
ALTERNATIVES FOR EMPLOYEE BENEFITS TO IMPROVE WORK/LIFE BALANCE

By Marcia Watson Wasserman

We are faced with a changing work force today, as Generation X'ers move up in the ranks and have different values than the Baby Boomers who preceded them. Today's young attorneys and support staff want more than money. They are looking for recognition and time to balance their professional and personal lives. Law firms should consider these priorities when structuring benefit programs.

A survey conducted by the Families and Work Institute revealed that 49 percent of employees who feel overworked are somewhat or very likely to seek employment elsewhere in the coming year. Further, according to a 2002 survey by TrueCareers.com, 70 percent of employees polled do not think there is a healthy balance between their work and personal lives. Of those who participated in the survey, 51 percent indicated that they were considering looking for a new job as a result of difficulties juggling their personal and professional obligations.

With the pressures put on young lawyers to bill at least 1900 hours a year, they need help managing their personal time. There are benefit options which firms can provide for little or no cost that can ease the stress of lawyering. Employers can contract with local merchants, such as laundry and dry cleaning services, who will pick up and deliver directly to the firm's employees.

Firms can provide information to employees about time-saving on-line services such as virtual concierge services. For example, Balancing Act in San Francisco (www.balancingact.com) offers a combination of errand running, auto concierge and personal assistant services to individuals in the San Francisco Bay area. According to Patrick O'Loughlin, the CEO of Balancing Act, "we continually bring in lunch, run to the pharmacy, get cars

washed, stand in line at the post office and courier items for our clients—keeping them stress free and focused on work."

Firms that can help employees be more effective parents will also reduce stress levels and turnover. The firm's administrator can maintain a list of referral sources for child-care and elder-care by searching out facilities, having them complete a questionnaire about the services they offer, and getting feedback from employees who use the services.

Emergency child-care facilities, such as the ones run by ChildrenFirst Inc. (www.childrenfirst.com), have been set up in high rise buildings in downtown Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other places in California. Firms can purchase a membership, which entitles them to an average number of days a month of back-up child-care service. The firm's employees can drop a child off at a facility conveniently located near their office when an emergency arises. The benefit to the firm of having an employee remain productive at the office rather than staying home when a nanny is ill far outweighs the cost of the membership.

Firms should provide rewards to hard-working employees. Unexpected gifts like gift certificates for movies or the theatre will engender much good will. Instead of using firm tickets to sporting events strictly for marketing, some of those tickets should be shared with the firm's employees. Further, firms can provide the gift of time off—an extra day off for an employee who has worked particularly long hours in a given month. Consider implementing an achievement awards program and involve the firm's employees in developing it.

Another innovative approach to benefits is the affinity plan. This type of plan supple-

continued on page 14



Marcia Watson Wasserman

ments traditional benefits packages with optional benefit programs at no cost to the law firm. Many firms have optional benefit programs such as dental and vision care, but today's affinity plans go beyond the traditional programs. For example, RewardsPlus of America (www.rewardsplus.com) offers creative benefits at group pricing and discounts on products and services. Their benefit programs run the gamut from homeowners' insurance to long term care insurance to pet insurance.

Anything the firm can do to alleviate the stress of its employees is a positive benefit. Consider inviting a massage therapist to the office once a month to provide neck and shoulder chair massages to lawyers and staff,

whose necks are stiff from sitting in front of a computer all day. Another easy way to reduce stress is to just remember to show appreciation to the firm's lawyers and staff. If you take the time to thank employees for a job well done on a regular basis, the resultant good will is well worth the effort.

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DAY/TIME	TITLE/PRESENTER(S)	SPECIAL CREDIT OFFERED	SEI COURSE NUMBER
FRI. 8:30-9:30	<i>Current Events in Legal Malpractice</i> Carol Langford	1 Ethics	1
FRI. 5:15-6:15	<i>Free Internet Research: The Price is Right!</i> Carole Levitt & Jim Robinson		25
SAT. 8:30-9:30	<i>Human Resources 101</i> Marcia Wasserman, Deana Pepe & Mary Helen Rich	1 Bias	30
SAT. 4:00-5:00	<i>Overcoming E-mail Overload</i> Irwin Karp		49
SUN. 7:30-8:45	BREAKFAST PROGRAM <i>Diversifying the Workplace with Attorneys of Color in a Competitive Legal Market</i> Craig Holden	1 Bias	69
SUN. 9:00-10:00	<i>How to Become More Profitable in the Business of Law</i> Ed Poll		56