

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Sharing Ideas at the Grassroots Level

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Most of the time, our focus in this industry is on providing more education for the growers growing the plants and the owners who run the greenhouses and garden centers. But what about the ones who are helping to hire the staff, filling out all of the benefits paperwork and making sure our industry's businesses are in compliance with the laws on seasonal workers?

Having a dedicated person on staff to handle human resources is vital in the current climate of our industry, especially with healthcare regulations and labor shortages. And in order to stay on top of the latest rule changes and legal requirements, these HR professionals need to be informed and share ideas. AmericanHort's new HR Peer Sharing Group is focused on bringing these people together to collaborate, connect and bounce ideas off of each other.



Pictured: Members of the HR Peer Sharing Group attend their first workshop at this year's Cultivate'19.

During Cultivate'18 at the CareerUp event, Margaret Whealdon of Smith Gardens and Julie Zeijlmaker of Battlefield Farms happened to sit at the same table. A bit of small talk revealed that both of them were in

charge of human resources at their respective workplaces and members of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). They exchanged business cards and decided to make it a point to chat once a month. They also spent the next few days at the show networking and reaching out to people in a similar job position.

"The industry that we're in is pretty unique in terms of the seasonality and getting the labor in," said Margaret. "It's our biggest challenge. In terms of being able to connect with other HR professionals in ag or horticulture, you just can't find any through SHRM."

Margaret and Julie mentioned it to staff at AmericanHort, who suggested they put together a conference call, bringing in other HR people and it grew from there. At this year's Cultivate'19, they had their first formal workshop focused solely on HR-related topics attended by more than 35 people.

The workshop included speakers, panels and sessions that addressed topics like workplace safety, overtime rules, H-2A and immigration, recruiting and retention, and employee engagement.

"This group allows us to make people aware of the changes, how to comply and provide some best practices," Julie explained. "A lot of times, something comes up that you've never dealt with before and you might know somebody in

the peer group who's been through it, so they can help you with a solution."

The HR peer workshop was so well-received that the goal is to make it an annual program at every Cultivate and, of course, encourage more people to be a part of it. There's also now a specific place on AmericanHort's website for the Peer Sharing Group where HR professionals can chat online, send each other messages, and post ideas and information on the blog.

"I think that's what's so great about the horticulture industry, that there are ways to share information" said Julie.

"We've met a lot of new people we didn't even know were in the industry. Education is so important, especially if you don't have an HR background. Hopefully, this will continue to grow."

If you're in human resources and are interested in joining the HR Peer Sharing Group, contact Mary Beth Cowardin at MaryBethC@AmericanHort.org. You can also find more information at americanhort.org/page/PeerSharingGroup.

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