

Work & Careers

Workplace perks that pay off

For small businesses, unconventional staff rewards can be a useful tool for recruitment



In gear: Jools Walker was drawn to cycling fashion retailer Vulpine by the work culture

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Ryan Carson is at his desk in Portland, Oregon. As chief executive of Treehouse, a business that makes and sells training videos in web design and tech skills, he shares his office with three co-workers.

But this is not a typical CEO corner office. In fact, it is on the third floor of Mr Carson's family home. He has built a 54-strong business based on a distinctive work culture: most employees work at home and the business operates on a four-day week, Monday to Thursday.

In addition, Treehouse offers not only what Mr Carson describes as an "insane amount of holiday"; it also gives each staff member \$5,000 to set up their home offices, free lunches and mobile phones.

Some human resources professionals may balk at the pricetag, but he argues it is worth it. "If you actually look at the costs of all this, they're not much when you consider the [return on investment] in loyalty and employee engagement," he says.

It is not unusual for employers to offer an attractive package of perks, from grants for training to free meals. But smaller companies such as Treehouse may go to extra lengths to attract new recruits. In competitive sectors with traditionally high staff turnover, such employers find the combination of a congenial work culture and generous benefits not only helps to recruit – and retain – top staff, it can also motivate people to work harder.

Mr Carson cautions that such initiatives deliver optimum productivity only if you recruit the right people. “If you hire the wrong person, none of this works.”

Michael Poley has been an employee of the company since February 2011 and is based in Orlando, Florida. “When you see an opening at Treehouse and read about all the perks, you lose your mind a little,” he says. That progressive work culture encouraged Mr Poley to make a big impression when he applied for a job there. “You want to blow them away and demonstrate how much energy and talent you can bring to the organisation,” he says.

Mr Poley’s co-worker Jim Hoskins says the four-day week has a profound effect on how he works. “The fact that we have only four days of work in the week to get things done pushes us to work smarter and harder.”

Campaign Monitor, based in Sydney, Australia, takes a similar approach to culture and benefits. It provides software for email marketing campaigns. Its careers page boasts an attractive package of perks from surf lessons and generous conference budgets to an on-site chef and private office for every member of the team. “A lot of these perks feed off our single priority, which is the ability for anyone on the team to easily remove distractions when they need to,” says founder David Greiner. “Open plan is the enemy of getting in the zone.”

Extra special: grants, naps and surfing

- Clif Bar The California-based producer of energy snack bars offers a reward programme for employees who walk or take public transport to work, together with grants to make energy-efficient improvements to employees’ homes.

The chef and attractive communal spaces are designed to ensure the company eats together every day and socialises, which Mr Greiner says helps keep people both happy and productive. “The most important factor in a rewarding career is doing great work, and the more you can do to help people achieve that, the more likely they are to stick around.”

Such benefits may be viable for some employers but most small businesses would struggle to offer on-site chefs. The opportunity is to create a working culture that becomes a draw.

●**Zappos** The online shoe retailer, which was acquired by Amazon, has a focus on healthy living, providing free smoking cessation classes, adoption and infertility grants, on-site health checks and a “nap room”.

●**Patagonia** The outdoor clothing business provides exercise areas and equipment so that employees can take fitness classes during the workday. Inspired by company founder Yvon Chouinard’s book *Let My People Go Surfing*, employees are also allowed to take time off during the working day to spend it with their children, go surfing or play sports.

Jools Walker is sales and marketing manager at Vulpine, a south London-based business selling cycling apparel. “For me, the biggest perk is the work culture here as it is directly linked to my passions – cycling and fashion. As clichéd as it sounds, it’s very much a dream come true,” says Ms Walker, who was previously admissions officer at the University of East London and is the cycle and fashion blogger, Lady Vélo.

That love of cycling mixed with a relaxed culture where brainstorming happens in the local park rather than the office creates an environment that she finds more productive. “Money wasn’t my motivation in my move to Vulpine. Working somewhere that suited my passions, as well as being around people who feel the same as me about cycling, was too perfect an opportunity to miss,” she says.

Across London in Shoreditch, Drew Benvie is building Battenhall, a communications agency offering employee benefits and a workplace culture designed to attract the best recruits. He has learnt that it is little

things – such as giving each staff member an IT budget of £1,200 to spend as they wish – that mean a lot. “It’s the small things that are critical to the success of your business. If you don’t give your colleagues the feeling that they’re being looked after, that will affect performance,” he says.

However, while the Battenhall website boasts home working and “unlimited holiday” allowances as standard, the reality is that most of the team work from the London office. Flexible work cultures may sound attractive but the reality for many businesses is that the workforce needs to be together.

In fact – as Ms Walker found at Vulpine – at Battenhall it is perhaps the workplace culture that is the big attraction. The nine-strong business is three months old; what attracted candidates was the opportunity to be part of that start-up spirit, to help shape the culture of the business and to be part of its vision to build a distinctive communications agency. “They have the opportunity to co-create the culture and personality of the business. And that’s something you can’t do at Google,” says Mr Benvie.

Back in Portland, Mr Carson is reflecting on whether he would retain the four-day-week policy if he were to start a new business. “I would, but it’s a heavy decision,” he says. “Now I’ve got kids, I feel life is too freaking short. If I’m doing something that gives me 50 per cent more time with my kids than all the other dads out there – why would I not do that?”

The reality remains that such work cultures may be deemed too extreme and untenable for bigger businesses, but Mr Carson is optimistic that his approach is not an obstacle to growth. “Every company I have built with a four-day work week has succeeded and Treehouse is the biggest one yet. You can still do this and grow an exciting company.”

But he adds: “Maybe you just need to do it a little slower.”

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