

# Companies perk up the office environment

## ARE BENEFITS WORTH IT?

BY JODIE SINNEMA

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

Think again. Some employers are offering unusual perks to get their employees' creative juices flowing and boost morale.

One Edmonton 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.

Think foosball tables, office scooters, fitness rooms and Xbox

stations. Think office concierge who will take your dog to the vet, collect the dry cleaning, find you a plumber and shop for groceries.

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

"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 each other, providing perks for twenty-something 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 staff can let off steam 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 the Energizer Bunny, giving them pretty rewards with little substance.

Mr. Lowe says he knows of no studies proving perks boost production. But the perks have symbolic value as 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 such as daycare subsidies, sick-leave provisions and supports for education.

Ray Thomas, spokesman for a U.S. corporate watchdog, calls perks "just another one of those shyster tricks to make something

shoddy look attractive."

They are 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 says 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.

Mr. King says they will likely evolve as high-tech workers get older and start having families. They may demand more concierge-style perks that give them more time with family by taking care of the groceries or bills.

He says people who are job-hunting, should look for things like clarity of purpose, leadership, interesting work, flexibility."

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### INTUIT CANADA LTD.

Developer of financial software, including Quicken and QuickTax

**Number of employees** 300 to 550, depending on seasonal workload

**Average age** 30 to 35

**Unusual perks** Rooms with beds and blankets for those needing catnaps, a gymnasium for basketball, volleyball and badminton, a fitness room with towel service and \$20,000 worth of equipment, a games room with a fireplace and beanbag chair, and four barbecues on patios.

### REDENGINE

Web developing company focused on usability of Web sites and human interaction with the computer

**Number of employees** 16, mostly male

**Average age** 30 to 32

**Unusual perks** A handball court, a miniature Zen garden in the boardroom, a small, red bicycle and silver scooter to get from one section of the office to another, Nerf guns and darts and an exercise ball and a CD player to listen to crooners Norah Jones or Louis Prima.

### TD WATERHOUSE DISCOUNT BROKERAGE

Call centre, open 24/7, offers financial service for people seeking information about trading stocks, bonds and mutual funds

**Number of employees** 140  
**Average age** 25 to 30

**Unusual perks** A billiard table that can be transformed into a ping-pong table with an overlay, a big-screen television and comfortable couches, and steel refrigerators that make the kitchen area fancier than the average home.