

How can I develop unique benefits for my employees?

inc.com Human Resources mentor Rudy Karsan offers some guidelines for developing unique benefits for employees.

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Human Resources mentor Rudy Karsan responds to the following question from an inc.com user:

Where can I get a comprehensive list of unique ways to benefit employees? We have the standard benefits, such as a 401(k) plan with company matching, paid health, dental, and life insurance, and profit sharing. We also buy our employees lunch once a month, pay decent salaries, etc. I am not in favor of things like "nap time" or video games, but I could use some proven ideas that are "out of the box."

Rudy Karsan's response: This is a question that I hear a lot nowadays, given the talent shortage. I would strongly recommend that you take a thoughtful approach to benefits. Keep in mind that benefits do not positively affect your ability to hire or retain people so much as they work against you. For example, a candidate probably won't join your company specifically because you offer better health benefits, but he or she may choose not to join your company because you don't offer those benefits.

You should look at benefits as an essential security blanket for the employees in your organization. In our culture, benefits are frequently viewed as entitlements. Any reduction in benefits will create as much angst as, if not more than, a reduction in compensation.

The best employee benefits that I have seen have been tailored to organizational needs. For example, a friend of mine, who was not very outgoing, ran a high-tech firm. When his company was small, he would always keep a basket of fresh fruit and vegetables in his office. This encouraged people to come in and talk to him while enjoying a snack. When talking to the employees of this company, I discovered that this benefit not only provided the employees with a healthy snack and a break from work, but it also afforded them important face time with the leader of the organization. The staff viewed this benefit very positively.

To cite another example, in the early days of our company, we had no vacation policy. Employees could take as much time off as they wanted, provided that they got their jobs done. This policy lasted for a few years until the company grew much larger and expanded to multiple locations.

I would strongly recommend that you gauge the needs of your employees and provide additional "soft" benefits for them that will not be seen as entitlements. This will require some work on your part, but the rewards in terms of attraction and retention of talent will be great.

Finally, I suggest that you review your company's benefits at least once a year, for the organization may outgrow some of them. For instance, when our company was younger, we voted on the benefits we wanted. As a result, our health plan was unintentionally biased toward single employees. It took us a couple of years to notice this anomaly and correct it. Had we conducted an annual benefits audit, we would have been able to catch it sooner.

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