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The Power in the Perks

Firms learn that pampering fosters a content, loyal staff

By Danylo Hawaleshka

Pounding on her computer while on the telephone with clients takes a toll on Carol Sebastian's body. As part of the product-support team for Merak Projects Ltd., Sebastian spends her work day answering questions about the software her company makes for the oil-and-gas industry. The repetitive nature of the job can aggravate her shoulder and make her neck stiff. Fortunately for Sebastian, 32, her company takes care of its people. Once a month, the firm brings in two therapists who provide Merak's 160 Calgary employees with free 20-minute massages. The company also hired an ergonomist to suggest

improvements to work stations and equipped Sebastian with a headset so she no longer has to bend her sore neck to cradle the phone. "To me it means that my employer is concerned about my well-being in my workplace," Sebastian says. "It really does boil down to a happy workforce is a productive workforce."

These days, hard-working staff at many companies are starting to expect better treatment. And a growing number of progressive employers are responding with innovative improvements to the experience of work. These range from massages and artfully designed offices to providing help for personal errands. In exchange for these perks, employers expect staff to be more productive and less likely to depart for greener pastures. That people require some pampering is



Merak's Sebastian gets a rub; lunchtime in Trimark's 'Leisure Zone' (opposite): easing stress on the job

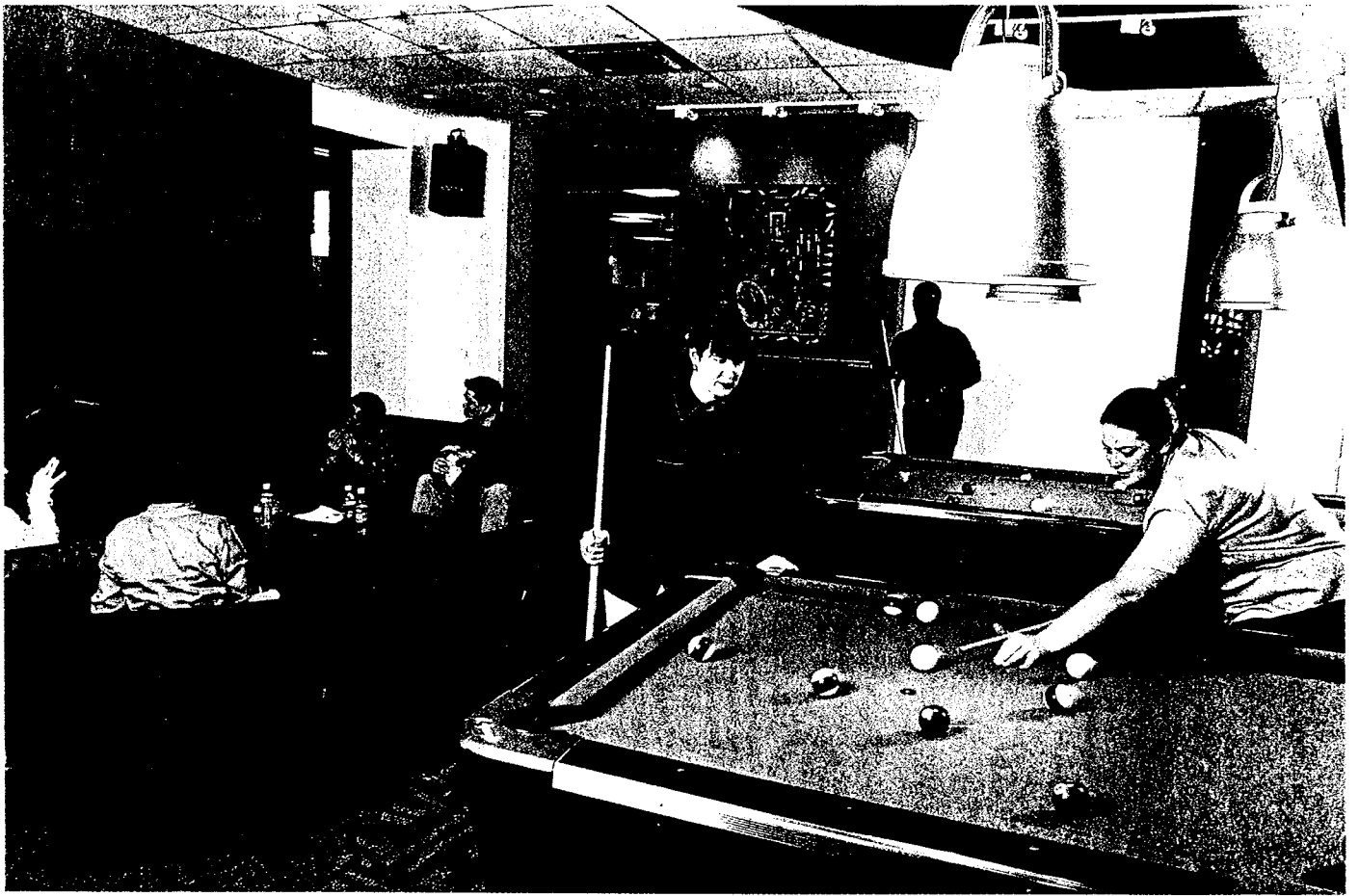
understandable, says workplace consultant Barbara Moses, author of *The Good News About Careers: How You'll be Working in the Next Decade*. Today's employee, she says, "is beset by tremendous productivity pressures, is typically trying to manage a very complicated and overburdened personal life and is worried about future employability."

Anything that eases the strain can be a morale booster. Consider a benefit offered by Andersen Consulting, the management experts with offices in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal. The company hired 2 Places at 1 Time, a concierge service that runs

errands for staff. Under the plan—which Andersen subsidizes—employees pay between \$5 and \$10 an hour for a concierge to feed or walk their dog, pick up groceries or get the oil changed on the family car. The helper will buy gifts if asked (demand peaks around Valentine's Day, Mother's and Father's Day and Christmas), or research possible vacations.

Shelley Daville, who oversees Andersen's office operations in Canada, spends an average of \$40 a month on the service. Daville, who travels frequently, recently could not find time to phone around for a landscaper for her home, so she got the concierge to make the arrangements. Daville does not consider the service a means of getting employees to toil longer hours. "It just allows me to spend my free time with

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family instead of running errands," she says. "I'd be very upset if they ever wanted to take it away."

Other companies have found different ways to improve the lot of employees. Pharmaceutical manufacturer Merck Frosst Canada & Co. in Kirkland, on Montreal's West Island, has several employees on flexible-work plans, involving either telecommuting or job-sharing. The company has also centralized many common services at the main office, providing an on-site dry cleaner, mailbox, automated bank teller and day-care centre. In addition, the firm is considering whether it can afford a fitness centre for the 950 people it employs.

But what sets Merck Frosst apart, says Mike Lamothe, executive director of human resources, is its new policy on maternity leaves. Starting last year, Merck Frosst began offering 18-week maternity leaves that pay 100 per cent of a mother's salary. "You'd be hard-pressed," Lamothe says, "to find any other company that does that."

Rosa Sarchese, 38, has worked at Merck Frosst for 10 years and is expecting her second child in July. While she looks forward to the generous leave, she was also impressed last December when she was promoted to public affairs associate even though management knew she was pregnant. Not every employer is willing, she notes, to hand a woman a new job six months before maternity leave, with a raise to boot. "The way you're treated here means you can still pursue a family and a career at the same time," Sarchese says. "It also gives you a sense of belonging, that you have a future here."

There is a motivation behind these bouts of employer generosity. Companies invest a lot of time and money in training employees who, in turn, become valued resources to customers and other staff. "Your assets," says Brad Badeau, president of Trimark Investment Management Inc. in Toronto, "go up and down the elevator every day" and

hanging on to them is essential. When Trimark last year decided it had had enough of downtown rents, the mutual fund manager moved most operations a 20-minute subway ride north. Instead of pocketing all the savings, the company set aside money to create a high-tech and stylish workspace that looks more like a trendy furniture showroom than the staid corridors of a money management firm.

Bright colors, art deco light fixtures, interesting angles and a liberal use of pale wood and stainless steel make for a lively, attractive environment spread over six floors of a modern highrise. Among the perks are two billiard tables, a big-screen TV and a cybercafé. Tracey McArthur, a 29-year-old human resources specialist at Trimark, notices the striking contrast between her company's offices and others in the building on her daily elevator rides. "When you see the other floors," McArthur says, "you feel bad for them. Everything here is funky." Badeau says the rule of thumb when relocating is that a firm can lose up to 10 per cent of its workforce. "In our case, the numbers were insignificant."

Cultivating enthusiasm, respect and loyalty in an employee is a fine art, and not every company is good at it. As a consultant on contemporary workplace issues, Barbara Moses shakes her head at some of the half-baked ideas employers have come up with to reward staff. In a case of what she calls a "reward gone awry," Moses recalls an employer bestowing an alarm clock emblazoned with the company logo on a select few employees. "It completely turned them off," Moses says. "People were saying: 'I work for them, I don't want to wake up to them; I don't want to have sex with them.'" The best thing for an employer to do, she adds, "is be savvy in not using a one-size-fits-all approach in providing people with a menu of rewards." That way, Moses says, workers are more likely to have an appetite for their jobs. ■