



Fall 2011

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Recommended Citation

Travis, Nicole (2011) "Rewarding Work," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol20/iss3/8>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Rewarding Work

Melissa Van Dyke '99 engages the people side of business as president of Incentive Research Foundation.

Story by NICOLE TRAVIS '11



Melissa (Arms) Van Dyke '99 can't help but consider her job rewarding. As president of the Incentive Research Foundation (IRF), her work is centered on helping others receive the appropriate rewards for their work.

“Recognizing employees is one of the most important things organizations and managers can do,” Melissa says. That means that formalities such as salaries and vacation days simply aren't enough to demonstrate appreciation for the work that employees are performing every day. For this reason, companies rely on information from the IRF as they create programs to stimulate employee engagement and recognize outstanding performance.

What those programs mean for employees is acknowledgment in the form of non-cash rewards, such as travel and merchandise awards for top performers, and interpersonal recognition. In its 20 years of experience, the foundation has devoted \$2 million in research to understanding and harnessing the power of incentives and motivation.

Van Dyke helps companies reward their workers.

“From a manager and employee perspective, we all want to be a part of programs and organizations that energize and engage us,” Melissa said. “From an organizational standpoint, no company can afford to invest in any tool that it can't readily optimize. The same is true of investments in human capital.”

Before joining the IRF as president last March, Melissa, who lives in St. Louis with her husband Todd and children Conor (5) and Maya (2), was a managing consultant of employee engagement practice at Maritz, where she also held leadership positions in solution management, product development and business technology solution management. In 2007, *Incentive* magazine recognized her as a “rising star in the incentive industry.” Her career in the industry began

immediately following her graduation from Illinois Wesleyan, when she accepted a position as a management consultant at Ernst & Young.

“I became interested in the people side of business when, as a consultant, I saw the profound impact that employee engagement could have on the success of major business and technology projects,” Melissa says. But she also saw the “enlightening” effect of such engagement on the lives of employees themselves. They’re people she hasn’t forgotten since, “from the seasoned sales executive who found new direction after building a land-mine victim prosthetic as part of a team-building exercise on an incentive trip to the single mother who supplied her son’s first apartment with all the necessary items using gift points she received from her organization’s reward program.”

But helping others enjoy the fruits of their labor helps Melissa appreciate her own as well. “I really enjoy that on any given day I could be working with the media, speaking at a conference, meeting with sponsors, speaking with researchers or finalizing financials,” she says of the varied facets of her everyday work.

This kind of appreciation and enthusiasm for her work is surprising considering that Melissa had never heard of the incentive industry at the time of her college graduation. Still, that didn’t mean she wasn’t prepared to enter it. The major in economics that she paired with another in international studies familiarized her with the research methodologies that now play a major role in her work at the IRF. She has also drawn on her Illinois Wesleyan study-abroad experiences in Japan, Kenya and the U.K. while organizing IRF Incentive Travel Programs.

But there’s been a great deal of on-the-job learning as well, especially in light of recent world events that have affected trends in incentive and motivation programs. The economic crisis, for one, did not spare the \$46 billion industry.

“Like all industries,” Melissa says, “the downturn forced the incentive industry to sharpen its focus and its tools,” although canceled programs and trips cost it millions of dollars at the outset. Now, however, cross-organizational collaboration and other improvements have assisted with its recovery.

Since redirecting its course in America’s new economic landscape, the IRF has gotten back to business, settling comfortably into its role as a meeting point between industry performance and academia. The result has been unparalleled research, such as a recent study on corporate-sponsored wellness incentive programs and employee health trends. As with any other incentive program, the study found, the benefits are twofold: Employees are rewarded for engaging in healthier behaviors while enjoying the advantages of good health and companies save on healthcare costs on top of gaining the work of healthy employees.

“Findings like these help organizations optimize their investments in human capital and ensure that individuals who participate in the program actually find it motivational,” Melissa says. While this is only one example of the IRF’s work, all of the organization’s research points to one essential finding regardless of trends in the industry: “Recognizing and rewarding people for their work will never become less important.”

