

PERSONAL CONCIERGE: THE HOTTEST NEW BENEFIT



The proposal is due this Thursday. The dry cleaning needs to be picked up before you fly to Cleveland on Friday. And who is going to walk Spike while you are gone? What's a businessperson to do?

With present unemployment rates low enough to give an HR manager nightmares, employees and job seekers are currently in the driver's seat. Companies know they have to offer more than a competitive wage to set themselves apart and make them the employer of choice. And what does today's workforce want? A balance between professional and personal lives.

Personal tasks account for 10 to 20 percent of time on the job

People are working an extra month per year compared with 20 years ago. So does the employer benefit from that extra month on the job? Not necessarily ... says a survey they conducted found that employees spend 10 to 20 percent of their workday attending to personal tasks.

That is why more and more progressive companies, especially those in the high-tech industry, are incorporating concierge services into their benefits package. Everyone can use the service, mailroom employee or president, even telecommuters.

According to a Boston-based concierge service, 4 percent of U.S. companies use services like Circles. HR managers see the benefits in decreased absenteeism, increased productivity, and elevated company morale.

How it works

Car due for an oil change? No problem. Theater tickets for your anniversary? Sure. The house needs cleaning before your parents visit? Done. The cost of the oil change, the tickets, or the cleaning service is your responsibility, but the concierge can have it billed directly to your credit card. That's one less thing for you to worry about.

Concierge service providers are paid by the company anywhere from under \$50 per employee per year to over \$1,000, depending on the services contracted. Compare it to a gym membership. Some will use it all the time, some around the holidays, and some not at all, so the fees balance out.

Don't think this benefit is limited to the behemoths of the corporate world like Microsoft, a client of Circles. While Circles likes to focus on clients with more than 1,000 employees, Professional Concierge's clients range from small businesses with 50 employees to large corporations.

And the client need not be in the same city as the service provider, thanks to the Internet. Circles provides service in 15 cities, hiring specialists in all locations for each need. Professional Concierge, meanwhile, has multiple Hewlett Packard locations, including one in Canada.

Clients may access the concierge through the Web, submit a request, state when the service is needed along with budget considerations, and get back to work with a clear mind knowing it is being taken care of. We generally ask for 72 hours turnaround time, though last-minute emergencies aren't turned away. Some companies may request an on-site concierge to assist employees personally. Services do provide on-site professionals upon request (when employees see a concierge in the lobby it reminds them that this service is available).

But I don't want my boss to know about my personal needs

Professional Concierge clients are provided with a quarterly report of the number of requests and the hours spent on each employee's request. (Companies may allot executives more concierge hours than are allotted to clerical workers.) We will provide general breakdowns, but not specific requests of an employee, says a Circles representative. So if you use the concierge to pick up prescriptions at the pharmacy, your employer does not need to know.

On the extreme side, Circles has been asked to find a husband for someone. Currently this service is not on the menu, but finding a matchmaking specialist is. The bottom line is a happier, less stressed employee who is able to enjoy more hours with family and friends and less time hurrying to get to the dry cleaner before 6:00.

If your employer doesn't offer a concierge service, talk to coworkers and examining how it would make your group more productive before bringing the suggestion to the HR decision maker.

This benefit is gaining momentum and will continue to be embraced by companies both large and small. If your home life is off balance because of on the job demands, this benefit could be the solution for both you and your employer.