Bulletin Board: The new and improved break room

by Amy_Winter

You step away from the desk to get a snack. You head toward the break room for a candy bar from the vending machine. You sit down and chat with co-workers.

The office break room is no longer just a place to grab a cup of coffee; it has become a room to socialize, snack or watch some TV. Ralph Bianculli, chief executive officer of Paradigm Group, a full-service supply distribution company, says the break room has evolved in the last 15 years.

Due to the increased workday - an average of 10 hours - most employers see increased productivity as a benefit of spending more money to upgrade the break room.

"Employees don't have to leave the office to have a light lunch or breakfast items," says Bianculli. "They are now available in the office."

With employers more willing to spend money on products, break rooms are doubling in size, and they tend to be more comfortable.

The Starbucks generation has influenced the evolution of break rooms. Starbucks altered the way consumers view coffee, according to Bianculli. With more variety available, it is no longer a plain cup of coffee from a coffee pot. People are becoming more sophisticated when it comes to coffee taste, and drinking coffee is now seen as a social event.

The break room and corporate America embraced this new coffee trend. Single-cup systems have replaced the coffee pot, and consumers are willing to pay higher prices.

"A pound of coffee has stayed about the same, but the price has quadrupled," says Bianculli. "This is attributed to Starbucks marketing."

Break rooms are even catching on to the green movement. The Paradigm Group provides green office products, including disposable cups, napkins and towels. Bianculli says his company offers about 50 products that are made from recycled content in order to help reduce waste. Biodegradable cleaning supplies and waste-reduction products (such as hands-free towel systems) are available for purchase.

"Green is becoming something more companies are conscious of," he says.

The Paradigm Group also provides knowledge to businesses about going green; they built an education forum on their Web site.

Break rooms will probably continue to evolve into more of a home away from home.

"There are few companies that don't recognize the productivity from bettering the break room," adds Bianculli.

For more information on the company's supplies, visit www.paradigm-grp.com.

BONUSES MAY BE LESS THIS YEAR

It is the bonus time of year, when most employees can look forward to receiving some extra cash to spend at the holidays. But with the lull in the economy this year, will employees be receiving less money in their annual bonuses?

Steve Apfelberg, vice president of marketing at Callidus Software, says holiday bonuses usually depend on the industry and may range from company to company. Some companies changed their fiscal years, meaning the end of the business year doesn't necessarily correspond with the holiday season, and these employees would receive bonuses at a different time of the year.

Some employees will get only a few days warning regarding the size of their bonuses, while some will receive the extra money unknowingly. More companies are using online goal statements to keep employees informed on company progress, according to Apfelberg. An employee intranet displays the company goals and individual performance reviews, giving employees a better idea of what will make up their bonuses this year.

The slump in the economy will have some sort of effect on company bonuses. If the system is based on corporate gains, it will be easier to decrease the amount this year if necessary.

Apfelberg sees more companies turning to variable-based bonuses and moving away from a fixed-based

structure. Linked more to performance objectives to motivate the worker, these types of bonuses are tied to measurable objectives. The employees aren't paid as much if the company misses its goals.

"If the company does well and the bonuses were tied to favorable things," says Apfelberg, "the company should be glad to give bonuses."

Employees expect to get a little more each year in their bonuses. If salaries go up, then bonuses should also go up a little bit.

"But employees are probably expecting this year's bonuses to be less due to the economy," adds Apfelberg.

E-mail Amy Winter or write to P.O. Box 120190, San Diego, CA 92112.

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