

HR 'super agency' comes to NoCo Mountain States Employers Council wants 'face time'

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Author: Tom Hacker

DENVER - A nonprofit agency that provides employers with day-to-day, face-to-face help with problems ranging from wage disputes to discrimination cases will open a Northern Colorado office to extend its reach.

Officials of the Denver-based Mountain States Employers Council, with 2,400 members in the Rocky Mountain region, are shopping for office space to house a satellite center similar to one the group opened in Colorado Springs six years ago.

Once established, the office and its staff will provide legal services, human resource consulting, training and wide-ranging data services to member employers in Northern Colorado and Wyoming.

"We found out when we opened in Colorado Springs how important it is to have close, face-to-face relationships with those members," said Bill Smith, the group's vice president for membership development.

"We would like to have been up there sooner, and had planned on that. But then everything slowed down in 2002 and 2003. It's exciting to see the economy heading in the right direction again."

In a sense, the agency's decision to invest in space and staff costs to serve the region is an economic indicator. Smith said the council has been mindful of employment growth among small to mid-size employers in Northern Colorado.

"If we didn't see that area growing as fast as it is, it wouldn't make sense for us to make this move," he said.

Mission evolves

Formed in 1939, and at that time perceived as company management's response to the growing influence of labor unions, the employers council has evolved into a broad-ranging service provider that offers everything from legal representation to customized data-crunching for member businesses and organizations.

The group's 80-member staff includes 30 lawyers specializing in employment issues.

"They have saved our bacon more than once," said Mark Griffith, chief financial officer for Allnutt Funeral Service's region-wide network of mortuaries and chapels. "Their people are so knowledgeable in the whole employment area."

Griffith said the council several years ago stepped in to mediate a dispute over an employment offer, preventing legal tangles that otherwise would have resulted. The agency also consulted with Allnutt on creating an employee manual for its 30 full-time and 25 part-time employees in Fort Collins, Loveland, Greeley, Eaton and Estes Park.

"We recouped our annual fee several times over," Griffith said.

Council members are assessed annual dues based on their payroll size, equal to 4 percent of the employer's share of Social Security taxes for all workers. Minimum dues are \$1,025 with a cap of \$4,100.

For that, members are entitled to the full range of council services.

"So much of what we do goes toward improving employee relations," Smith said. "A lot of what we do for employers is about staying out of trouble. We help them in knowing what to not do, so to speak."

Wage-and-hour

Beginning with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a series of regulatory reforms have shaped labor relations over the past four decades. Those issues have become the focus of many of the council's training programs and much of its legal work.

Most commonly, Smith said, the council has assisted its members with wage-and-hour issues and employee classification.

"Failure to pay overtime when overtime wages should be paid is one issue," Smith said. "Deciding when someone is exempt from overtime is another."

While the thornier issues of employee relations occupy the agency's 30 staff attorneys, the group's work is probably more visible to its members in training rooms. The group uses facilities at the Platte River Power Authority in Fort Collins to conduct about a dozen topical classes annually.

Smith said the number of offerings would jump dramatically when the new regional office is opened, just as it did in Colorado Springs the year after the council expanded there.

"We expanded our training in the Springs from 12 to 16 classes a year to well over 40," he said. "We'll be doing the same up there. It's going to be very beneficial to members who otherwise would travel to Denver to attend those."

Data crunch

The council's annual wage surveys provide the most publicly visible evidence of its work, with daily newspaper stories carrying the group's prediction of wage growth in the region based on reports by members.

Last year's survey, for example, concluded that employers would offer pay increases averaging 3.4 percent during 2006.

The surveys also benchmark wages and benefits in specific industries, offering guidance to employers. The group will even customize surveys to suit special cases.

"Our business is kind of unique, and it's very hard to benchmark," said Jenny Briggs, human resources manager at New Belgium Brewing Co. in Fort Collins. "For us, they survey other craft breweries in the country, and provide us with that data."

Smith said the agency would seek an office location central to member employers in Northern Colorado, somewhere in the center of the triangle formed by Greeley, Loveland and Fort Collins. He also said membership would likely climb in the region from about 200 to 250 in the first year of operation, based on the Colorado Springs experience.

"We want to make sure we're as accessible as possible to our members," Smith said. "We're very excited about coming to that area. We've learned how important it is to have those one-to-one relationships."