



WORKING WELL

One year after the government changed the rights to flexible working hours, wellbeing is firmly on the agenda in business, with lifestyle discounts and fitness training just two perks offered in the battle to retain the best staff

WORDS: ABIGAIL BUTCHER

As many of us prepare for our summer holiday – and the email cull and impending deadlines triggered by our return to work – it’s worth considering that 30 June saw the one-year anniversary of the government’s revision to guidelines surrounding flexible working hours. Rights initially offered to carers of children to request a change to the structure of their working day are now available to all employees who have

completed at least 26 weeks of service.

Although initial reports from research by survey consultancy Censuswide suggests that more than a third of companies are resisting such requests, the emphasis on work/life balance is growing, with businesses keen to supplement salaries with lifestyle perks, in order to attract and retain the best staff.

In Canary Wharf, KPMG uses the collective buying power of its employees to negotiate

discounts on everything from mobile phone bills and cinema tickets, to meals at 18,000 restaurants. While here and elsewhere, fitness is a key priority.

In April, one of the world’s leading acquisition companies, MVE, launched a challenge to its employees – to become the fittest company in the UK. Five months later, MVE lauds its wellbeing programme as one of the key tools for maintaining staff morale. Among other benefits, employees are offered personal training, yoga classes, football and running clubs, healthy breakfasts and fruit all day long – all free of charge. They also have access to reduced price gym membership and the government’s cycle-to-work scheme.

“One of our founders, Tom Morgan, was an Olympic rower and everyone takes part in charity challenges, so wellbeing and fitness is really built

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into the psyche here,” explains MVE head of PR, Grace Garland. “Our sector is very competitive, so our benefits really help to give us the edge over bigger companies.” As a result, MVE has leapfrogged up *The Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work For* list – from 42 in 2013 to tenth place this year.

Statistics show that motivation and performance will improve with investment in wellbeing programmes, at a smaller cost to firms than an unhappy employee. Research undertaken for last year’s Britain’s Healthiest Company awards, a joint initiative between VitalityHealth, Mercer and *The Telegraph* newspaper, found that poor lifestyle choices made by employees cost British companies nearly £60m in lost productivity each year.

But it’s turning around, says leading UK trainer Matt Roberts, who regularly consults with businesses – particularly in the financial, legal and hedge fund sectors – on employee wellbeing.

“What’s really noticeable is that although the economy may have squeezed companies, there has still been a strong upward trend for employee wellness programmes; employers want their staff to get and stay fit for the ‘battle’,” says Roberts, who devises a tiered range of programmes from simple personal training to consultation on food, physiotherapy and desk layout.

One company found its work with a personal

trainer so successful that it added him to the payroll. Former Army sergeant major John Allison began working two days a week with the marketing agency Momentum Worldwide two years ago. He is now their UK health and wellbeing manager, producing global best practice.

“We were very keen to have minimal excuses for staff not to get fit,” says Allison, who created a “Training Shack” at Momentum’s office complete with TRX, kettlebells and a climbing rope.

“It’s simple, but very effective – I’m very keen on empowering people to use what’s available in the urban environment. I want to inspire people and give them ideas that will work anywhere.”

Allison has also brought in the Good Eating Company, a contract caterer specialising in nutritious and seasonal food and is now training in stress management and mental health.

The government reports that in 2013/14, some 11.3 million working days were lost due to stress, depression or anxiety and that UK employers face an annual bill of around £9bn for sick pay.

Deloitte is one employer that has a network of “mental health champions” within its workforce.

Emma Codd, managing partner for talent at Deloitte, explains: “The champions are able to facilitate conversations with team members who they suspect are experiencing mental ill-health.”

Deloitte also offers gym facilities in London, as well as GP, dentist and physiotherapist facilities at its Health Suite. In addition it provides coaching to parents to help them balance work with the responsibilities of a new family, a 12-week paid internship to those returning to work after three to six years out, and a renowned Time Out scheme.

“Deloitte’s Time Out scheme enables employees to take a four-week period of unpaid leave once a year,” says Codd. “Our aim is to ensure that all our people are able to balance their lives with a successful and fulfilling career.”

It comes as Richard Branson publicly confirmed that the 170 employees in his US and UK personal staff could take holidays whenever they like in a nod to working practices in Silicon Valley, and in the hope of increasing productivity.

While some suggest that such flexibility might be taken advantage of, Codd is convinced it’s a simple and effective proposition for big business.

“Employees are trusted to choose what works best for both them and the team, and that they are judged on output.” ☺