

## Educating for Maximum Impact at Lebel & Harriman

By Barry MacMillan and Ellen Lamb

If you can judge an organization by its people, the Falmouth-based consulting firm of Lebel & Harriman LLP is like Deborah Whitworth, its Managing Director for Human Resources Consulting: small but powerful. As Workforce Readiness Director for the Maine State Council of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Whitworth extols “the need to hire people who can hit the ground running,” and the need for employers to make sure their personnel can keep up once they’re on the move.

The issue is critically important in Maine, which lags New England in its proportion of workers who have two- or four-year college degrees.

The Maine Department of Labor’s workforce forecasts call for jobs that require these degrees and more, an increasingly specialized trained cadre to keep the state competitive in a changing economy. Whitworth, in her role as Workforce Readiness Director, is constantly looking for ways to encourage and help Maine employers offer new educational opportunities for their personnel, and has found a valuable partner in the Maine Employers’ Initiative. The Maine Employers’ Initiative, a program of the Maine Development Foundation, is funded by grants from Ford and Lumina to promote educational attainment among Maine’s adult workforce.

“I didn’t want to reinvent the wheel,” said Whitworth. Networking with former colleagues, she discovered that MEI was already pursuing

many of the objectives she’d identified for the Maine State Council of SHRM. Last year the two organizations announced a partnership to encourage employers to “take one more step” to support employees’ educational goals. Almost 100 employers statewide have now made this commitment, Lebel & Harriman among them.

Employee development is just as important for small firms as for big ones, Whitworth said. “We’re a small firm, there are only a dozen of us,” but Lebel & Harriman includes a Development Plan for each employee as part of its performance evaluation process, asking staff members to identify specific actions that will improve their performance and their professional capacity. Two of Lebel & Harriman’s staff members have already set and achieved educational goals as part of the firm’s “one more step” to support these efforts.



Rebecca Burchill, Managing Director, Insurance, completed the requirements for professional designation as a Chartered Life Underwriter (CLU). The internationally-recognized CLU designation is the highest professional qualification available for individuals who specialize in life insurance and estate planning. It requires five core courses, three elective courses, and the completion of eight two-hour, 100-question examinations. Burchill said she doubted she could have earned the designation without her employer’s support. “Being designated as a CLU shows that we take our role working with clients seriously,” she said, “and is a clear indication that this is a highly professional office. We will be here for our clients when they need us.”

Sarah Day, Lebel & Harriman's Client Service Associate, earned a license as a State of Maine Life and Health Insurance Producer. "With the license, I can be more knowledgeable about the business and be of assistance both to the company and our clients," she said. "There are a lot of opportunities here, and with the help of the organization, I have been able to show my dedication [not only] to the insurance business, but also to our clients." Lebel & Harriman not only paid for Day's course materials, but also allowed her to take an hour of paid time each day for five months in order to study for the licensure test.

Occasionally, Whitworth said, clients express concerns that training may encourage employees to seek new opportunities elsewhere. She acknowledges the concern, but tells them, "If you train your employees, they may leave. If you don't train them, they're sure to stay. Who do you want to be working with?"

In working with her business clients, Whitworth makes the point that employee education programs require high-level backing to succeed. "It starts at the top," she said. "The people at the top, the CEO, the Chairman, have to be on board. The resources can come from somewhere, but typically it's not the HR director making that decision — it's the CEO or the board." MEI, Whitworth said, plays a

key role in emphasizing the leadership value of employee education, not only as good business but as good corporate citizenship.

She refers her clients to MEI for initial assessments of their existing employee development programs, followed by recommendations for ways to take that "one more step": raising awareness of educational opportunities, mentoring employees, providing flexible time for education, and/or providing a pathway to financial assistance. While Whitworth describes herself as an enthusiast for employee development, she said that MEI sells itself: "I just have to make the introduction. Their website [[http://www.mdf.org/mei\\_overview.php](http://www.mdf.org/mei_overview.php)] is phenomenal, and their written materials are excellent." While most of her clients understand the importance of employee education, MEI provides a framework and context that can make the difference to an organization's leadership.

Perhaps most important, Whitworth said, MEI helps employers break the larger goal — boosting employee education — into smaller pieces, carving a daunting mission into measurable tasks. The partnership with MEI makes employee development doable and manageable for businesses of all sizes in Maine, with lots of help along the way. "It's easy, and it's important," she tells her clients. "Why wouldn't you do it?"