

The varied flavours of reward...



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Employee benefits can be an excellent tool when it comes to recruiting and retaining staff, writes *Georgiana Head*

Key Points

What is the issue?

It is not only the straightforward financial rewards that attract tax candidates to jobs and - even more significantly - that make employees want to stay in those jobs.

What does it mean to me?

Increasingly, employers are recognising that it is the working environment and the additional benefits on offer that tie employees into their tax teams and secure their commitment to the business.

What can I take away?

Money is always going to be a motivator but it is not just the amount of pay that retains staff – it is also the feeling that they have been dealt with fairly.

It is funny the things that tie people to a firm or in-house tax team. I will always remember my first client visit when I moved into recruitment. I went to see the then accountancy practice Littlejohn Frazer in their old office in the Docklands. I was struck by what a lovely office it was, because it had a fish pond in the reception and a duck island moored outside on the river, which you could see from the office windows. I remember thinking very clearly that if I had known firms like that existed, I might not have left a career in tax.

Most people work to live. It puts food on the table and pays for a roof over their head, and for most people their wage is the number one reason that they work within taxation. However, it is not only the straightforward financial rewards that attract tax candidates to jobs and – even more significantly – that make employees want to stay in those jobs. Increasingly, employers are recognising that it is the working environment and the additional benefits on offer that tie employees into their tax teams and secure their commitment to the business. So, what works?

Comfort food

A longstanding but simple idea which I think really works is KPMG's lunch allowance. Staff at KPMG always talk about it fondly and explain how much food the daily allowance can buy both within a KPMG cafeteria and externally. This benefit comes up time and time again in student and staff reviews of the Big Four. I think the lunch allowance fits with an innate element of human nature – we all like free food! You only need to position yourself near the canapés at any networking event to see that even the most senior tax professionals turn into ravening students when faced with free food and drink.

Other firms have cottoned on to this. The financial consultancy firm Sedulo in Leeds has a very cool bar and lounge area where you can get free drinks and snacks, and

on some days full afternoon tea. One of my in-house clients, property company Fairhome Group, has a free restaurant – you can literally have breakfast, lunch and dinner there every day. And if you are consequently worried about your waistline, it also has a free onsite gym.

One of the perks at our own office at Platform in Leeds is that Bruntwood (which owns and manages the building) has organised a range of small food producers to come into the office a couple of times each month. You can enjoy free artisanal ice cream, cheeses and fruit – it's a lovely idea and definitely brightens up the day.

Ice cream makers Froneri have their finance team set above their factory in Leeming Bar and there are always freezers of free ice creams in the break out areas. Not only can you try your favourite childhood ices, but you get to sample their newest inventions.

I remember a partner in a Big Four firm once telling me how in the 'old days' they had a tea trolley and that it was much missed. It makes me wonder if any of the accountancy firms or law firms still have one?

Certainly, at CIOT and ATT headquarters in London the biscuits and snacks in the meetings rooms are a great simple perk for staff and visitors alike. I used to think that Artillery House was the last refuge of the Tunnock's Tea Cake.

A great setting

I've often spoken with clients about how a new office can improve productivity. I remember when GT in Leeds moved from the Merrion Centre to their current offices at Whitehall Riverside. The old offices were distinctly shabby – located next to the DVLA exam centre and stuck above a McDonald's. This made it very difficult for the firm to compete for staff. Moving to a state of the art office made a huge difference. Staff told me it impacted them in all sorts of ways – they even bought new work clothes, as they wanted to be smarter because their environment was smarter.

I'll never forget going to see a Big Four firm office in Nottingham about 15 years ago where the wiring was hanging down from the ceiling in the lift and there were peeling posters on the walls. Staff had lost respect for their environment and had stuck chewing gum on the lift walls. It is incredibly difficult to recruit staff for an office which is dark, drab and dated. Luckily, shortly after this the firm moved offices.

Flexible working

Increasingly, tax professionals of all levels are asking for more flexibility in their working patterns, whether it be to accommodate childcare, care of parents or to help them manage an outside work interest. This isn't something new. The old Inland Revenue and Customs & Excise had a strong track record of recruiting athletes – the one I always remember is Linford Christie, who worked as a clerical assistant for the Inland Revenue while training for the Olympics.

Since 2016, I've seen a huge increase in businesses offering homeworking contracts and flexible working arrangements. EY were one of the first firms to take this seriously with their 'Work Smart' scheme, which allowed staff to work from anywhere at anytime, as long as they were in the office for pre-arranged meetings. They were the first employer I came across offering term time contracts and amongst the first to promote tax partners who worked part time.

Client care, and therefore having staff available to deal with client queries, will always be a priority in the tax profession. However, the use of smart technology, mobile phones and internet-linked home systems means that client work can be dealt with away from an office desk. Modern businesses such as the Property Hub are able to offer tax staff 100% homeworking – by offering client advice by phone, video calls, webinars, and so on.

One of the main reasons that candidates come to me is to get a better work-life balance, so offering flexible working arrangements really does help you to attract and retain staff. However, being part of a team is also important. In the last month alone, I have seen two candidates who actively wanted to decrease their homeworking because they missed office interaction. A key element of having homeworking is organising things like team training days and social events to enable those working from home to still be part of your business.

A couple of years ago, a client of mine had an idea that I really liked. The firm Sagars Accountants in Leeds asked every member of staff what their favourite book and film were. They then bought copies of each and set up a lending library in the building.

Share in the reward

Money is always going to be a motivator but it is not just the amount of pay that retains staff – it is also the feeling that they have been dealt with fairly. I talked to Charlotte Cunliffe from the HR team at Top 20 firm Saffery Champness, who said: ‘At Saffery Champness, we have found that providing time off in lieu of overtime to reward staff for the work they put in is very popular. Similarly, we always get really good feedback on our firm’s Christmas profit-sharing plan bonus.’

We are beginning to see share ownership schemes cropping up in accountancy firms – the idea being that all staff will gain from some of the super profit that comes from their work. (Think John Lewis!) I’m also seeing some independent firms using quarterly or biannual bonus schemes based on a mix of personal and business performance as a way of tying in staff.

One of the things that has surprised me over the years is how different bonus schemes are from in-house team to in-house team. Retailers often have no bonus schemes, whereas financial services teams can have bonuses that amount to 30% of base salary. Something that is becoming increasingly rare are share option schemes for in-house workers. These really do help to tie in senior hires, but increasingly in the north of England they are becoming the preserve of the newer AIM listed businesses, rather than the more established groups.

A really good benefit scheme should tie in staff and any recruiter worth their salt should explain the value of what a candidate currently has. I can’t remember the last candidate I saw who still had a final salary pension scheme – but when I come across one, I always do advise them to stay put if they possibly can!