

Among the many companies offering tuition assistance to their employees, Verizon Wireless is a standout. The wireless communications leader is leaps and bounds ahead of its peers in bringing the college classroom directly into the workplace.



Education On-Call

Verizon Wireless Brings the College Classroom to the Workplace

By Michelle West, Writer

T

hrough a partnership with Strayer University, Verizon Wireless launched a pilot onsite education program last fall at its Salt Lake City, Utah, call center.

Associate, bachelor's and master's degree classes in business administration are conducted onsite at no cost to Verizon Wireless employees. Business courses are tailored to the Verizon Wireless student, with the opportunity for actual business scenarios to be used as case studies.

The model has been so successful that Verizon Wireless is rolling out Strayer University courses in other locations throughout the company.

"It has made it much easier for employees to take advantage of our industry-leading tuition assistance bene-

fits," notes Trent Vansice, director of customer service for the Salt Lake City call center.

Dorothy Martin, Verizon Wireless' LearningLINK national program manager, loves the stories she hears from employees enrolled in onsite classes. "We have first generation college students in the program and working moms who say it would be impossible for them to get their degrees without the company's tuition assistance program and the convenience of onsite classes," Martin says.

Business Plan

While helping employees achieve educational goals is rewarding, offering onsite degree-oriented courses also



NEAR LEFT, Joshua Smith and Andres Garcia (both AABA candidates) work on a class project

OPPOSITE PAGE Verizon Wireless employees take a Strayer University class in an onsite classroom in Salt Lake City Utah

makes good business sense. The reality is that the U.S. work force is shrinking. Baby boomers are entering retirement, and with fewer younger workers to replace them, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that by 2010, the United States will have a shortage of 10 million workers. Companies of all sizes are looking for ways to recruit and retain their share of a quality work force. Verizon Wireless' leaders believe they are on the right track.

"As the economy tightens, this is the kind of program that some companies would look at trimming or even cutting," Martin notes. "But we don't view it as another expense to the business; we view it as an investment, and we know we are getting our money's worth."

That's not just wishful thinking—Verizon Wireless has the data to back it up. Just a few years ago, the perception in the corporate community was that companies were spending a lot of money helping employees get their degrees, only to have the employees leave shortly after completing their education. Martin initiated a study at Verizon Wireless to determine whether that perception was true. The initial results showed that retention rates among Verizon Wireless employees who participated in the company's tuition assistance program were actually higher than those of the overall work force.

Through a cost analysis, Verizon Wireless found that not only did its LearningLINK program pay for itself, it also saved the company millions of dollars through employee retention.

Research about the LearningLINK program also

reveals that participants have greater internal mobility as well as improved job performance. And the program is a great recruiting tool—some 55% of the LearningLINK participants Verizon Wireless surveyed said the tuition assistance program was a factor in their decision to accept employment with the company.

Employee Satisfaction

Verizon Wireless leaders aren't the only ones who are satisfied with the program. "I like that Verizon Wireless is willing to invest in me," says Matthew Lee (BBA candidate), who works in tech support at the Salt Lake City call center. "It makes me want to work harder and remain a part of this company."

Lee points out that he has to commute only to one location, cutting down on his driving time during the day.



"I like the accessibility too," he adds. "I have access to my professors right in my workplace, making it very easy to communicate with them."

Strayer University professor Dr. Paul Brower, who teaches classes at the Salt Lake City location, says feedback from students has been very positive. They enjoy being in class with co-workers and are able to assist one another with their coursework, Dr. Brower says.

While Verizon Wireless's approach to providing educational opportunities to its work force may be a secret to the company's success, Martin says it's a secret they are eager to share. "We are absolutely willing to promote this concept and model to other companies," she says. "It's an important message for corporate America to hear." ☞