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Corporate America Is Sitting Out the Trump-Biden Rematch -- WSJ

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What election?

In the midst of what many expect to be the most toxic presidential campaign in modern history, American businesses are going to extraordinary lengths to stay off the political radar.

Some CEOs are privately drawing up plans to tell employees not to expect comments on political matters in all-hands sessions. Others are reconsidering common election initiatives, such as get-out-the-vote drives, fearing those could be viewed in the current moment as partisan. A number of companies are also taking a harder line on workplace activism after long tolerating dissent.

In a recent memo following protests by employees over the war in Gaza, Google Chief Executive Officer Sundar Pichai said he didn't want the company to "fight over disruptive issues or debate politics," noting that, ultimately, "we are a workplace." The company fired dozens of employees for disruptive activity in its offices as they protested Google's contracts with Israel.

Executives are coaching managers to lower the temperature. At Cisco Systems, the company's top human-resources executive, Francine Katsoudas, plans to advise managers in the months ahead to be aware that employees will be experiencing a swirl of feelings tied to the election.

"We've seen how emotional politics leading up to an election can be," she said. What "I would say to a leader is, 'Be there to support your people.' I don't think it's wise for us to encourage some of the debate because it is just so personal."

The approach to this year's presidential race is a stark reversal for many employers. In 2020, CEOs weighed in on divisive topics, feeling pressure from employees and customers to share their views on the election and issues such as voting access. After years spent navigating debates on immigration, abortion, gay rights and racial equity, many executives say fatigue has set in. With the white-collar labor market now cooling, employees also have less leverage to agitate for responses, corporate advisers say.

Neutrality

Plenty of workers want companies to stay apolitical. In a survey of 532 U.S. employees conducted earlier this year, 28% felt employers should host election-related events such as town halls and debates while 71% felt employers should keep the workplace politically neutral, according to the Weber Shandwick Collective, a group of marketing and communications brands.

"The workplace is not the forum for working out all the political issues of the country or the world," said Evan Smith, CEO of the roughly 175-person artificial intelligence startup Altana, which focuses on supply chain issues. He doesn't plan to comment on politics in all-company meetings. "We have a mission. And everyone is at will, signed up to make the mission happen."

Prior incidents now inform how some companies approach political talk at work. Jeremy Brandt, CEO of WeBuyHouses.com, said his company put dispute-resolution policies in place after some volatile incidents happened at the Dallas-area company's office during previous elections.

In 2016, a member of the sales team, which largely supported Republican Donald Trump, burst into the marketing department saying "crooked Hillary," Trump's nickname for his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton. The marketing team, many of whom supported Clinton, told the CEO they were fed up. Brandt met with a few employees one-on-one. The policies, communicated in staff meetings, now discourage giving unsolicited opinions on politics.

"I love to talk about politics," Brandt said, "but if somebody doesn't want to talk about these topics they should never have to talk about them -- ever -- in the workplace."

Flare-ups

Though executives acknowledge it will likely be all but impossible to avoid political discussions altogether in the workplace, what companies want to avoid are flare-ups within organizations that distract employees, or draw backlash from customers.

Jeanne Meister, a workplace consultant who works with large companies spanning professional services, IT and retail, has been recommending that clients encourage civil discussions in small town halls, bringing conversations into the open so "you're not whispering amongst yourselves."

Employers are also not removing themselves from the political process entirely. Large companies remain a major source of political donations, though more S&P 500 companies have curbed their spending in recent years or agreed to better disclose their financing of political efforts, according to an analysis by the nonprofit **Center for Political Accountability**.

Even if executives hope to steer clear of this election, "if they engage in political spending, they're speaking," said Bruce Freed, president of the **Center for Political Accountability**, which has pushed for spending

disclosures. "They won't be sitting it out. As long as they're giving, that creates risk because of what it associates them with."

Policy shifts

Some companies have been preparing for the election by focusing on possible policy shifts. At Duke Energy, Chief Financial Officer Brian Savoy said the Charlotte, N.C.-based power producer has conducted scenario-planning exercises should there be a change in administrations. Such exercises should be conducted regularly, he said, as the company makes investments with time horizons that can stretch 50 years.

Executives have plotted, for example, what might happen if lawmakers pull back federal tax incentives for green energy. The planning exercises help to answer questions such as: "How would we invest in the business, what would we change?" Savoy said.

More difficult, he said, is determining whether to take public stances on political issues. Duke Energy employs about 27,000 people with a range of beliefs. "No matter what position it is, about half the workforce is not going to agree," Savoy said.

In such a polarized environment, even relatively straightforward corporate initiatives, such as voter-registration drives, are being newly questioned. Johnny C. Taylor Jr., chief executive of SHRM, an association for human resource managers, said some CEOs have told him and his staff that they will comply with laws requiring time off to vote, but not go much further, feeling such campaigns are fraught with risk.

Instead of mounting get-out-the-vote campaigns as they did in the past, he said, "many of them are saying, 'Listen, if you don't know that an election is coming up, your head has to be in the sand.'"

During the 2020 presidential election, cosmetics company e.l.f. Beauty gave employees time off to vote on Election Day and launched a big digital and social-media campaign that encouraged all registered voters to "go e.l.f.ing vote."

The Oakland, Calif.-based company plans to allow employees to take time off to vote but hasn't yet confirmed any plans for a get-out-the-vote campaign as public as the one in 2020, said Scott Milsten, the company's chief people officer.

Swing state

In the swing state of Wisconsin, Nick Pinchuk, the CEO of manufacturer Snap-on, based in Kenosha, said he sees no need to ban political T-shirts on shop floors, as some other employers are now considering to head off possible arguments.

If Snap-on employees want to wear items supporting Biden or Trump, Pinchuk is fine with it. "Around here, you'd probably get dissed more for wearing a Chicago Bearshirt," he said.

He has tried to instill a culture where employees know each other, and will be less likely to lash out at those with whom they disagree. "We are colleagues and, I dare say, even by some definitions, sort of friends who you would treat with respect," he said.

As the CEO makes his rounds across the company in the coming months, meeting with employees in various states, he expects workers to ask him about his personal political views. Pinchuk said he focuses on redirecting the conversation and listening. Instead of sharing his personal views, he typically asks workers to share who they think will win -- and why.

"You can talk about that like you talk about a football game," Pinchuk said. "They could say, 'Well, I hope President Biden wins, but I think Donald

Trump's going to win or vice versa.' And so I think that's a way to engage on this without getting involved; you can have the enjoyment of discussing the context without getting emotional."

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