

Perking things up

Employers sweeten the pot to grab and keep the best young workers

So, you think you have it good at work, with your discounted coffee, your free pens, plug-in for your car and a brown floral couch next to the bathroom stalls.

Think again. Some employers in Edmonton and across Canada are upping the ante and offering unusual perks to get their employees' creative juices flowing and boost morale.

One local company has three quiet nap rooms with pillows and blankets.

Mercedes-Benz in Toronto lets its employees test drive its sports coupes and cabriolets.

Labatt breweries in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver have regular stein sessions where employees get together and swap stories over a pint. (Just one, since moderation is a virtue.) A public relations firm in Toronto takes the idea one step further and wheels a "beer cart" around the office on Friday afternoons.

Rumour has it that workers at Edmonton's Labatt brewery get to take home free beer each week, though local officials are tight-lipped with such company secrets. They don't want their competitors at Molson or Big Rock to get the scoop.

Think foosball tables, office scooters, fitness rooms and Xbox stations. Think office concierge, who will bring your dog to the vet, collect the dry cleaning, find you a plumber, then do your grocery shopping.

In the name of "fostering a corporate culture," dot-com employers and businesses filled with gen Xers and Nintendo kids-cum-adults are offering unique, indulgent perks to promote teamwork and attract and retain the brightest employees.

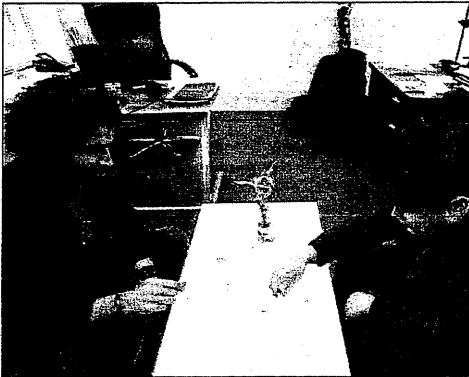


Adil Kassam, left, and Bishan Zaver play foosball at Synthesystems.



Candace Elliott

Ryan Lother and Heath Ryerse compete in a friendly little ping-pong match at their TD Waterhouse office.



Bruce Edwards

Robin Mohar, left, and Anton Hoang play chess at Synthesystems

"Employers are always looking for something new that is going to distinguish them as an attractive place to work," says Graham Lowe, a sociologist at the University of Alberta. "During the high-tech boom, firms were stepping all over themselves to try to outdo themselves providing perks for twentysomething software designers and computer engineers."

Perks are thought to help employees maintain a balance between work and play and give them stress-free fun so their productivity increases.

If employees can let off steam by getting sweaty in a handball court, if they can clear their brains with a quick yoga session or a Zen garden in the boardroom, job satisfaction can only improve, some say.

There are skeptics who think corporations use perks just to make employees work like Energizer bunnies, giving them pretty

rewards with little substance.

Lowe says he knows of no studies that prove that offering perks boosts production. But the perks have symbolic value, he says. They're a way for employers to acknowledge hard work.

He says employers who offer cappuccino bars and game rooms also have to offer more valuable benefits like daycare subsidies, sick-leave provisions and supports for education.

Ray Thomas, spokesman for a corporate watchdog in the United States called @™ark

(pronounced art-mark), calls perks "just another one of those shyster tricks to make something shoddy look attractive."

They're fundamental to the job, he says, but "people know that their standards of living are going down, that they have to work much longer hours than their parents had to, that their leisure time is diminishing. ..."

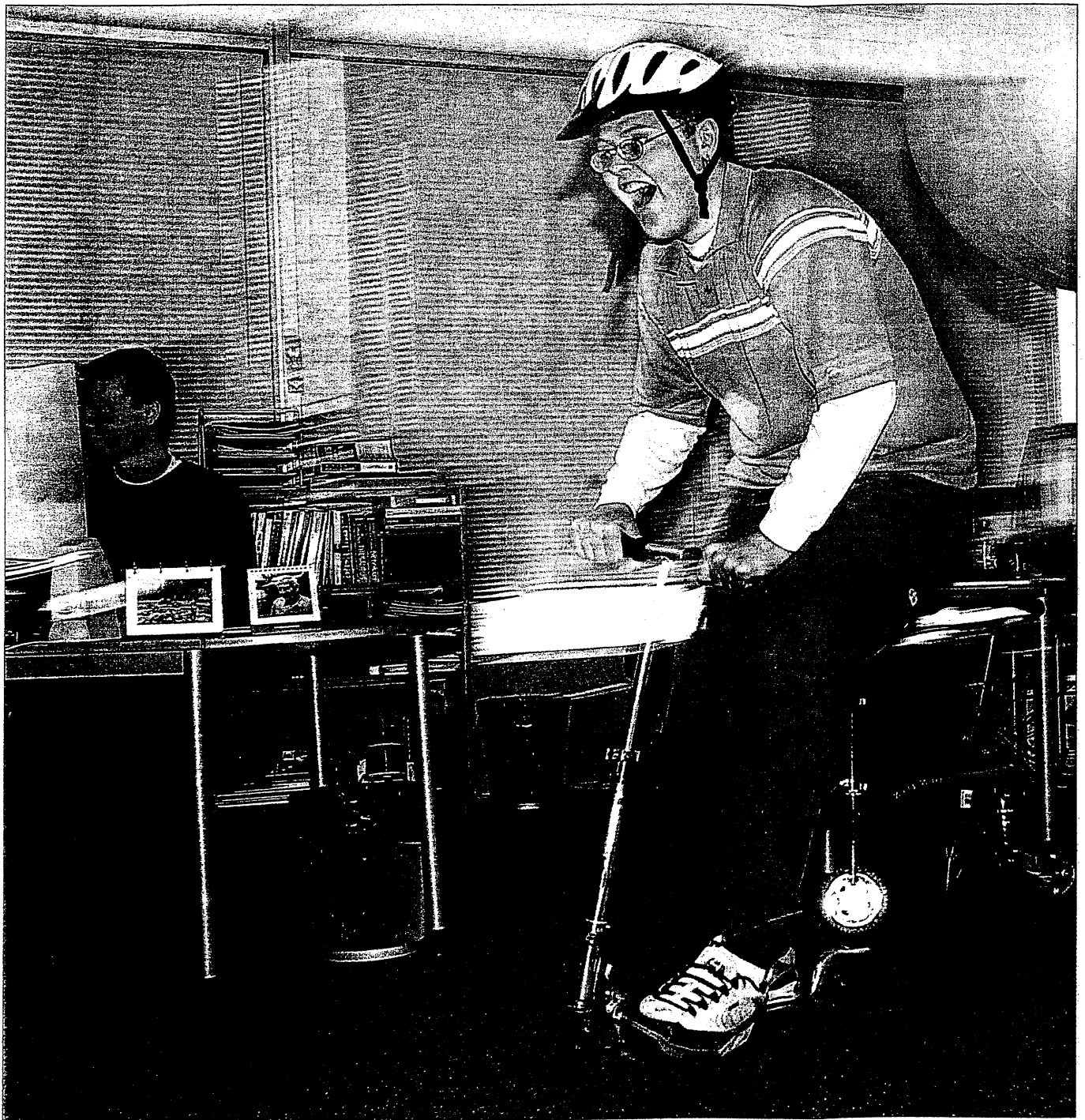
"Companies feel that by giving people rec rooms and counsellors, they can make up for all this."

Herb King, human resources consultant for the Hay Group, says if the employer's motives are genuine and employees see them that way, the perks will be well-received. He said few companies flog their frills and perks in a huge way, but focus instead on great leadership, interesting work and opportunities to advance.

"The perks are never going to replace or be a surrogate for those fundamental things."

Nor are they going to disappear.

@WORK



Ed Kaiser

King says they will likely evolve as high-tech workers get older and start having families. No longer interested in game rooms, they may demand more concierge-style perks that give them more time with family by taking care of the groceries or bills.

"What makes the most admired company is not these kinds of perks.

"These perquisites are just kind of a nice pass if they work for you.

"I think, for people who are out looking for companies to work for, that the things I would look for are things like clarity of purpose, leadership, interesting work, flexibility."

Jodie Sinnema ■

jsinnema@thejournal.canwest.com

Programmer Chris Dusing, right, goes for a spin on a scooter while Dave Bellous, a builder developer, works away at Redengine.