



New Media

RICHARD KOLENDA

There's still no such thing as a free lunch

by Ric Kolenda

“... ‘tanstaaf.’ means ‘there ain’t no such thing as a free lunch.’... anything free costs twice as much in [the] long run or turns out worthless.” - Robert Heinlein

“You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.” – French proverb

Lunch is on me

How cool is this... free lunch on the company? Well, maybe not as cool as you might think. What if getting a free lunch means you have to choke it down at your desk while you continue coding, six hours into your eighth consecutive 12+-hour day?

The other day I read an article about how companies are cracking down on employees using the Net to buy plane tickets and read personal email on company time. The problem is, it’s not so clear when company time ends and my time begins?

Sure, a lot of tech startups offer cool perks for their workers, but they don’t always match employee needs and wants. **Mark Woodall**, Deterritorializationist for **GivingCapital**, likes extras in the office like free food and drink. And of course money. But those aren’t the only things that make him feel good about the long hours and high-stress of a startup environment. “Most people would probably find work more appealing if they were just given credit when it was due and not treated like they’re worthless by levels of management. No matter how much beer or club memberships you throw at people, it is not going to make them feel better about being treated like shit the rest of the time.”

Dan Hoover, Director of New Media at **eCityInteractive**, agrees. “The perks I appreciate most are regular, generous raises and well-adjusted bosses that don’t give me a hard time.”

“The biggest perk we have is trust,” according to **Carol Doroba**, a VP for **Impact Search and Strategies**, “which is hard to find in most companies.”

Check please?

Sure, most perks are offered in a sincere effort to make employees happy, even if the motivation is enlightened self-interest. But what are the things to watch out for?

- *The Passive-Aggressive Theory of Management.* You know what I'm talking about. "Flex-time" actually means arriving by 7:30 a.m. and leaving anytime after 9 p.m. You can take time off for personal needs, as long as you don't have any. And then there's that look you get when you have to make a personal phone call.
- *"Team-Building" exercises.* These are typically structured events or activities, and almost never during regular work hours. This might include paintball battles, laser tag, or even a softball game. Not everyone dislikes these activities, and they may even serve the intended purpose in some instances. Doroba, for example, enjoys her company's quarterly orienteering competitions in Valley Forge National Historic Park ("The girls beat the guys big time!").
- *The "Optional" Social Events.* This can range from the casual after-work happy hour thing to more structured events in or outside the office. The important thing here is, there is usually at least a subtle pressure to participate even if you'd rather be chilling at home or with (can it be?) non-co-worker friends. As an employer, I learned the hard way that what seemed like a great way for people to get to know each other better outside work (and feel good about how great a boss I was) wasn't always welcomed by my staff.

The good stuff

That's not to say that employees don't appreciate many perks being offered by this new model of employment. **Cherie Arabia**, a veteran of 3 local new media shops and currently at **eCal**, has enjoyed perks from the typical (health club memberships, dry cleaning pickups, company socials) to the more unusual (free breakfast, lunch, beverages, and snacks and veterinary insurance).

I think **Ian Cross**, CEO of **i-site**, has a good perspective on activities for employees. The company does things like Friday happy hours in Old City and quarterly activities like ballooning or an Austin Powers Day, when the company shut down at noon for lunch and the opening of *The Spy Who Shagged Me*. The quarterly activities take place on company time so as not to intrude on employee's private lives. "In Europe they have a different sense of the line between work and play," says Cross, a native of England.

It's my personal opinion that the best thing you can do for your staff is to let them do what they want in the few hours they have outside of work. The fun stuff should be on company time because forcing employees to socialize with each other after hours might be counter-productive. Employers like to think that they're employees are one big happy family and that they're fostering esprit de corps with such activities, when in fact employees often feel like they spend way too much time with co-workers already.

I do not, however, wish to discourage innovation in the area of non-monetary perks. Our industry is working out a whole new model for the workplace. Walter Duranty, the 1930s-era New York Times Moscow Correspondent liked to quote that famous "omelet" proverb above as an apology for Stalin's atrocities. I don't want to draw too close a parallel between tech employers and the Soviet dictator, but let's not break too many eggs, huh?

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