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Philly's job perks: Viagra, tattoos, and doggie treats

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Tattoos and dog food, cold meds and cannoli, inner cleansing and eternal salvation: There are, it seems, a few employee benefits Philadelphia schools chief Arlene Ackerman might have overlooked.

Between Ackerman's \$65,000 bonus and the Delaware River Port Authority's spending on E-ZPasses and car allowances for executives, employer munificence appears alive and well in Philadelphia.

But in a lean economy, have the perks trickled down to the area's less-connected?

Employee benefits in the United States made up more than 18 percent of compensation - nearly \$1.5 trillion - in 2008, the most recent year for which detailed data are available, according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Health and retirement benefits accounted for the lion's share, but Wharton School management professor David Crawford said that many companies had been forced to pull back on such perks over the last two years.

"It's fair to say there have been cutbacks," said Crawford, who is also president of Econsult, a consulting firm that specializes in human resources management. "But there are ways to spend a modest amount of money and create a little bit of fun, out of proportion with the actual cost of doing so."

If efficient spending is the criterion, Harry's Occult Shop, at 1238 South St., humbly nominates itself for the crown of area perk king - there's room for it on the shelves between the dream-catchers and the "butterflies blood."

"We engage in energy healing. Money is separate," said Barbara Kane-Gusaras, a tarot reader. The shop's atmosphere of communal - and, for employees, often complimentary - healing, she added, has helped cure her asthma over the past year.

"What better benefit can you have?" she asked.

The answer, of course, is a matter of taste. Many perks might seem reasonable - haircuts for the barber, water ice for workers at Rita's (though ice cream is only 50 percent off for staff), cable and Internet services for local subjects of the Comcast empire.

Others might take hours to fully appreciate. For example, in addition to free transit, SEPTA

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workers are entitled to 10 Viagra pills a month as part of their employee health plan. Provisions like this - which became a minor sticking point during the organization's strike in November when some employees lobbied for daily doses - are found at several firms that offer workers expansive prescription coverage.

Fujirebio Diagnostics Inc., a Japanese company with a branch in Malvern, offers employees yoga and Pilates classes at its on-site workout center. For the less fitness-inclined, the company hosts an annual "Wing Bowl" and occasional mustache-growing contests. Merck, Sharp & Dohme Federal Credit Union, in Chalfont, attempts to fuse such dueling impulses - active and slothful - by providing Wii bowling in the lunch room.

"We do give bonuses," said Grace Volm, human resource manager at Merck, Sharp & Dohme, "but something like this is long-lasting."

For many retail operations, store discounts often amount to employees' most worthwhile perks. Jess Krebs, manager of Doggie Style pet shop in Old City, saves hundreds of dollars a year on reduced-rate kibble and "winter sweaters" for her two pint-size pooches, she said.

The store also offers free samples near the register - and doesn't prohibit those who have dry noses and opposable thumbs.

"I've tried the dog snacks before," said coworker James Conroy, staring into space. "Not that bad."

South Street is a particularly active hub of practical worker freebies. Tattoo artists like Alice White, of No Ka Oi Tiki Tattoo just off Fourth Street, often exchange needle artistry with coworkers. That perk can add up to thousands in savings for the heavily inked, White said, with hourly rates often hovering in the triple digits.

The occult shop's neighbor to the east, Condom Kingdom, offers staff the best in preventative Western medicine: cold medication, charged to the store during flu season.

"It's so small here," said cashier Nicole Wiegand, 26. "If one person gets sick, we usually pass it around."

In food service, meanwhile, if owners give an inch, their ravenous rank and file might well take the whole cannoli.

At Pizza Pub on West Passyunk Avenue, workers get 15 percent discounts, owner John Tripodi said, "though it usually turns into 100 percent" if his back is turned.

Employees of McFadden's at Citizens Bank Park receive 50 percent off food and drinks at any McFadden's location nationwide. And every few weeks, one devoted server pockets \$50 for selling the most "cheesesteak nachos" on a given night.

If grub-based gratuities are of secondary concern, colleges and universities may provide some of the area's premier perks packages.

Penn employees like custodian Dan Harrell, who has polished the hardwood at the Palestra for 21 years, have parlayed full tuition aid into Ivy League degrees. (Harrell earned a bachelor's degree in 2000 without paying a cent.)

Of course, any discussion of perks in education ought to include Ackerman's meticulously negotiated deal - which includes a car, a BlackBerry, a cell phone, a laptop, a printer, and a fax machine, among other throw-ins coaxing eye rolls from local businesses.

"Nothing like that here," said Anthony Martino, as his sweat-stained staff at Sneaker Junction in Old City unloaded boxes. "We got to earn our money."

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