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Working for the weekday

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Think you've got it made at your 9-to-5 job?

Sure, you get the bulk of your doctor and dentist visits paid for. And yes, you get those two weeks of vacation. You may even get a gym membership and reimbursed for tuition. But do your perks include an annual three-night, all-expenses-paid trip to anywhere in the country? What about a paid six-week sabbatical every four years? Daily free gourmet lunches?

These benefits are being offered by Chicago employers, who say when workers are happy at their jobs, they're more likely to stay. Employees say such perks factor into their decision about where to work and help boost morale.

Although some companies are tightening the purse strings, others are opening their wallets to give employees a little something extra.

And those extras can go a long way.

"The mantra is, 'How do we retain our best workers?' One of the keys to do that is creating great culture and great perks," said John Challenger, CEO of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, a Chicago-based outplacement consulting firm.

More employers are looking at what they can offer their workers with the unemployment rate hovering between 4.4 percent and 4.6 percent over the past year, a rate so low it's near full

employment, he said.

"When the labor pool shrinks, they then invest more in trying to find and hold on to the best people," he said.

Often, when people think about taking a new job, they consider the pay, the work they're doing and whether there's room for advancement.

"But it's often the perk that's kind of the coup de grace. It's what closed the deal," Challenger said.

Hamilton Hill, 32, went to work for law firm Bartlit Beck Herman Palenchar & Scott in the Loop fresh out of law school because he felt he would get the best experience there.

"The salary and perks that came along with Bartlit Beck, they were more the icing on the top of the cake," said Hamilton, now a partner who lives in Lincoln Park.

For the past five years, he's gotten a taste of the sweet life.

All associates at the firm get a four-day, three-night, all-expenses-paid trip to anywhere in the country every year.

Hamilton's been to southern California, South Beach and the Florida Keys. The lawyers can bring their spouses and stay at high-end resorts, eat at five-star restaurants and even go to the college football national championship game or the Super Bowl.

"We work a lot of long hours. There's a lot of travel. There's times when you're away from Chicago two to three months at a time, so it's nice when you get to enjoy these perks," Hill said.

It makes economic sense for the law firm to give these perks because turnovers are more costly, managing partner Skip Herman said.

"Management are people, too, and I like going to work in the morning where people are happy," Herman said. "Life's too short to be in a place that isn't fun."

Such perks keep employees from burning out, Challenger said.

"It's like the company is looking out for their long-term welfare. ... You'll come back with your batteries recharged," he said.

Sumita Ghosh, 26, feels refreshed after returning last month from a six-week sabbatical in India, where her family lives.

She works as an associate product manager at Morningstar, an investment research company headquartered in the Loop. The firm offers employees a paid six-week sabbatical after they've been with the company for four years--and every four years after that.

"It's really a double incentive; you have time off and you get your salary to spend. The company really takes care of you," said Ghosh, who lives in Lincoln Park.

Google employees feel the same way.

At Google's Loop office, employees say the company's fun perks make them they feel appreciated and rewarded for their hard work. The mentality is work hard and play hard.

After all, the company was first on Fortune's list of 100 Best Companies to Work For in 2007.

Big blue and red bouncy balls, and lava lamps fill the Chicago office. Employees have large computer screens at their desks and TVs in the office. A game room called "Adventures in Babysitting" after the movie set in Chicago, has a Ping-Pong table, foosball table, Xbox 360 and Nintendo Wii.

"People want to work in a comfortable environment, something that motivates them and energizes them," said Kevin Willer, head of development for the central region based in Chicago.

And what about the rumor that Google feeds its workers gourmet lunches every day for free? It's true. "We do these things to take care of people," Willer said.

That includes sending employees on an annual company ski trip, giving them \$5,000 to buy a hybrid and even giving a \$500 reimbursement for take-out food to employees on maternity leave.

"It's really nice to feel like you're taken care of, to be in an environment where they care about you," said recent hire Elle Duncan, 31, of Lincoln Park. "You don't often see that."