

Happy Bludgeday to You!

By

Ashley Midalia and John Kehoe

This article appeared in The Australian Financial Review, 23 May 2008, pp. 3.

Got a better place to be on your birthday than slaving away in the office? It appears many Australians do with an anecdotal spike in sick days being taken by employees on their birthdays.

Realising that many employees would have a much happier birthday on the beach than being force-fed cake by sweet-toothed colleagues, some companies have introduced formal “birthday leave” policies, granting workers their birthday off each year.

Some employers have even been actively using the benefit as a recruitment tool, with credit card issuer American Express promising applicants “a day off on their birthday” in a job advertisement appearing in newspapers last weekend.

The company’s regional head of human resources for customer services, Chris Meyrick, says the purpose of offering employees birthday leave is “to give something extra back to our customer service teams to make them feel special and valued.”

The day off is only available to members of Amex’s “customer service international” team, Mr Meyrick says, though he denied that it’s a source of envy among employees in other parts of the business.

“The rest of the company knows just how hard-working and passionate our customer service employees are.”

Unlike American Express, which had introduced birthday leave relatively informally, Fone Zone, which is part of the ASX-listed Vita Group, has enshrined birthday leave in its most recent certified agreement.

The rules governing Fone Zone's policy are equally as formal, though, with only those employees with 12 months' continuous service entitled to "request" birthday leave so long as they give one month's notice to human resources. The leave can only be taken if the birthday falls on a working day, though permission may be sought for the leave to be taken in "special circumstances."

One may hope a little latitude would be granted for employees born on a public holiday or, heaven forbid, February 29.

Other businesses to offer birthday leave include law firm Sparke Helmore, which offers employees half a day "so you can enjoy the morning or afternoon of your birthday doing whatever you like", and market research firm Colmar Brunton.

Colmar Brunton's human resources director, Gabrielle Carman, says the policy was introduced about five years ago.

"It does seem to have a positive impact on people looking at the company," she says. "I don't think we could get rid of it now without having a riot."

Organisational psychologist Christopher Shen says birthday leave tends to "invoke a sense of value in the recipient and in their contribution to that business". But he jokingly questions whether the policy may be exploited - or even stretched to include wedding anniversaries and dogs' birthdays.

So whereas until recently only the Queen could celebrate her birthday with a holiday

(although it is not celebrated on her actual birthday), it appears an increasing number of Australian workers are equally anxious to put their feet up and enjoy the day off.

But, despite the gathering popularity of the perk, not everybody stands to win from employees staying home on their birthdays. Not only are city cake shops likely to be fearful of a drop off in business but most office workplaces, which regularly grind to a halt for a ritual of gorging and back-slapping, can also expect improved productivity.

* * * *

Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers.

Website: www.christophershen.com.au