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## **Why Your Benefits May Not Be My Benefits**

By: Jim Helik

Decades ago I signed on to work at a **consulting** firm. I arrived for my first day of work around 8:30 in the morning, and was told by my new co-workers that, unfortunately, I had arrived too late for breakfast. It seems that breakfast was served, for free, every morning to employees at 7 a.m. This was an employee **benefit** that nobody had mentioned to me during the recruitment process. Oh happy days! Starbucks had just arrived in Canada, and I was ready to sample this well-promoted brew. The next day found me happily munching and drinking away at 7 am.

It took me a couple of days to realize that this meant that I was at my desk, billing clients, by about 7:10 every morning. I, of course, wasn't paid any extra for my early morning appearances. I quickly calculated that my extra time was effectively purchased at a rate of less than \$5 an hour - all in all, a pretty effective return to my employer.

### **Too Cheap**

But, I felt that I was selling my personal time too cheap, and this was, therefore, an employee benefit I quickly viewed with suspicion. Fast-forward to today and the current headlines about Google. According to one magazine, this is the best place to work in the United States, due in no small part to its employee perks and benefits. The lists of non-traditional benefits that this firm offers is almost endless. You can get a massage on company time. There is a swimming pool, complete with lifeguard, on the Google campus. There are pool tables and a 24-hour gym. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are all provided – for free. There is an in-house doctor, nutritionist, and yoga instructor. You can have your dry-cleaning picked up by the concierge and your hair cut in mobile trailer salons. You never have to go home.

Which may be the point to all of this. Your personal chores are looked after by the company, leaving you free to concentrate – seemingly for long periods – on your work.

At what point, though, does help with your home life become paternalism and, more specifically, at what point do some of these benefits have the exact opposite effect, of being viewed negatively by employees as an impingement on personal life?

### **Create Boundaries**

Nancy Rothbard, at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, along with Katherine Phillips and Tracy Dumas, address some of these concerns in a paper titled, *Managing Multiple Roles: Work-Family Policies and Individuals' Desires for Segmentation*. They examine how different individuals create boundaries between their work lives and their home and family roles. They create a continuum between "integrators" (those individuals who overlap their work/non-work roles) and "segmenters" who want to keep these roles separate.

Integrators prefer the blurring of roles of work/home since this allows them flexibility in dealing with the multiple demands on their lives. Segmenters may prefer to keep work/home separate since it may allow greater focus on either role, and may buffer against the spillover of negative emotions and experiences from one domain to another (the segmenter having a bad day at the office leaves their work life in the office when they go home).

In a survey, they found that employees who wanted more segmentation in their lives were actually less satisfied and committed to their firm when that company had benefits that sought to break down the work/life wall, such as the provision of on-site daycare. Promoting the integration of these two roles made segmenters distinctly unhappy with their employer. Integrators, of course, like the

provision of onsite daycare. Segmenters preferred benefits such as flextime, which to them actually reinforces the work/home distinction.

This conclusion is important since it is just another example of how varied today's workforce has become. Managing this diversity of employee desires becomes yet another challenge for the organization.

So, let people bring their dogs to work and encourage them to personalize their workspaces. But, recognize that not everybody wants to live at their workplace and be sure to give these employees the benefits which allow them to maintain their distinct lives.

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