

Birthday Leave the Latest Office Perk

By

James Campbell

This article appeared in The Sunday Herald Sun, 25 May 2008, pp. 17.

BOSSES have started giving their workers a present on their birthdays - the day off.

Credit card giant American Express is currently advertising for staff with the promise that "as a special thank you, you will never have to work on your birthday again!"

While some employers might regard it as a thank you, others introduced it to help cut the number of birthday sickies.

Bianca Shanahan, HR training manager with recruitment firm Colmar Brunton which introduced the perk several years ago, said not all employees took up the offer.

"We have 150 full-time staff who are all entitled to birthday leave but only about 50 per cent take it," she said.

Those who do not take it up are given an additional day's leave in lieu.

Chris James, a spokesman for industry group VECI, said the move was a matter for individual firms and said they would oppose making it a universal perk.

"It's hard to see it taking off across the whole economy," he said.

"Some people want to take leave on their birthday or other milestones. Some people don't want to be reminded of their birthday at all."

Organisational psychologist Christopher Shen welcomed the initiative but warned that it might be open to abuse.

"It's a wonderful initiative but the complexities need to be considered and some boundaries set," he said.

"People could start trying to replace their own birthday with another special day such as a wedding. I think that's problematic because it makes it difficult for managers to assess the merits of these claims and it opens up the prospect of discriminatory behaviour."

Mr Shen also warned about the threat to staff morale if birthday cakes disappeared from the workplace.

"These events are seemingly unimportant but can actually be critical to building a good atmosphere at work," he said.

Courtney Tippett, marketing project manager with telco Fone Zone, which offers birthday leave to all its employees, said her company had a different solution to the cake problem.

"We have it the day before," she said.

* * * *

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