

CORNELL HR REVIEW

Bill Dirksen – Cornell Campus Visit

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On March 24, 2015, Bill Dirksen joined ten students from Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations for a lunch and career chat. An alumnus of the school's graduate program (1985), Dirksen came to Cornell after graduating from the University of Notre Dame with an economics degree. He currently serves as Vice President for Labor Affairs for Ford Motor Company. He is a key negotiator for the firm, and has been responsible for both internal and external labor relations and human resources. He has also worked in a number of Ford business units and locations, including a stint in Australia and one with Ford Credit.

During his discussion with current students, Dirksen shared his career experiences and advice for students interested in entering human resources, while also taking the time to chat about current developments in the automotive business, touching on the business' increasing globalization, the emergence of transplant manufacturing and his company's One Ford strategy, rolled out under transformational CEO Alan Mullaly.

Given his responsibilities overseeing labor relations at Ford, including bargaining on the firm's behalf, Dirksen provided great insight into the recent economic recession's effect on the automotive industry's labor relations, touching on areas ranging from voluntary turnover to growing the labor force again during the current period of recovery. During UAW negotiations in 2007, 2009 and 2011, Dirksen played a key role, and he will lead the 2015 negotiation. Among the results of those recession-era agreements was a two-tier wage structure, which Dirksen expects will be a key negotiation point in the coming bargaining. This system maintains high wages for senior employees, but establishes lower wages for those new to the firm. Designed to encourage employment during tough times for automakers, questions remain about the long-term viability of this compensation pattern, especially as the United States' economy recovers and the UAW seeks to raise wages. In approaching the negotiation, Dirksen praised the "progressive" past of the UAW, and emphasized the importance of trust, noting the steps Ford took to avoid involuntary terminations during the economic downturn. Amongst these were the two-tier wage system, early retirement and a number of other career transition incentives. Through these, the firm substantially cut its workforce before increasing it again in recent months.

He also touched on Ford's internationalization, noting the distinctions between international divisions of Ford and their respective union-management relationships. For example, the business unionism common in the United States differs substantially from the function-specific trade unionism seen elsewhere, as well as the sector-wide unions common in Europe. While in Australia, Dirksen observed many unions who united to

bargain together, and each had their own distinctive needs and wants essential to comprehend before and during negotiation.

On the topic of breaking into the field of human resources and labor relations, Dirksen stressed the value of developing core competencies in labor relations (academically, in a rotational program, or otherwise) and understanding the role of HR as a business partner. By focusing on these priorities, students entering a labor relations role can quickly impact their organization and advance their careers. ✎

[Adam Kirsch](#) will graduate from Cornell's Johnson Graduate School of Management in May 2016 with a Master of Business Administration. Before graduate school, Adam worked with a number of startups on recruiting and talent strategy, and in HR consulting for PricewaterhouseCoopers.