



**Feature:** Some Employers Are Thinking Outside the Benefits Box

## Some Employers Are Thinking Outside the Benefits Box

At some companies, benefits sweeteners can extend beyond health and dental in an effort to better retain employees even after the job market improves. Some of the less-routine perks include pet insurance, elder care, free personal trainers and a \$500 allowance toward a commuter bike purchase.

**By Richard Rothschild**

In this uncertain economy, most employees feel fortunate if their benefits remain intact and their share of health insurance premiums doesn't skyrocket.

But some companies are adding sweeteners to benefit packages that go beyond traditional medical and retirement coverage. In February 2011, Home Depot Inc. will begin offering employees a new "backup dependent care program," which provides discounts for both child and elder care. The Atlanta-based retailer says its new program will pare the daily cost of day care to \$25 from a typical \$85 and elder care to \$35 from a typical \$240.

"We felt [the new program] was an excellent way to help our associates deal with life's surprises," says Brant Suddath, the company's director of benefits. "We liked the flexibility it offers because it can be used for any dependent in need of supervised care."

Home Depot also offers employees a pet health insurance program called "nose to tail coverage," be the pet a dog, cat, rabbit, ferret, reptile or bird. The company doesn't subsidize the costs, but it does negotiate a discount for employees.



Companies are giving workers money for such "green" purchases as hybrid vehicles and bicycles. They are also providing discounts on such services as pet insurance to keep and attract top talent.



Other companies are offering such new workplace perks as 100 percent employer-paid medical insurance premiums, on-site health clubs with free personal trainers and a 50 percent subsidy on the purchase of college textbooks.

Why are employers going above and beyond? Although it's a buyer's market for most recruiters, says Chris Covill, a national practice leader for New York-based Mercer, there are a few industries such as health care and specialty retailing where "competition for employees is still pretty high." Employee-friendly benefit plans also can help companies engage and retain their workforce.

The sluggish job market "won't always be this way," says Luke Vandermillen, vice president of Principal Financial Group in Des Moines, Iowa. The company annually honors the "10 Best" small- or medium-size companies that show a commitment to financial security through outstanding benefits. Some "companies are taking the long view," he says, "and have made a strategic decision around investment in employees in the form of benefit programs."

Principal has noted a recent uptick in wellness programs. For example, Principal's top 10 this year includes Clif Bar & Co., a Berkeley, California, maker of natural and organic foods and drinks, that offers an on-site gym with a free personal trainer, nutrition counseling and a \$500 allowance toward the purchase of a commuter bicycle. It also gives employees other "green" benefits such as \$6,500 (taxed) toward the purchase of a hybrid car and a \$1,000 yearly (taxed) allowance toward the purchase of home updates.

"Clif Bar is very much at the leading edge for wellness programs," says Matt Swinnerton, a senior vice president at Precept Group, an Irvine, California-based human resources consulting firm. "It's part of the culture of their company."

Similarly, Franklin International, a Columbus, Ohio, manufacturer of adhesives and sealants, which also made Principal's list, recently began giving out \$50 gift cards to employees who take a health-risk assessment. It also offers 50 percent reimbursement of up to \$500 per employee per year for college textbooks for workers' children.

Some companies have long offered creative benefits. Consider, for instance, Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc., a pioneer in offering unusual perks. The South Burlington, Vermont, company provides a nap room for weary workers—of which about 10 percent of the employees partake, says Sean Greenwood, the company's "grand pooh-bah" of public relations.

The nap room "was set up about a decade ago when we moved into our current headquarters," Greenwood says. "We want people to be able to take care of themselves. They might be tired after coming in from a long trip."

Additionally, Ben & Jerry's gives employees three free pints of ice cream to take home every day. "It makes a lot of friends," Greenwood says. "The original intent was to make employees experts in ice cream. They tell us what" new flavors taste good.

Pretty sweet.

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