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# Creative Benefits to Engage, Motivate, and Retain

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by [Kyle Lagunas](#)

HR Market Analyst, Software Advice  
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Attracting and retaining top talent is a formidable and never-ending challenge for business leaders (newsflash, right?). Beyond salaries, benefits can play a crucial role here, but few companies have met this challenge with creative solutions. Most employers still boast of their "competitive benefits" offerings, which usually amount to a standard package of health, dental and vision insurance, some paid vacation, a modest life insurance policy and—if the employer is feeling generous—a matching 401k plan. That's "comparable" not "competitive."

Benefits need to be perceived as strategic to an organization. The fact of the matter is that employers who continue to offer the same old benefits package will fall behind in attracting, motivating and retaining the best.

Chosen and implemented effectively, however, benefits can demonstrate leadership's concern for the well-being of employees, reinforce cultural values, and foster deeper employee engagement.

In this article, I'll present a few creative benefits ideas that the everyday business leader can offer to attract, motivate, and engage – and do so without breaking the bank. I'll also suggest some strategies for selling and

implementing these ideas in your company.

## Benefits Are More Than Just Compensation

Many employees once drew a solid line between work and their personal lives, but these lines are now blurring. Today, workers are seeking more work/life balance, making wellness a higher priority, and finding value in the ability to choose the specific benefits that best meet their needs at this point in their lives. But according to James Berkeley, [Director of Berkeley Burke International](#), "The decisions made regarding what benefits to offer are often based on subjective viewpoints, viewpoints that are far removed from the actual needs of employees." If you really want to know what your employees want, don't guess—ask them! In the meantime, here are a few creative ideas worth considering:

**Promoting Healthy Living and Wellness.** Healthy living and wellness programs are a great way for employers to go beyond the basics and actively improve employees' lifestyles. At Software Advice, our kitchen is stocked with healthy snacks (e.g. filtered water, fresh fruit and veggies, protein and granola bars, etc.). And the simple gesture of providing an alternative to chips and sodas is incredibly valuable. The kicker? It only costs about \$200 a year per employee.

The biggest benefit that employees ask for is gym membership reimbursement" says Susan Combs, President of [President of Combs & Company](#).

"Most health insurance providers offer a partnership, whether through specific gyms or by reimbursing a flat dollar amount." In addition, wellness programs like [WalkingSpree](#)—which creates walking clubs, assigns teams and creates competitions—are a great way to motivate and engage employees to live healthy (thereby reducing your health care costs).

**Commuting Relief Benefits** Whether your people take the bus, train or drive themselves, more and more are looking for commuting relief benefits from their employers. Gas isn't getting any cheaper. Why not incentivize carpooling ([San Mateo County, CA does it](#))? Also, as Combs points out, "If you are in a Metropolitan area, [Transit Chek](#) offers another benefit that employees want: they can purchase their subway or train tickets with pre-tax dollars." Or, go for the double whammy, and promote healthy living and alternative commuting options by installing bike racks in the office.

**Perks You Can Afford.** You may not be able to build an ice rink for your hockey-crazed employees like [VoIP Supply](#), but there are certainly other perks you can afford. Services like those offered by [BetterWorks](#) reward employees with an allowance to spend on discounted food from local restaurants, dry cleaning, gym memberships and more. "Healthcare is something people expect," says Dave Segura, CEO of [Giant Media](#) and an avid fan of BetterWorks. "BetterWorks puts some control in their hands. We began offering dental and vision insurance, and it elicited no response. When we upped allowances on BetterWorks, though, there was a lot of excitement."

Another option: On-site massages, which aren't just for the guys in Silicon Valley.

Many companies—big and small—bring in a massage therapist who offers chair massages to employees. Convenient and relaxing, this perk costs the employer nothing and might just keep employees in the office longer.

**Flexible Work Options.** Telecommuting and other forms of flexible work options make employees healthier and happier. "Traditional management styles haven't quite adjusted away from the notion that if a manager can't see you working, then you must not be working," says Sara Sutton Fell, Founder and CEO of [FlexJobs](#).

But as Sutton Fell points out, studies show that employers who offer flexible schedules and

alternatives to the traditional nine-to-five not only see higher productivity, but also save on health-related benefits they already offer.

"For telecommuting in particular, last fall, Stanford University conducted a study that found [telecommuters were four percent more productive](#) than office workers, working more hours and taking a larger workload," says Sutton Fell.

## Clearing The Great Leadership Hurdle

Benefits offer an organization a great—and creative—way to set itself above the competition and build a strong culture of engagement and motivation. But getting there requires the support of leadership. According to Eddie Trieber, CEO of [Harris Rothenberg International](#), there are a few common concerns that need addressing: "They're often too focused on costs, and don't perceive the immediate benefit. Or, leaders don't believe these benefits will be utilized, hence no payoff for the employer." It's thus up to you to deliver on these key points. Two suggestions:

First, to drive employee interest, actively promote offerings in your recruiting strategy and use open enrollment as an opportunity to re-educate employees. In addition, use the employee self-service portals built into most [human resources management systems](#) to make it easy for employees to access and manage their benefits packages. This is a good place to add FAQs and educational content about what's available to them.

Second, address the cost issue by reminding leadership how little (if anything) creative benefits cost the organization. It might also help to frame benefits in terms of investments—not costs—in new employee acquisition and retention. The return on investment can be quite high.

What creative benefits does your organization offer? What value have your employees found in improved plan offerings?

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VoIP Supply

Thanks for the mention, Kyle! If it actually snowed this winter in Buffalo and instead of rain we'd be getting more health benefits out of that ice rink.

VoIP Supply's allowance of flexible work from home schedules have been a big help for those with kids. Like you said, sometimes creative benefits cost little, if anything, and can make a big difference.

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