

While Others Wait, Some Bold Companies Invest in their Future with Training

Times are definitely tough for most insurance companies these days. And when times get tough, training and education usually are the first casualties of cost cutting directives. This is nothing new. This has been standard operating procedure ever since the first company declared the development of their employees “a top priority.”

Nevertheless, there are some companies that, despite the downturn, realize that in the long run, they must keep their employees trained and educated. Why? Because they believe it's more profitable.

This series will focus on those companies that decided to buck the trend, and found tremendous returns on their investments in the talent and skill of their people.

Part 3: Employer Resources Northwest Sees Training as Critical, not Expendable

By Carl Van

The Company

Employers Resources Northwest (ERNWest) is a specialty workers' compensation service company that operates exclusively in Washington state. Washington is one of the last monopolistic states but allows industry trade associations to pool their member's premiums in group retrospectively rated insurance programs. ERNWest administers these trade-association based programs by helping associations to structure their programs and then providing all services necessary to run the programs including sales, enrollment, account management, claims oversight, safety, and legal services.

The Task

John Meier is the owner of ERNWest, and like everyone else, Mr. Meier knows he has to continually look for new ways to improve both the technical and customer service skills of his employees. He saw a new class offered by the International Insurance Institute entitled Critical Thinking for Claims, and decided to move forward with providing that class to his claims staff.

“I was aware of the financial problems that the industry and indeed the entire country faced, yet decided that to stop investing in the development of my people would be a mistake,” he explains. ERNWest truly serves a niche market, and it is essential for his staff to be able to com-

municate effectively with over 1500 client companies, as well as be able to convince the state's State Fund to adjudicate claims in a proper, timely and effective manner. In his eyes, training, especially customer service and critical thinking, is a must.

To appreciate this focus, you must first understand Mr. Meier.

The Decision Maker

Mr. Meier, President & CEO of ERNWest, started working in the workers' compensation industry right after graduating from the University of Puget Sound as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor in 1992.

While he knew VRC work would not be a career, it provided valuable insight and experience in the workers' compensation system in Washington. Mr. Meier was successful as a VRC because he spent the time to understand how premium rates were established in Washington and was able to relate to employers the importance of managing their claims efficiently and effectively. He held such titles as Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, Branch Manager, and Vice President. After being sent to the University of Washington's Executive Management Program, Mr. Meier pitched an idea to his company that they should help employers manage their claims directly. In 1999, Employer Resources Northwest was born. Over time this idea became ERNWest which he purchased in 2004.

He likes to be involved in everything: from IT, to underwriting and claims reviews, to sales. He says the most rewarding part of his job is, “Helping employers understand and successfully navigate a complex and sometimes frustrating workers' compensation system.” Along those lines, both he and ERNWest have been quite successful. He attributes that suc-

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cess to, “my staff being focused on providing the best service they can to each of the company's clients.”

When speaking to Mr. Meier, there is little doubt about his philosophy when it comes to training. “I require every one of my employees to seek out and receive training every year. I don't dictate what training they choose to attend,” he explains, “I just want them to continue learning, and then try to apply what they've learned to their day to day activities.”

The Short Term

His staff had been through the Awesome Claims Customer Service program previously, and Mr. Meier was looking for

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something to also enhance the ability of the staff and management to think through situations logically and thoroughly.

The Critical Thinking for Claims class seemed like a perfect fit. His group learned:

- 10 pitfalls of unreliable reasoning, and how to respond to each.
- 2 ways to deal with “emotional manipulation.”
- 3 Styles of non-critical thinking and how to identify them.
- 2 ways of recognizing and evaluating statements, conclusions and arguments.
- 7 steps to analyzing an argument.
- 2 skills for staying focused on the issue at hand.

According to Mr. Meier, “This kind of training was extremely important for ERNWest staff because they work in a monopolistic state where they must convince other adjusters to take action on claims that they do not have the authority to take themselves.” He adds, “By applying the skills learned in this program the staff enhanced their reasoning, critical thinking, and they were better able to structure the arguments they have to make, so their clients' claims are handled as aggressively as possible.”



John Meier, President & CEO of ERNWest, believes that every employee should seek out training.

The Long Term

ERNWest has received various awards from the trade associations they work for, but according to Mr. Meier, “The most important award comes from the employers we work with on a day-to-day basis. Our company surveys our clients every six months regarding the level of customer service and expertise our front-line staff provides.”

Over the past three years, through both good and bad times, his staff has been able to average claims management customer service scores of more than 9 out of 10 (10 being the best). Immediate needs

were a focus on customer service and the ability to critically work through what kind of actions are most effective in resolving State Fund claims. This has allowed ERNWest to continue

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growing in a very difficult economy. Over the longer term it is Mr. Meier's hope that his employees will continue to pursue additional training in these areas because it is customer service, critical thinking and strong execution of the company's mission that will sustain the company as a premier service provider and a great place to work.

Mr. Meier's prized possession is a gift his staff bought him a while back. It is a parody of the “motivation” posters that you see in many offices these days. It shows a rowing team in the middle of a very intense moment. Underneath it reads “Get to work; you aren't paid to believe in the power of your dreams.” He says he likes it because it makes him laugh. Also, through that humor, it reminds us “that most of what we come to value over time, we had to work hard to achieve.”

Carl Van is President & CEO of International Insurance Institute and author of the Awesome Claims Customer Service and Critical Thinking for Claims programs utilized throughout the U.S., Canada and the U.K. He may be reached at 504-393-4570 or www.InsuranceInstitute.com. On-line video training is available at www.ClaimsEducationOnLine.com. ■