

Election '08: What you need to know about what workers think

Election year politics has a strange way of focusing employers and employees on the larger issues—such as jobs, wages and the economy. Every four years, Americans believe their votes can influence the large issues that affect their daily lives.

This quadrennial political ritual contains more than its share of polls, punditry and pontification. Politicians, their staffers and handlers read these tea leaves daily to try to divine their prospects and learn what their futures hold.

HR pros should pay attention to election year buzz, too. Knowing what's on people's minds as they go to the polls can help savvy employers get a glimpse of the future workplace.

What Americans say they want

The nonpartisan Employment Law Alliance recently conducted a survey of 1,125 working Americans to identify the hot-button issues in this year's presidential election campaign. The survey, known as the *America at Work* survey, asked what issues they would like the next president to focus on. At 87%, the top answer was "increasing the proportion of the work force earning at least a living wage."

Americans also seem concerned about

losing jobs to other countries. Eighty-six percent of respondents want the next president to make it harder for companies to outsource current U.S. jobs to foreign countries. Almost as many (83%) want the next president to find a way to provide health care coverage for all U.S. citizens.

Savvy employers read the subtext

Clearly, workers are worried about economic security. They have heard the media drumbeat of doom on the economic, global trade and health care fronts. Employers may be feeling the same insecurity, but employee angst may be employer opportunity.

When employees fear losing their jobs, they see any change in the workplace as a potential threat. This may make them more likely to seek a job elsewhere, or may lead them to look for discriminatory patterns in employer actions. Be sensitive to this insecurity and strive to reassure employees.

Now is a good time to reexamine policies and procedures to make sure they comply with federal and state laws. Train supervisors about key anti-discrimination laws and how to handle tricky issues such as harassment and discrimination charges, FMLA leave

requests and questions of overtime pay.

Also, understand that tough times may be the right time to innovate. If you are concerned about retention, address the issue in common sense, low-cost ways. Study after study shows employees appreciate being appreciated. Praise and thanks are priceless.

Note: It is possible, however, for employers to go too far in reassuring employees—and it can cost a bundle. Supervisors should never promise employees that they will never be laid off, or even that they won't be laid off in the near future. This may be construed as a contract with the employee that would destroy the employee's at-will status. If the subject comes up, employers should simply say that no layoffs *are planned* at that time. No one can guarantee the future.

Underlying concerns

The *America at Work* survey also revealed employees favor stronger employment law enforcement. In particular, 76% think the enforcement of workplace safety laws should be beefed up. Approximately 70% feel family leave should be expanded, and a similar number (69%) feel workplace discrimination laws should be more vigorously enforced.

Views about immigration laws varied widely by race and region. According to the survey results, 55% of nonwhites support relaxing immigration laws for professionals; only 36% of whites feel that way. Regionally, workers in the West feel the next president should work to increase legal immigration, while only 25% of Midwestern workers support such initiatives.

The survey results suggest employees are looking for a larger government role in the workplace, something employers have typically opposed. If this support translates into electing a president and lawmakers with similar views, employers can look forward to increased regulation. This is all the more reason employers should make sure their policies and procedures are in order.

The candidates' employment law platforms

Although the three presidential candidates—Democratic Sens. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton and Republican Sen. John McCain—talk about creating high-paying jobs, only Obama has promised to raise the minimum wage and index it to inflation. Both Democratic candidates support the Employee Free Choice Act, which would ease restrictions on union organizing. McCain does not.

All three candidates support tougher enforcement of existing trade agreements. Both Clinton and Obama want to make changes to the North American Free Trade Agreement that would require Mexico to meet tougher labor and environmental standards.

On health care reform, both Clinton and Obama advocate allowing the uninsured to participate in the federal government's health care program. Both candidates' plans would adjust premiums based on the worker's income. Clinton's program would be mandatory for anyone who did not have current coverage. Obama's plan would be mandatory only for children.

McCain pursues a more market-based approach. Generally, he wants to move America away from the employer-provided health insurance model. Specifically, he would give each individual a \$2,500 annual tax credit (up to \$5,000 per family) to purchase health insurance on the open market. McCain advocates less regulation of health care, as well as tort reform to limit malpractice payouts.