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Staffers Embrace Idea of the 'Free Vacation'

Posted Wednesday, August 1, 2007 12:00 am

Joe Strupp (mailto:Joe@editorandpublisher.com)

By: Joe Strupp While many newspapers facing tough financial times are turning to layoffs and buyouts to trim costs, The Press of Atlantic City has taken a different route that brings savings but keeps staffers employed. Starting in 2001, the 67,650-circulation New Jersey daily has allowed employees to take time off without pay ? a practice that has drawn enough interest to stave off massive staff cuts, at least for the moment.

"It is something we have incorporated in the past few years," says Publisher Keith Dawn, who first launched the approach six years ago and brought it back for the past two years. "Certainly during the summer, people appreciate that."

The furlough plan began in 2001 as a mandatory program for all 300 employees, who were required to take a week off without pay when the paper saw a revenue decrease. But Dawn promised that those lost wages would be returned at the end of the year if the paper's economics improved.



which they did.

After 2001, the program was shelved but returned again in 2003 as an option for workers who wanted extra time off. That year, about 200 people took advantage of it. Says Dawn, "It was promoted as something to sign up for, but it was not tied to any slowdown in business."

After two years Dawn brought the program back in 2006, sparking another 200 takers. That move saved the paper about \$100,000, according to Human Resources Director Kathleen Leonard. "It has been very, very successful," she says. "It really hasn't created staffing problems." So far in 2007, at least 29 employees have signed up and more are expected. Leonard says this year's furloughs have saved about \$30,000.

Director of Advertising John Celestino says "it saved a substantial amount of money, and I have not seen a loss in productivity. I thought people would feel obligated to do it, but they love it. It seems like they wait for the announcement every year."

The publisher believes the option is a good way to handle some of the downturns in the newspaper industry without suffering long-term staff reductions. "A lot of the softening of the economy is cyclical," he says.

But not everyone at the Press sees the furloughs as the answer to its financial problems. Charlie Bryant, the paper's director of finance and administration, thinks the unpaid time off is only a short-term solution. "It is an interesting way to go, it is much more palatable," he says. "But at the end of the day, it is not a permanent reduction of costs. It is like taking a house payment, and the lender says to skip a month. But the payment does not go away completely."

Executive Editor Paul Merkoski notes that some staffers have gotten creative, such as taking every Monday off for a month. "We don't accept it if the person is in an area with sophisticated subject matter we can't pass along," he says. But he stresses temporary time off is better than permanent staff cuts: "Any time you lose a whole person, it is a big chunk of your soul."

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