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Rochelle Barcellona, left, with Stephanie Johnstone, makes milkshakes for her staff every Friday. It's just one of the things she does to reward her employees and foster a relaxed and happy workplace. "If you have a good, happy working environment, your employees are more productive."

REWARDING WORK

Regular recognition of employees' successes, contributions can boost morale, productivity

MELANIE TURNER | STAFF WRITER

It's a work day, and the handful of employees who make up Davis design and marketing firm Studio66 are kicking back at AT&T Park watching the San Francisco Giants.

On another work day at Sacramento law firm Trainor Fairbrook, the staff of a little more than 20 is touring a few wineries together.

It's not always this much fun at local small businesses. Plenty of work gets done, too.

That's precisely why reward programs and perks are so important, local small employers say. They establish and implement such programs to ensure their hard-working employees will continue to be productive, collaborative and happy.

From spa days to Milkshake Fridays, employers are finding creative ways to reward their employees in an effort to attract and keep them.

"I think it makes people really enjoy their opportunity to be here," said Jen Baker, principal of Studio66.

Baker offers her employees a variety of perks, from up to \$50 a month for a gym membership to flexible hours that provide options from the standard routine.

Studio66 also hosts a quarterly off-site trip. The decision about where to go rotates each quarter to a different employee. Besides the Giants game, other trips the firm has taken include a boat trip on Lake Berryessa and a visit to Crocker Art Museum.

And once an employee has been with the company for five years, Baker will pay up to \$2,000 toward a week-long vacation. She worked solo for several years and has had just one employee pass the five-year

mark so far. Baker paid the airfare and accommodations to send a senior graphic designer to Hawaii.

"They're excited to do their work because they've gotten the breaks they've needed," Baker said.

ONGOING RECOGNITION

Dee Hansford, a local consultant who specializes in employee recognition programs, said it's very important to reward workers.

Celebrations, such as special picnics or above-and-beyond recognition events, are "wonderful," she said. But the organizations that do it best "don't necessarily wait until once a year to do it," she said.

"From my perspective, the more you practice day-to-day recognition, personal recognition that is specific, sincere and timely, the more you make your employees feel valued," she said.

"If we think of it as part of the daily routine, then it becomes engrained in our culture."

While major corporations have long offered expensive perks, such as on-site day care, Hansford said recognizing employees doesn't have to be expensive.

"Our jobs as the leaders of these organizations is to make the people feel that they own the business, that they are the business," she said.

As an example, she said one organization ditched the label receptionist for "director of first impression," to make the employee understand the value of that position.

A bank client she worked with knew that Fridays were "killer days" for tellers.

"Without any big fanfare, the bank manager knew the soda preference of the people and made sure they had their soft drink of choice and a cookie," Hansford said. "It says, 'I've got your back. I know you can't leave. I'm going to take care of you.' It honors the people. It really does say that they're important."

MEET THEIR NEEDS

It works best, she said, when employers match the perk to their specific staff.

"We as leaders need to be thoughtful," Hansford said, citing a supervisor who thought everyone in their unit would appreciate Sacramento Kings tickets.

"Not everyone is a Kings fan," she said, adding that it helps to set parameters and ask employees ahead what they would like.

Employers also need to be cognizant of the work environment so as not to disrupt the flow of work. Employees at a call center, for instance, need to be on the phone as much as possible. So bringing them breakfast might be a good idea, she said.

"People just appreciate a little break, and that you know they're under pressure and how much work they're doing," she said.

Hansford said it's also best to make sure employees understand why they're being rewarded. A theme park manager had the ability to give out \$20 on the spot when good work was noticed, but employees

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didn't always know why they got the cash.

Hansford said last week she saw Vision Service Plan Inc. — not a small business, with more than 1,600 employees in Rancho Cordova — do it right when the firm recognized 50 employees for going above and beyond in customer service. Everyone got make-your-own sundaes and soft drinks. Some people shared why they received the award and others talked about corporate goals. There was a drawing for gifts such as assigned parking and gift certificates to Java City. And it all took place in just 30 minutes.

“It created excitement and reinforced goals and behavior,” she said. “The people came back jazzed.”

THE HAPPIEST PLACE ON EARTH?

At Barcellona, a marketing firm in Folsom, president and creative director Rochelle Barcellona makes milkshakes for her staff every Friday. And she takes her staff on a mystery trip once a year. This year it was Disneyland. In between, when appropriate, she hands out gift

cards to Starbucks or for dinner.

“It gives a break from the craziness of work. It gives people a chance to relax together and get to know each other,” she said. “If you have a good, happy working environment, your employees are more productive.”

At Trainor Fairbrook, once a month after work the staff enjoys hors d'oeuvres and cocktails on a patio off the main office. This month, they had tri-tip, shrimp and barbecued chicken.

The firm also sponsors staff retreats to Tahoe or other spots and hosts an annual staff day each April. On that day they work until noon and then a bus picks them up and takes them on a trip. One year there was a scavenger hunt in Old Sacramento. Another year they visited a science museum, and another, the wine country.

“You want to make your staff feel like this is a special place to work,” said Candy Harper, managing shareholder for the firm. “You work hard, and you need to play a little bit, too.”