

*by Boyd Byers*

## Want to Know What Coworkers Earn? Ask Marilyn First

Keeping up with the Joneses. It's been part of human nature since long before Moses came down from the mountain with "Thou shalt not covet" chiseled in stone.

### ***Ignorance is bliss***

Does knowing what your coworkers earn lead to job dissatisfaction, or does it inspire improved job performance? Marilyn vos Savant, who's listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for "highest IQ," recently addressed that question in her weekly "Ask Marilyn" column in *Parade* magazine. (You might ask why the smartest person in the world writes an advice and puzzle column instead of working to achieve world peace or find a cure for cancer, but that's a question for a different day.)

A reader reported having a heated argument with the boss after learning what his coworkers earn. He told his boss it was in his best interest to know. The boss replied that he would be better off not knowing. The reader asked Marilyn, "Who's right?"

Marilyn sided with the boss for two reasons. First, pay is often determined by several factors that aren't known to employees, so pay information alone will be insufficient and possibly misleading, resulting in dissatisfaction. Second, most employees will use the information in a harmful rather than a helpful way. "It's a rare employee," Marilyn concluded, "who, upon learning that others make more, is inspired to find that more pay may be possible and quietly sets about improving his or her job performance, preferably in some noticeable ways!"

Marilyn's advice is spot on and consistent with our experience. We've defended countless claims fueled by employees' dissatisfaction after learning that others in their department or in similar jobs within the company make more money. There are almost always perfectly good reasons for paying an employee less, but he's either unaware of those reasons or unwilling to accept them because he has an unrealistically inflated opinion of his abilities and job performance compared to his peers.

### ***Don't gag on a gag rule***

So you need to take every step possible to keep employees from discussing their salaries, right?

Not so fast. Remember that you generally can't prohibit employees from discussing their wages just because you want that information kept confidential. Only a few months ago, the Tenth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals (the federal appellate court for Kansas) ruled that an employer's policies preventing employees from discussing pay increases and salary information were unlawful. That type of policy can run afoul of the National Labor Relations Act, which gives employees the right to unionize and engage in other "concerted activity."

Of course, you can impose disciplinary rules requiring managers and others entrusted with your salary data to keep it confidential, just like any other proprietary company information. You just can't keep employees from sharing their own pay information and discussing it with others.

### ***How do you stack up?***

Even knowing the pitfalls, you still want to know how your salary compares to other HR professionals, don't you? Alas, there's no cure for human nature.

*Money* magazine recently published its list of the 50 best jobs. HR manager was ranked number four. HR jobs received an A for flexibility and Bs for creativity and stress level. The best parts about HR, according to the survey, are making work more rewarding for employees and helping shape corporate culture and strategy. The worst parts are dealing with the "fluffy HR" stereotype and firing people. (The firing part is probably why stress earned a B, not an A, and why some days it feels like an F.)

Now on to the salary information. The average pay for an HR manager is \$73,500, according to the survey. If, based on that knowledge, you think you're underpaid, don't wallow in despair or go running to the boss. Instead, follow Marilyn's advice and quietly improve your job performance and increase your value to the company; then reap the rewards that follow.

In case you were wondering, lawyer ranked only 37 on the list of best jobs. I shall try not to covet my neighbor's job.

### ***He said it***

"Why not? I had a better year than he did."

— Babe Ruth, when asked by reporters why he should be paid more than President Herbert Hoover