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Ken Pohlman, Midwest Laboratories, is a member of the Nebraska Section AWWA.

Omaha World-Herald, April 10, 2009

Cutbacks? Not at this employer — \$1,000 gifts instead

BY STEVE JORDON  
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Nichole Kern expected bad news when her employer unexpectedly announced a staff meeting Thursday afternoon.

Her husband's workweek has been shortened, and bad economic news seems to be everywhere.

The couple are expecting and thrilled about the arrival of their baby girl in June, but that involves financial uncertainties as well.

Kern's employers, however, had good news to announce.

Ken Pohlman, John DeBoer and John Torpy, owners of Midwest Laboratories Inc., are depositing an extra \$1,000, minus taxes and withholding, into each of their 100 employees' bank accounts Friday with instructions to use the money to help the economy.

"It's our own stimulus package," DeBoer said.

Kern knew right away where the money would go.

"My baby," she said fluttering her hand in front of her face to fend off tears. "They made us so happy. It really means a lot."

Reading from a statement, DeBoer told employees gathered in the company's lobby that Midwest Laboratories has escaped most effects of the recession.

"We want to do our part to help rebuild our country's economic stability," he read. "As a result, we will give each full-time employee a stimulus check of \$1,000 . . . "

There was an audible gasp, followed by applause.

" . . . less mandatory taxes," which drew laughter, "to help boost our economy."

Rob Ferris had immediate plans for the money, too.

"My wife," he said with a laugh, but added that the family has some medical bills to pay.

Sue Ann Seitz and her husband plan to paint their house.

Katie Griess had been thinking about a new television. "We sacked that idea last night, but now maybe it'll come back."

"I'm still in shock," said Jamie Wood. "Maybe I'll give it to St. Jude. I've always wanted to give something to St. Jude."

The decisions are up to each employee, DeBoer said, with the objective of pumping cash into the local economy one way or another. Donations are fine, because charities have suffered from the downturn, too, he said.

Pohlman said he heard about a company that did something like this, so he proposed the idea to the partners.

"We just all kind of agreed that it would be a good thing to do," DeBoer said. "This isn't huge, \$100,000, when you see the government talking about billions. But it's our part, and it isn't coming out of taxpayers' money. It's not something we're going to have to pay back in the future."

The money will percolate through the economy, helping other businesses with their sales and salaries, and even boost state and federal income tax receipts, DeBoer said.

"We're thinking, if we do that, maybe other companies would get the same idea and do it, too."

Midwest Laboratories, at 13611 B St., recently added eight employees. Those new hires also will get the \$1,000 stimulus payments.

DeBoer said demand for the company's services has remained high during the recession because they can save customers money. The laboratories analyze soil for farmers, food for nutrition content, fuels for chemical makeup and other substances.

Conservative business practices help, too, he said.

"We don't have any debt, and that's helpful in this kind of a time," he said. "We're very efficient. We use computer systems to make us that way. All of our employees work really, really hard."

Indeed, 10 minutes after they gathered to hear the announcement, they were back at their desks and labs.

Midwest Laboratories also has a bonus program for employees and pays 100 percent of their health insurance premiums. The company started 34 years ago as part of a bigger business, and the partners bought it about 20 years ago.

Thinking about applying?

Noll Human Resources Services in Omaha handles Midwest Laboratories' personnel screening process.

"We're very picky who we hire," DeBoer said.