



## HR World Far Different This Time Around

by David Goll – Equal time  
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The region's largest annual gathering of human resources professionals returns to the East Bay this year in the midst of a business climate drastically changed from the last time they met here.

Some 700 members of the Northern California Human Resources Association are expected for the organization's annual conference and trade show Sept. 30 and Oct. 1 at the Oakland Marriott City Center. The event will feature 36 workshops, displays from 150 companies and speakers, including therapist John Gray, who will discuss his book, "Mars and Venus in the Workplace."

Two years ago, the last time the NCHRA met in Oakland, the economy was still flying high. Just around the corner, however, was the dot-com meltdown, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that crippled the airline and tourist industries and this year's corporate accounting scandals that have led to thousands of layoffs and plummeting stock prices.

"It's a very different atmosphere this time around, but we're glad to be back in Oakland," said Tom Makris, NCHRA president, noting that last year's conference was held in San Jose.

During the 2000 conference, downtown Oakland was one of the region's hottest markets for dot-com startups, which flocked to the refurbished old buildings that featured 21st-century communication lines. But this year, one of the workshops is titled: "Rebuilding Your HR Career After the Dot Bomb." "HR people were the first ones laid off when companies started downsizing," said Valerie Frederickson, an employment specialist with offices in that fountain of Silicon Valley venture capital, Menlo Park. She'll lead a workshop that will feature a staffing professional, the vice president of a software firm and a former vice president of the Pacific Stock Exchange.

"More HR people per capita were laid off than any other group. Many startups felt once they had the basic HR tools in place and their culture had been established, HR just wasn't much of a priority any longer. But, of course, things went from bad to worse for a lot of these companies, and soon everyone was out the door."

Today in the Bay Area, a "huge pool of HR professionals are competing for just a few jobs," Frederickson said. Companies that are hiring tend to seek candidates who specialize in certain areas, with

compensation issues especially hot today.

"One local company interviewed more than 200 candidates for a single job, and a lot of people were told they did not have the right qualifications or background," she said. "When something like that happens, it's demoralizing for the entire HR community."

Many who were let go by dot-coms and high-tech startups typically have weaker sets of skills, she added, because their employers seldom invested in professional training.

"These days, I recommend that people make their résumés less generic, which was the trend for a while," Frederickson said. "Put something there that makes you stand out from the crowd, whether it be a professional or personal quality or achievement."

There will be other topical workshops, including "Executives Behaving Badly," which will deal with inappropriate behavior from senior management; "The Love Contract," tackling the thorny issue of what happens when office romances go sour; and a presentation called "Embracing Diversity" that will guide employers through the rewards and challenges of creating more inclusive workplaces.

But many other presentations will take on subjects that never go out of style. San Francisco attorney Mary Topliff will lead one of those sessions, "Strategies for Effective Employee Relations: Compliance, Communication & Consistency."

Though not as sexy as dot-bombs and misbehaving bosses, that is a vital topic, nonetheless, in Topliff's opinion, because it encompasses issues that can ultimately affect the bottom line.

"If a company has a high-profile harassment complaint for example, they can expect bad publicity, so they need to focus on effective, clear communication, both internally and externally," she said. "Being in compliance with legal obligations and even your own policies is crucial when it comes to things like time off, leaves of absence, workers' compensation and wage and hours issues."

And if companies pay attention to those things, consistency should be the result.

"These things are a challenge, even for large companies with big HR staffs," Topliff said. "Everything moves so fast and we're all just trying to keep our heads above water. You've got the everyday things to deal with, but then something blows up and employers, whether big or small, need to know the best ways to proceed."

*Equal Time explores workplace issues.*