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Salary & Benefits

September 23, 2011

Perks at work: Unconventional benefits can attract and keep employees

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By **Karyn Johnson***Special to NWjobs*

Despite an economy where many employers are struggling to maintain traditional employee benefits, some Seattle-area companies are offering unique perks to keep their employees satisfied and productive.

Happy hours, pet-friendly offices, ice-cream breaks and rooftop barbecues are just a few of the many nonstandard workday perks that local workers enjoy. While these perks may not line employees' pockets, they can make work a richer experience.

At Seattle-based Big Fish Games, play isn't only for customers. Employees ride scooters between offices and shoot Nerf darts at each other. Video games can be projected onto the game-room wall, encouraging communal play. The Big Fish "fun squad" recently arranged for two ice-cream trucks to swing by with free cones to celebrate a sunny Wednesday.

The atmosphere of teamwork and camaraderie fosters creativity and keeps employees committed to their work. "People who enjoy working are more productive," says Susan Lusty, the public relations consultant at Big Fish Games.

Play is also important at REI's Kent headquarters, where employees often arrange yoga or CrossFit classes during lunch breaks. An on-site dog park provides fresh air and a little play time for employees and their pooches.

REI's commitment to the outdoors extends to its employees. "We don't just say we have a mission to get people into the outdoors — we actually get our employees into the outdoors," says the company's rewards director, Beth Wright.

This mission includes grants for up to \$300 in gear for personal challenges, which REI employees have used to climb Mount Rainier, bike the Pacific Coast Highway and run seven marathons in seven days.

Popular employee perks don't always have to do with blowing off steam. At tech startup BigDoor, Chief Operating Officer Ring Nishioka says the company's best benefit is its South Lake Union location, which allows it to bring in speakers from nearby tech companies.



Big Fish Games employees Stephanie Shin (from left), Alisa Somova, Dennis Kendrick, Chris Eeds, Charlie Conlon, Alex O'Farrell and Eugene Gavrilyuk enjoy an ice-cream break arranged by the company's "fun squad." (January Fredericks / Big Fish Games)

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This collaborative atmosphere is popular with current employees and a big draw to prospective ones. BigDoor also gives each of its developers a pair of high-definition headphones and allows employees to choose between Macs and PCs.

One important consideration for employers when they look at employee perks is work-life balance. "Companies large and small are realizing that happy employees are productive employees, and having family and personal time definitely makes for a happier work environment for all," says Carrie Meredith, an executive assistant at Artitudes Design in Issaquah.

To this end, many extend nontraditional benefits to employees that go beyond their time at work, such as company-sponsored sports teams, theme parties and Mariners or Seahawks outings. Flexible scheduling allows employees to meet family and personal obligations.

Discounts on services, gym memberships, products and entertainment are also a big hit. In July, Microsoft hired Dave Matthews to play a private concert at Woodland Park Zoo for more than 1,000 summer interns, each of whom also received an Xbox 360 and Kinect.

Many companies encourage employees to show their philanthropic side. A 2011 report of employee benefits from the Society for Human Resource Management states that 40 percent of employers surveyed offer community volunteer programs.

At Artitudes Design, employees teach art classes at elementary schools and receive 40 hours of paid time off each year to volunteer for local or international nonprofits. Big Fish Games and REI employees are active with organizations such as the Washington Trails Association and Northwest Harvest, among others.

Nonstandard benefits are a contributing factor to having a company culture that attracts — and keeps — employees. BigDoor has managed to retain all of its tech employees since the company was founded in 2009, Nishioka says. REI, Big Fish Games and Artitudes Design each have been named best place to work multiple times by various publications, in part because of their perks.

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Call me a prude -

How about adult perks for people who actually like growing up and don't want to have to pseudo smile around pretend BFFs all the time? Or has everyone agreed (because if you don't then people will grumble that you're a buzzstopper) that it's all now about cool-school perks such as foos-ball or mini-plastic comic toys in goodie bags -- the kinds of things coveted by man-children? I suppose as long as it's "cool" Seattle will do it. So much for practicality or genuine inclusivity.

Party Flopper on [September 23, 2011 2:08 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

Speaking of which, where's the news coverage on today's visit of South Korean president Lee Myung-Bak?

Half of Seattle is shut down (not grumbling - happy to be host to ROK) and yet we're reading about fancy party breaks for so-called hip people.

Why aren't those same people and corporations hosting some sort of Q&R; / round-table conversations with key foreign dignitaries - so we can actually learn from them rather than just having insular sugar-socials?

Now that'd be something different.

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