



The Pros and Pitfalls of Perks

Navigating a world of swag and freebies in the workplace.

Barbers, shuttles, and gyms. Oh, my!

Free food! Gaming areas! Rock-climbing wall! On-site barber, banking, and fitness center. Sleep pods and car services. All free! All bottomless! And all *yours* at your new job—more magical than any magic kingdom because there’s no admission fee.

Faced with an increasing talent shortage, attracting and retaining qualified workers has fast become a top priority for companies. Where automation is not a solution, organizations of all sizes have upped hiring/benefits packages with perks once never imagined. Flex time, paid time off, company car and phone are almost boilerplate. The argument: offering conveniences that save time, reduce scheduling anxiety, and help let off steam should make for happy and productive employees. So, given the benefits of perks, are perks the same as benefits?

It pays to know the difference.

Both benefits and perks are defined as non-wage employee compensation. Aimed at fostering loyalty, their availability may depend on company type and size. As salary supplements, benefits address basic needs and offer insight into company culture. They commonly include health (medical, dental, vision) insurance, 401(k)s, vacations, paid time off, and stock options. Larger technology, service, and financial firms may even pay off student loans.

Conversely, if benefits are the safety features in a car, perks are like chrome rims (or dessert)—a bonus, but not essential. Geared to motivate and help employees do their jobs better, *i.e.*, be more productive, perks vary widely: free cafeterias and transportation; unlimited vacations, on-site services, off-site employee activities, summer Fridays, spa massages, ergonomic desks, performance-based rewards, employee discounts, even paid employee weddings. So, who doesn’t like fresh fruit, branded yoga mats, or bringing their pets to work?

There’s no free lunch.

Studies show you *can* have too much of a good thing. Over time, some perks lose their allure or even have an opposite effect: open space/no cubicle floorplans can create less employee communication

and a sense of constant surveillance; on-site daycare enables parents to easily put in longer hours at the office; 24/7 amenities can distract or be abused—resulting in less productivity and more hours to meet workplace goals; beer on tap risks frat house behavior. Statistics even show that employees with “unlimited vacations” take fewer days off. Many work during “time off,” often motivated by guilt, fear, duty, or a sense of competition. Plus, company phones keep workers constantly connected to the office and accessible. What *was* the brass ring has instead turned into “golden handcuffs.”

It’s about balance.

Sound business, positive work culture, and a healthy bottom line all depend on sustainability. The best relationships—professional and personal—require balance. Look at the intangibles: Does the job provide purpose or address your passion? Do long-term company vision and good management keep you engaged and productive without burnout? When surrounded by “shiny objects,” do you have the self-discipline to time manage and meet work goals? In lieu of unlimited vacations, does the organization offer employee development programs, education stipends to expand your capabilities, accrued vacations (think “earned and guilt-free”), or higher pay options and incentives?

Don’t be swayed by swag. The best perks are those that leave you recharged and ready to resume your duties. Work smarter, not harder; there are no trophies for simply clocking in more hours. Instead, work so that you can choose to have a life *outside* of the company brand. If you leave work tired, leave knowing that you have delivered meaningful results while meeting your needs and those of your employer. Unless you’re on call, put aside work devices. Most important, *leave* the office. Perhaps the motto for the tech company Slack sums it up best: “*Work hard and go home.*”



i n a nutshell:

Freebies can come at a cost if they mean longer hours on the job:

- **Weigh all options when choosing a job offer**
- **Know the difference between benefits and perks**
- **Exercise self-control; use on-the-job flexibility and freedom wisely**
- **Meet your work deadlines and deliverables**
- **Aim for work-life balance and sustainability; recharge**

All that glitters isn’t gold, and a gilded cage is still a cage if you can’t get away. In the end, the best perks are those that help you meet your work responsibilities, create the lifestyle you want, and enjoy both.