

Rethink Work-from-Home Employee Perks

By Paul Bergeron

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As working from home stretches into the summer and beyond at many companies, some firms are adopting interesting, innovative incentives to maintain engagement and productivity among telecommuting employees.

Most common among such perks is the expanded flexibility for personal time off and customized work schedules. But many employers consider those options to be table stakes and are raising the ante. Perks related to food and drink, camaraderie, dress code and new technology are being introduced as HR rethinks and adjusts company culture.

"Pre-COVID, working from home was considered a top employee perk," said Cheryl Fields Tyler, CEO of San Francisco Bay-area firm Blue Beyond Consulting. "Now, it's practically considered an entitlement. And with executives [seeing] how effective their home-working employees have been during this situation, it's likely to stick around even after the recovery."

At her firm, "our teamwork has really stepped up. People are supporting each other more and finding new ways to handle responsibilities to get through this, which will be the lasting benefit of this 'change!'"

At IBM, CEO Arvind Krishna created and shared a special eight-point pledge (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/i-pledge-support-my-fellow-ibmers-working-from-home-during-krishna/>) that went viral as a model for other C-suites to follow, putting a "human touch" on his entire workforce.

"With employees and companies making such strides in work-from-home execution, there's going to be a massive rethinking of just how you build culture," Fields Tyler said.

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Informality Catches On

Many companies are creating clever ways to connect remote employees during and after the workday ends, usually with fun in mind.

Tampa HR consultant Michelle May Griffin, SHRM-CP, has clients who have created a virtual coffee klatsch once or twice a week, designed with an impromptu gathering-in-the-breakroom feel. "Supervisors aren't invited," she said. "Staff can come and go. It's very informal. People can eat lunch or have a cup of coffee and just talk about anything they wish."

At Centurion, a health care company based in Vienna, Va., HR created a voluntary lunch-time video meeting for employees on Zoom to talk about things other than work, said Jennifer Tyrrell, SHRM-SCP, senior director of HR.

"We did one that was called 'Get Up and Move' based on fitness videos so employees could be active, but that didn't draw a huge crowd," she joked. "Others had better participation, such as 'Just Social: Brown Bag Lunch Buddies' for remote workers to take a break and have virtual lunch to catch up with co-workers, and end-of-day Friday happy hours, including one where we played Pictionary."

Griffin shared another story of a small client. On one Friday afternoon, HR reached out to all employees and took drink orders. It then set up a virtual happy hour on Zoom where employees used their drinks—that the company personally delivered to their homes—to toast another great week.

"The company did a good job, packing them in baskets with other goodies," Griffin said.

As for food, some larger companies are offering stipends for daily lunch pickups or delivery, which has become an unanticipated expense for remote employees "now that they aren't able to take advantage of full cafeterias at work every day," said Chris Hoyt, president of CareerXroads, a membership-based talent community of more than 150 companies.

Zoom Fatigue

Virtual meetings have become so common at most companies that "there is more and more talk of blocking out meetings on multiple days each week to reduce stress and prevent 'Zoom fatigue,'" Hoyt said. "For some, there are entire days where either no meetings are called, or at least none that involve a video log-in. That's a well-being perk."

As for home offices, tech equipment stipends can make work and life easier. Hoyt said one organization gave its remote employees full access to a virtual ergonomic assessment that could help determine what equipment they would need to work most productively and funded those purchases.

At Iona, a nonprofit firm in Washington, D.C., employees were provided with office furniture and computer technology delivered to their homes, with set up-help provided, said Stacey Berk, a managing consultant with Expand HR Consulting in Maryland. "They bent over backwards to help their employees," she said.

At some companies, encouragement to take a summer vacation is a well-received perk. "Having spent so much time over the past few months working from home, [employees] are pivoting to summer rentals in remote places instead of theme parks or family reunions," Berk said. "Some employers are allowing staff to extend that time away if they split their work time, and may offer to pay for Wi-Fi connections, additional temporary office resources and supermarket gift cards for these types of vacations so that they can productively work in this capacity."

Wellness Well-Done

Berk sees a trend where clients are providing wellness "relief" to their workers by having group stress-relieving exercises, guest virtual speakers or even comic relief, such as themed summer dress-up days. Hoyt agrees that wellness has become an emerging front for many HR leaders.

"Some have been pushing for the ability to incorporate ideas and strategies for years and now are realizing that the pandemic [is the final catalyst] to get initiatives off the ground and running," he said.

"Some company fitness centers are offering virtual workouts much like commercial gyms do," Hoyt added. "A few employers' in-house trainers are getting creative with programs for people who may not have equipment at home but can do workouts with whatever equipment they might have around."

Personalized mental-health care program offerings also are gaining popularity, Hoyt said, such as LyraHealth and Headspace. Both focus on mindfulness and meditation for stress, anxiety, sleep, attention and fitness and enable participants to track their progress. Other popular programs include MeQuilibrium, a well-being and performance platform that helps employees identify and manage stress; and Sleepio, a digital sleep-improvement program featuring cognitive behavioral therapy techniques.

Gifted and Talented

At BHI Insurance in Newark, Del., which boasts 28 employees, HR Director Maria Clyde, SHRM-SCP, offered everyone a list of electronics to choose from as a thank-you gift for adapting well to working from home. She budgeted \$40 to \$60 per gift.

"We thought that was fitting since everyone who is working remotely is looking to make their lives (and their kids' lives) easier," Clyde said. "I've also seen companies providing headphones and streaming services like Netflix or Disney+ for the kids. People are getting really creative!"

Charitably conscious, Hoyt said some companies are matching or double-matching employee donations to local organizations or for anything related to front-line workers and PPE creation and distribution.

Other benefits that companies can define as perks, Berk said, are a relaxed summer dress standard and the ability to work outdoors, which shows up as an employee's background in virtual meetings. "By not having to wear a blouse or dress shirt, think of the money employees are saving in dry cleaning because they can dress casually," she said. "It's not a lot of savings, but it helps."

Giving employees a greater voice can be considered a perk for some employees. Organizations that previously conducted one employee survey a year—or even every couple of years—are now conducting them more frequently, Berk said. "This gives employees more of a chance to be heard and to have a voice in some policy decision-making, which is one perk you cannot put a price tag on."

Tyrrell said Centurion has conducted more employee surveys recently and found that 90 percent of employees expressed confidence in how the C-suite has been dealing with the crisis, while at-home distractions ranked second lowest among employee challenges.

Many companies are creating incentives for work-from-home employees to voluntarily return to the office. Campus Advantage, an owner and manager of off-campus university student housing, has 70 employees assigned to its Austin, Texas, headquarters.

"Many workers are still afraid to come back," said Angela L. Shaw, SHRM-SCP, vice president of HR. "Our office has a mojo committee that creates fun office events, and we've offered those in the office breakfasts, Taco Tuesdays and yoga classes. On average, we'll have about five employees come in. The others are happy to continue working from home."

Perks on the Chopping Block

Many companies are planning for the next wave of the coronavirus, one that is expected to hit them hard financially during the second half of 2020 and beyond, Berk said. Traditional employee perks likely will be impacted, at least for the short term.

"Expect perks like traditional staff-wide wellness benefits, such as gym memberships, discount programs and celebratory gatherings, will be cut or eliminated and replaced with more modest offerings," Berk said. "Companies are quickly adjusting forecasting and budgeting for the coming year based on the realities of the pandemic. The reimaged office layout and sanitation will be at the forefront for HR and executives, and you could see companies reducing employee benefits, eliminating increases, bonuses, education stipends and executive perks. With the post-pandemic workforce, they have to account for a big in-office sanitation budget and potential reduced profits."

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