

Great Company Perks

Take a job at Flight Centre and there are a number of expectations – not least attending the monthly buzz night. Tough stuff this – you have to go with your team to a local pub where suppliers find a fun way to update on their latest offerings, high performers receive awards, cheers and appreciation and you have a fantastic evening with your young colleagues, on the house.

You would be forgiven for thinking that life at FC is loads of fun. In some ways it is, but it is also extremely hard work with high expectations of performance. One way to keep employees focussed on excellent results is by providing great rewards in a way that best suits their people – hence the buzz night.

What is a ‘perk’?

Great companies do what they can with the standard perks of company car, excellent maternity leave and the best benefits they can manage. However they recognise that the purpose of perks is to build a strong relationship with employees in a way that boosts morale and makes people feel good about themselves and their work. Perks are the things they talk to their friends about on Friday evening in the pub –feeling proud of themselves and the company.

Great companies also realise that there is no set formula to the perks they provide. Consideration of what suits their people is paramount, coupled with what will make a difference to the business. There are two aims: to offer perks that are relevant, so will make a difference; and to make working life easier and fun, so people can do their work better.

Making Life Easier

If an employee is to concentrate and do their best work, the rest of their life needs to run as smoothly as possible. The more an organisation can do to ease the transition between work and home, the better their people will feel and the better the quality of work.

These are perks that need not cost a lot; in fact they can support local businesses. For example, providing time to go on line and order the weekly shop so it can be delivered to the office at the end of the day can really take the pressure off and enable a relaxing evening at home. Ask the local dry cleaner to visit one day to pick up and another to drop off and you remove another of those tiresome tasks from the household agenda.

Some companies, like Microsoft, go one step further and have a concierge service, providing their employees with support to complete a whole range of

everyday tasks from booking flights and hotels to arranging for a plumber to visit. This service is paid for by employees and organised by a number of external providers. Easing stress through Indian head massage, reflexology and yoga classes are also a great support.

As more women return to work, childcare becomes increasingly important. Keymed decided that the investment to provide an on-site nursery was well worth it in terms of peace of mind for parents. Not every company can go to these lengths, but it doesn't stop them providing information about local childminders and nurseries or making agreements with local childcare facilities. Making the effort to enable appropriate childcare demonstrates respect for the family and also keeps parental needs at the forefront. A manager who understands the urgency when a childminder lets you down earns the greatest commitment from their people.

Flexible working is another way in which organisations improve the lot of their people. But employees are not the only beneficiaries; companies can often provide a better service to their customers – as CORGI discovered when they lengthened the working day to accommodate variable start times.

Making Work Fun

Fun forms part of great culture. It is an attempt to keep people fresh, creative and committed to the success of the company. Hence St Luke's Advertising Agency provides a temporary ball pit as an alternative meeting venue. At Asda House in Leeds they hold a monthly meeting to update people on the business and include fun events, which may be a pop group to entertain or a rowing machine competition between the CEO and Steve Redgrave. Many places have an annual event, like the Bromford Bash, an evening when the whole Housing Group go out to celebrate together, dress up, share awards and have a really good time.

It need not be expensive – celebrities are not a necessity. You can find ways to bring people together that will be fun, build relationships and bring the community together. Lots of organisations use charity events to do just this – taking teams out to decorate a room in a children's home can be great fun – great team building too. Charity walks are popular for crossing company boundaries and mixing people up. Mick Kent, CEO of Bromford, also sees this as a wonderful way to have time with employees – in the second half of a long walk the barriers drop down and you have some really useful conversations.

Admiral Insurance work at making their call centre interesting, supported by the 'Ministry of Fun'. It makes a significant difference to the day-to-day task of talking to people over the phone without breaking the bank. Fancy dress days go down well including the day after Christmas when those disaster

presents come out. Poem writing competitions for Valentines Day, conker competitions and table football all contribute to an interesting day.

If you read this and think it sounds like 'a fate worse than death' – that's because your needs are different. Fun means different things to different people and the trick is to find what suits your organisation. At AstraZeneca it's a family picnic in the summer. At Timpson, it's time with your mates over a pint, so James Timpson, MD, puts a goodly amount of money behind the bar and leaves them to it. Know your people, listen to what they say and you will find the right perks.

Making Fun Work

Great companies are also known for their ability to outperform. This is demonstrated clearly in statistics produced by Best Companies Ltd which show that the *Best Companies to Work For* in the UK outperform the FTSE All Share. Five year compound returns show a 5.7% negative return for the FTSE against a 13.6% gain for the best companies.

They achieve this through highly engaged people who care about their organisations and are prepared to work for their success. One element of this is the emphasis on excellent performance management coupled with rewards that address fun as well as finance. Everyone understands their task and where they need to get to; measures are clear and appraisals are a regular and useful process that supports personal and career development. And the rewards that follow encourage everyone to do their best work.

As always, you have to find the rewards your people want. At Great Companies Consulting, we call this the 'company signature' – know your people and align your culture to suit their needs, as well as the needs of the business. A perfect example of this is Hiscox Speciality Insurer. A while ago they had two sports cars that were coming to the end of their lease time, so they offered short-term use as a reward for good work. When the cars went back, they returned to the more usual offerings of meals out etc, but soon realised that people were missing the cars. The end result – they bought an MG midget, which is allocated to the best performer at regular intervals and the company undertake to ensure the car is in the right place at the right time.

The All Important Intangibles

So far, these perks have been easy to describe and they are often the first things people consider. In fact, once you have the basic requirements in place, it is often the intangible perks that make the greatest difference. When people have sufficient money, there is only a certain amount of difference you can make by giving them more. On the other hand you can make a huge difference by treating them differently.

For many people the most memorable moments at work are those when the boss comes to perch on their desk to say 'thank you' for a job well done; or the time when a good idea has been well received and acted upon. These are the moments that build respect and a sense of self-esteem that is priceless.

Mark Davies at Honda speaks of two people who could see exactly what changes needed to be made in part of the racing bike division. He listened and sent them away to build a plan of action. This involved them in extra work to the day job, but they did it with such success and satisfaction that it is now a full time job that makes a significant difference to the business. Mark's willingness to back their ideas left them feeling excited, enthusiastic and totally committed to the company. I don't believe you could match that feeling with any amount of money or presents.

Perks from the Leader

Leaders and managers in great companies understand the importance of their role. It's no good getting bound up in the 'to do' list and keeping your head down – the job is about far more than this. Taking time to talk with people, walk around, find out about the kids and the next holiday – these are the actions that make a big difference to people and alter their perspective of the daily round.

This is achieved through being easily available – hence open door policies and open plan offices. In fact some CEO's, like Ken Kier at Honda, believe this is the only way to lead a great company. People need to ask questions, make suggestions and discuss concerns – only then will they feel part of the business as a whole. A heady mix, it leaves people feeling positive and excited about their work. Being directly involved, included and significant in the business is one of the biggest perks you can give.

So great company leaders go out of their way to build strong rapport. Spending time working alongside others 'on the job' is a good way to build relationships whilst learning more about the issues in a specific area and many leaders do this each month for half a day. Inviting a range of employees to have lunch or breakfast with the CEO is another good option. Both provide excellent information to the leaders and a feeling of being valued and involved for the employee.

Perks from the Manager

Managers are equally important people in a great company, since everyone is in regular contact with their manager. Providing them with a small budget from which to celebrate successes within their teams is a way of validating the

role. Plus when they can chose small gifts to suit people they can be personal and appropriate – like the manager who bought bedding plants rather than giving the standard bottle of fizz to a keen gardener.

The small gesture of verbally congratulating people when they do well or have a good idea is remarkably powerful and forgotten by far too many managers. All it takes is the willingness to remember to speak out when things are going well.

Personal development perks

Stretching everyone to do their best work is a satisfying and productive experience all round. Great companies encourage everyone, not just their stars. Like St Luke's 'Make Yourself More Interesting Fund' where everyone has £250 a year to learn something new.

Internal job swaps and shadowing encourage people to think more widely about the impact of their work and sabbaticals with suppliers build knowledge and great customer relationships. Internal mentoring shares in-house knowledge and validates the mentor in one move.

So when you think about perks, think outside the box to what will encourage your people and make their lives easier. Listen to what they need and want – it will earn you increased commitment and respect.