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Guest Column

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Cultivating Success With Benefits

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In the evolving landscape of the horticultural industry, attracting and retaining top talent is crucial for sustained growth and success. One key strategy that forward-thinking horticultural businesses are adopting is offering a full spectrum of staff benefits.

Recognizing that employees of different ages have diverse needs and priorities, a comprehensive benefits package can appeal to a broad range of workers. Let's explore the significance of various benefits, from paid leave to workplace perks like pets at the workplace, in creating an inclusive, sustainable and attractive work environment.

Paid Leave: Catering to All Life Stages

The foundation of any robust benefits package is paid leave. Acknowledging the diverse needs of employees at different life stages is essential. Parental and bereavement leave, for instance, demonstrates a commitment to supporting employees during significant life events. Employees in their reproductive years may value parental leave to support growing families, while older employees may find bereavement leave particularly meaningful as they navigate end-of-life situations. And none of these phases are static—the conditions and needs fluctuate over time.

Parental leave is a good example of this. The horticultural industry was once largely dominated by males, but is seeing a huge influx of female employees. With more birthing mothers entering the horticultural workforce, parental leave policies become more important as a recruiting and retention tool. Additionally, a generation ago it was uncommon for the male partner to take any time off, but these paradigms have shifted, and extending parental leave policies to include fathers is common now. Many parental leave policies also accommodate adopting parents.

The U.S. doesn't have federally mandated parental leave laws, and there's a lack of consistency across industries and businesses. For companies that offer it, it can range from two to 24 weeks, with some costs offset by Short Term Disability plans that cover pregnancy.

Medical & Injury Benefits

Major Medical: Major medical health coverage is another cornerstone of a robust benefits package with multi-generational appeal. From family planning to additional care that may be needed past the age of 40, major medical is a vital benefit to attract and retain employees.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP): Mental health is a growing concern in the modern workplace. An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can offer financial, mental health and legal counseling, benefiting employees of all ages. Work and personal life can be stressful at any age. Providing support to navigate these challenges is mutually beneficial for the employee and the employer.

Domestic Partner Insurance: Respecting diverse family structures is paramount in today's society. Offering domestic partner insurance extends benefits to employees' partners, promoting inclusivity and equality. Many employers have been dropping these benefits in response to the Defense of Marriage Act, which federally granted the right of marriage to same sex couples beginning in 2015. Some companies are retaining these benefits because they realize that many Millennials and Gen Zers aren't getting married or are marrying much later.

Short-Term Disability: Accidents and health issues can impact employees of any age. Short-term disability coverage ensures financial stability during periods of unexpected illness or injury. Given the physical demands of this industry, certain employees may be at a higher risk of work-related injuries or conditions that require short-term disability coverage. Additionally, short-term disability can offset the costs of parental leave, since it typically covers a portion of salary for mothers who've just given birth and take leave.

Financial & Additional Benefits

Retirement Planning with 401(k): In the horticultural industry, where physical demands may change over time, it's crucial to consider long-term financial planning. A 401(k) retirement savings plan not only provides financial security for employees in their later years, but also serves as a valuable recruitment and retention tool.

Work from Home (WFH) Options: The modern workforce increasingly values flexibility in work arrangements. WFH options can address commuting challenges, work-life balance questions or health-related concerns. Many employers are offering bridge programs to individuals returning from major health events like birth, surgery or serious injury to ease back into work.

Employee Discounts: Employee discounts not only boost morale, but also enhance the connection between employees and the products they help produce/sell. This can be a powerful recruiting tool since it offsets personal expenses.

Perks & Additional Options

Pets at the Workplace: Incorporating pets into the workplace is a unique "benefit/perk" that transcends age boundaries. For example, the garden center that I manage has two full time cats on the payroll named after past employees. Not only do they keep the rodent population in check, which in turn protects our fertilizer products from being eaten, they provide comfort and stress relief to our staff and customers. On top of that, they're brand ambassadors for our marketing department. Guests will come into the store just to see the cats.



Pictured: Hard-working brand ambassadors (and pest patrol) Diane (left) and Peep (right).

Other options: Some other popular benefits that appeal to a full spectrum of American employees include tuition reimbursement, flexible spending accounts, student loan repayment matches, stock options, pet insurance, commuter benefits and telehealth.

The Cost of Benefits

These benefits range in cost and complexity greatly. Typically, healthcare and paid leave account for the greatest costs. Other benefits/perks cost significantly less. For example, telehealth usually ranges between $5 to $10 per month.

Keeping a pet on-site typically costs less than $500 per year, which includes food, immunizations, flea/tick

medication and vet bills.

When thinking about the cost, also consider what it will cost if you don't implement some of these changes. This was advice given to me by my peer and mentor John Kennedy.

Here's an example: Imagine a valued employee with years of experience has a major life event and determines that the company's benefits offerings don't match their needs. Now the company needs to recruit and train a replacement, which could cost as much as 15 to 18 months of that employee's salary. Not to mention the opportunity cost that will be missed by that employee not being present to fulfill their vital functions as the replacement is trained. I recently did an exercise to look at these numbers in depth and the cost savings to retain versus replace could mean tens of thousands of dollars.

Why It All Matters

In the competitive landscape of the horticultural industry, offering a comprehensive array of staff benefits is a strategic investment that pays off in employee satisfaction, loyalty and productivity. By acknowledging the diverse needs and priorities of employees at different life stages, businesses can create an inclusive workplace culture that appeals to individuals of all ages. As the industry evolves, businesses that prioritize the well-being and happiness of their employees will undoubtedly reap the rewards of a thriving and engaged workforce. **GP**

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