REVOLUTIONIZING WORKFORCE CULTURE: WICHITA BUSINESS INTRODUCES GROUNDBREAKING BENEFITS PACKAGE, DEBT-FREE INITIATIVES

By Emily Younger Barnwell

Talent recruitment and retention are critical for businesses to thrive in today's competitive and dynamic environment.

Not only are large corporations expanding their workforce pipelines, and implementing distinctive talent attraction methods, but family-owned organizations are doing the same.

One such example is Tanganyika Wildlife Park, the most interactive wildlife park in the Midwest, located just west of Wichita in Goddard, Kansas. The park has undertaken numerous talent initiatives and continues to roll out new ones with the goal of not only attracting top-tier talent but also fostering long-term engagement and inspiration among its workforce.

"Our director cares more about culture and his people than any other park I've ever worked at," said LynnLee Schmidt, the chief operating officer at Tanganyika. "We lean heavily on developing our leaders and helping them realize their dreams."

According to a 2023 Muse study, today's job candidates prioritize these factors the most in a position and/or company.

1. Work-life balance.
2. Compensation.
3. Learning and growth opportunities.
4. Office culture and coworkers.
5. Perks and benefits.
6. Job security.
7. Company leadership.

Tanganyika's Response to the Evolving Workforce

With 60 full-time employees, 60 seasonal employees and an additional 15-20 interns, Schmidt said workforce recruitment

and development is vital to the park's success and customer experience.

"About 85% of employees leave their jobs because they don't feel appreciated," said Schmidt. "The cost of turnover is hard to pinpoint but guesstimates range from one to four times an employee's annual salary. When it comes to animals the cost is even greater. Our keepers, the largest chunk of our full-time workforce, build relationships with our animals, learn how to read the slightest changes in their behaviors, and have knowledge of species, diets, behavior and husbandry that can take decades to replace."

In response, Tanganyika is differentiating itself and strategically positioning the park as not only an attractive place to work but also an employer that offers creative perks, a competitive employee benefits package, and distinctive work-life balance and financial benefits.

These additional benefits include, but are not limited to unlimited paid time off, the promotion of unplugging from work during non-business hours, free park experiences and vouchers, access to a financial wellness and wellness program as well as a Certified Dream Manager.

Most recently, the team launched an initiative to have 50% of its staff debt-free.

"We have a lot of ideas from helping people pay down student debt through government incentive programs to buying every full-time employee a car," said Schmidt. "Currently, every employee is enrolled in a financial program, and we are incentivizing the points earned in the app by providing bonuses."

Eventually, if an employee saves $500 in their emergency fund, they will be entered into a contest where the winner will receive a company match of $500.

Ricki Ellison, the director of talent, workforce development and community engagement for the Partnership, shared these forward-thinking efforts can be life-changing for a community.

"By supporting and empowering its employees to navigate toward homeownership, debt elimination, and the creation of generational prosperity, Tanganyika is not only employing the community; the park is building legacies," explained Ellison.

Dream Big

Also new at Tanganyika is the Dream Manager program. Employees apply to work with a dream manager and attend monthly meetings to review concepts and set goals, ultimately leading to increased personal and professional growth.

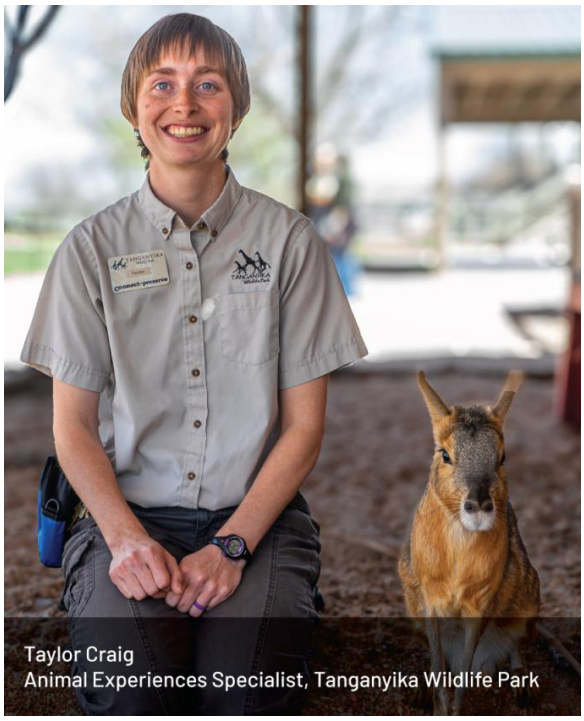
"The staff will help us find conferences we can attend and peers that we can talk with to help us learn and grow as individuals and improve the welfare of the animals we work with," said Taylor Craig, an animal experiences specialist at Tanganyika.

"I can't think of a better way to show our appreciation to our team than to help them realize their dreams. Whether that is buying a home, taking a bucket list trip, or building better relationships with friends and family," emphasized Schmidt. "When someone says, 'My company helped me go on a trip to Bali or my company helped me buy a house,' other people start to listen and want to work there too."

The organization has even set up babysitting circles for employees who have lost or cannot find childcare. Tanganyika also has a strong set of core values and a no-gossip rule.

Schmidt said talent recruitment and retention come down to empowering employees and helping them achieve their goals.

"It also doesn't hurt to have a llama walk down the hall or a penguin attend your meetings. Guests at the park are also often here on vacation making bucket list memories so their joy and excitement is contagious to the team as well," she said.



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Greater Wichita Partnership
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