning that these forced shutdowns could occur until they are announced.

The result of such policies is that workers are effectively banned from planning any vacation for fear that a shutdown will be announced at some later date. What a boon for companies. They seem to have finally found a way to curtail vacation time without doing anything illegal. Unable to plan vacations without the fear of losing a week's pay, many employees will opt for no vacation at all. Once again, these companies show no understanding of the effects on their employees.

I guess it is just too bad if vacations were planned for school breaks or other immovable dates. Employees will just have to do without their vacation, or take it on their own time, the companies seem to be saying. Taken with all the other abuse employees have suffered over the years, this action seems intolerable to me.

Severance—What Severance?

Another tactic that has come to light is the "severance pay that really isn't." One company recently announced that all employees would be asked to work for half pay for the two weeks leading up to a layoff announcement. Then, those who were cut would receive one week's severance pay. The trouble, as you might have surmised, is that there really isn't any severance. The laid-off employees are only receiving the week's pay they should have received over the prior two weeks. Someone at this company is sure to call this savvy planning, but I call it disingenuous, deceptive and despicable. I certainly hope that these employees realize that the company is merely using them for two more weeks of work—while adding the abuse of a pay cut.

You can rest assured that some companies will continue to push the envelope on ways of abusing their employees in an effort to stave off bankruptcy or merely increase the bottom line. You need to make sure that you evaluate every announcement, every policy, and every change with a wary eye. More important, you need to be ready to take your talents elsewhere when your company decides that your needs no longer matter. □