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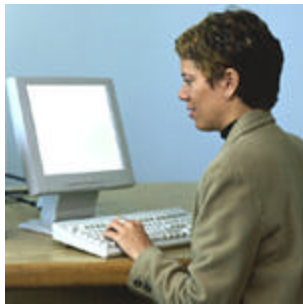
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Introducing The Conference Board

Yvonne McNulty looks at the advantages of joining business research and network organisation The Conference Board.



Your company has decided to introduce rotational assignments to increase the level of expertise among a selected group of international employees. As the HR manager it is your job to implement the programme. The challenge is that you have no experience with rotational assignments - but the success of the programme rests on your shoulders. What can you do?

Members of The Conference Board are able to access global research

In this age of information overload it is difficult to know where your time and energy is best invested when it comes to finding the data you want quickly and efficiently. One excellent source of information is The Conference Board (www.conference-board.org), a global non-profit business membership and research organisation. Formed in 1916 in the US, The Conference Board has over 2,000 member companies in 65 countries worldwide.

The Conference Board remains a widely respected source of published material on economic indicators and research on a range of business and management issues, including international HRM topics. It is well-established in the US, Europe, Asia Pacific—including China—and India with members who are typically Fortune 1000 companies and who pay an annual subscription fee pegged to the size of their company.

"Our members rely upon Conference Board research for its objectives and pragmatic applications," says Barbara Reno, Vice President & Managing Executive – Europe. "These reports and surveys, which are often based on the responses of senior executives worldwide, help to strengthen planning and decision making for practitioners," she says.

Benefits of membership

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One of the advantages of joining The Conference Board is access to cutting edge research on a global scale. For example, full research reports and shorter executive summaries are available in print versions, or can be downloaded from the Members Only website (www.conference-board.org/membersonly.htm). The Executive Action series can also be downloaded, representing brief electronic reports addressing the most pressing issues facing business today.

"Our Executive Action Series is geared to the practitioner," says Reno, "to provide an overview of a topic and present a summary of key findings. There are a huge number of titles which are HR-related and of value to HR practitioners."

Another significant benefit of The Conference Board's printed material is a feature called 'PowerPresentations', which enables electronic materials to be viewed and downloaded in PowerPoint format from their website. This allows members to access content in its most visual form. The 'notes' feature of PowerPoint also includes a detailed script and additional information for use during presentations.

In addition to the research Reno explains, members are also able to participate in The Conference Board's 'councils'. In Europe there are currently 33 councils, with 100 in the US, and more than a dozen in Asia.

"This is a major benefit of membership," she says. "Councils are peer groups of no more than 30 to 35 members, with members meeting in person up to three times a year to discuss a particular topic of focus." According to Reno, the dialogue at these meetings can be very strategic and forward-thinking. Members can also communicate regularly throughout the year either electronically through email and web pages, or via the telephone.

Another unique feature of membership is the access to 'working groups' which comprise individuals who are attracted by a particular topic The Conference Board is proposing.

"Working groups come together for a year to exchange experience and also to collect data on a topic," says Stephen Bates, Principal Researcher, HR and Performance Issues, based in The Conference Board's Paris office. "Principal researchers are there to help define the questions, help to create a survey, and identify companies which are doing interesting things on that topic."

"We might profile them for a report and invite them to give presentations to the group, which often becomes a published case study," says Gates.

Researchers like Gates also deliver presentations to individual company



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members and give presentations in person to council networks in the US and in Europe. It's a combination of drawing on academia and using research techniques but also crossing the line between the academic world and the real world to bring new perspectives back to the member networks.

Keeping costs down

Linda Barrington, labour economist and research director of The Conference Board's 'management excellence programme', says out of the many reasons for joining, one stands out in her mind above the rest: to save money. It's an interesting perspective for an organisation that charges a membership fee, but not when one considers the costs associated with consulting services.

"Say a company wants to implement rotational assignments," says Barrington. "One solution would be to get in a consultant and go with their solution, which is fine, but expensive".

Barrington explains, "Our approach is to get together with around ten other member companies who are all thinking about the same topic and struggling with how to do it. They want to know best practices. So we do a group think."

Essentially The Conference Board's approach involves bringing in their research people and experts, who then gather the data into a research report. Often the participants will have access to the report before its general publication. But the advantage, says Barrington, is that companies are building a knowledge base from within their company, rather than hiring a consultant who then walks away with the knowledge.

"And, by dividing the cost among around 15 companies to get this kind of study done; it can end up costing you only USD10,000 instead of USD 40,000," she says.

Other member benefits include access to unique information including a business information service, which saves executives both time and money through providing rapid answers to their business questions.

Conferences are also high on the list of member benefits, with public attendance at non-member rates encouraged. Currently over 100 conferences a year are held in the US, with eight to 10 per year in Asia Pacific and Europe.

What's next?

Currently, The Conference Board's 'management excellence programme' is undertaking a number of new studies including the changing role of the 'C-Suite' (COO, CEO, CFO etc), and the future of the workforce in terms of the costs and benefits of maturing/older workers. Global talent management and consumer driven healthcare are also new research topics planned for 2005/2006.

To check if you are a member of The Conference Board, or to find out more about membership, email info@conference-board.org for a quick response.

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