

# The Miami Herald

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## Work/Life Balancing Act

### Lost perks: 'It's a hard time to be an employee'

**Most companies are cutting back on benefits, but some are finding ways to add perks that their employees want.**

**By Cindy Krischer Goodman**

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Once a week for three months, **Eric Ferrer** shut his office door, made a phone call to his life coach, and spent the next hour shaping his personal and career goals. The sessions were paid for by his employer — a company benefit that 28-year-old Ferrer ranks as valuable as health insurance.

"It helped me figure out my vision and stay on track," says Ferrer, a senior recruiter at **Signature Consultants**, an IT staffing firm in Fort Lauderdale.

While surveys show coaching is one of the job perks young workers covet, it's one of the rare benefits companies offer. Most employers have cut back on benefits, particularly in the past year, keeping only the basics such as healthcare and retirement plans.

While employees like Ferrer appreciate the perks their companies offer, only half of workers recently surveyed cite benefits as "very important" to job satisfaction. A new study by the Society of Human Resource Management shows job security now has overshadowed benefits as key to job satisfaction.

"People are just happy they're working when their neighbors are not," says Joyce Gioia, a business futurist and CEO of The Herman Group. As Labor Day approaches, the national unemployment rate remains high at more than 9 percent. With the economy still in flux, workplace experts like Gioia are predicting it will take several years before employers bring back their more generous benefits.

In 2011, 77 percent of employers reported their benefit offerings had been negatively affected by the economy — a 5 percent increase over the past year, according to the SHRM 2011 Employee Benefits Research Report.

For the most part, employers have kept the basics — health insurance, paid holidays, life and dental insurance. However, they have reduced offerings such as long-term care insurance, retiree health coverage and adoption benefits. And most have slashed

benefits such as executive club memberships, legal assistance/services, mentoring programs, organization-sponsored sports teams, professional development opportunities, travel planning services and housing/relocation costs.

“All the ‘nice to haves’ have been cut,” says Mark Schmit, director of research for The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). “It’s a hard time to be an employee.”

The loss of benefits, even some that don’t seem significant, can have a harmful effect on work/life balance and financial viability. For example, Candace Whitaker, HR director for Signature Consultants in Fort Lauderdale, says her counterparts at some companies are eliminating short-term disability. But she feels a few weeks without a paycheck could devastate her hourly workers: “If an employee breaks an ankle and he doesn’t have short-term disability, it could put a family under.”

Whitaker now scrutinizes the cost of every benefit and the return and tries to be more creative to avoid cuts. “I cannot name a benefit that I would not cringe if I saw it go away.” Even the life coach her company made available to Ferrer is a benefit that has proved its worth: “Employees that have been through that program are excited about their future in this company. We see impact in their self-esteem and openness to take on new challenges.”

When it comes to deciding what to cut, some companies are turning to employees for input. Baptist Health, consistently recognized for its rich benefits offerings, regularly polls its 13,000 employees — 75 percent of whom are women. “We’re tapped out on spending additional money, so I’m looking for what benefits give the most bang for the buck,” says Maggie Marshall, assistant vice president of Total Rewards benefits for Baptist Health. Giving employees the benefits they want keeps them engaged, she says: “An engaged employee is willing to put forth discretionary effort when necessary, versus a person who is ready to go out the door in a minute.”

Marshall discovered one of Baptist’s highly valued perks is Lifeworks, which offers counseling, free assistance with work and family issues, and the use of a personal assistant has been used 40,000 times over the last three years. “It only comes out to be about \$20 a year per employee and we’ve seen a huge return.”

DentalPlans.com in Plantation says its growth has allowed it to add benefits, rather than cut them. Management uses a unique approach to zeroing in on what benefits its employees appreciate. Four employees a month eat breakfast with CEO Buddy Johnson and make suggestions. The feedback allows management to better tailor benefit offerings to its young workforce. What came from breakfast was “we wish we had a place to take a break” and “we wish we had a 401(k) program.”

The company now has both. An employee lounge with a beach theme, a foosball table, a Wii and a popcorn machine provides a place for sales staff to chill. “When our employees are happy, it shows in their performance,” says president Jennifer Stoll.

Going forward, rising healthcare costs may cause companies to spend more on coverage and require they scrutinize benefit offerings even more. Those employers who continue to cut without careful attention to effects on job satisfaction could find their best employees will bolt when the first opportunity comes along, says Gioia: “They will find another employer who will be more sensitive to their needs.”

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