

Personal Group Seminar

On 28th January 2009 Personal Group invited HR and benefit professionals to attend another of its popular seminars - this time the focus was on how to effectively and innovatively utilise benefits packages. The seminar included guest speakers that looked at absence management, voluntary benefit shopping cards and EAPs - plus a best practice example of how to successfully implement a voluntary benefits scheme was showcased.

The event was held at The Sheraton Park Lane Hotel in London and included presentations from First Care, P&MM, First Assist and TNT Express UK. Key messages from each of these presentations can be found below - plus those from Mike Govier, director at Personal Group and Caroline Jordan, head of Voluntary Group Income Protection (VGIP) at Personal Group can also be viewed.

Aaron Ross, MD at First Care discussed how to control absence effectively. His key points were:

- Keep track of absence trends in your organisation, both on an organisational and individual level. For example, does one employee frequently take Mondays off? Is absence noticeably higher at the monthly staff meetings or when a big football match is on?
- By analysing information from the CBI, CIPD and its own database - First Care enables companies to monitor real time absence.
- Its absence management programme records employee absence, offers medical advice to the individual and then conducts follow up calls with the employer and employee to keep track on the status of the absence.
- This method typically helps businesses reduce absence by 10%-40% in the first year of implementation.

Caroline Jordan, head of VGIP at Personal Group asked – can your staff afford to be ill?

Her key points were:

- Although only 5% of absence spells become long-term (20 days or more) this accounts for a staggering 40% of all time lost.
- In 2007 long term absence cost the UK economy £5.3bn.
- The average gross household weekly income is £649. This is frightening when considering that government support currently stands at £84.50 per week if an individual is incapable to work and becomes reliant on benefits.
- If a member of staff is off on long term sickness – the talent pool shrinks, expensive replacements have to be sought and extra pressure is put on payroll.

- Income Protection Plans, such as VGIP, can give employees peace of mind that their income is protected if the worst happens and they are no longer able to work due to illness or incapacitation.
- VGIP acts as a great retention tool, it has no implications on payroll, it is a group scheme with no exclusions and provides real value for money.

Kevin Dewhurst, sales and marketing director at First Assist explained his manager's guide to Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs).

His key points were:

- The main cause of absence is non work related stress, depression and anxiety
- This resulted in 13.5 million working days being lost in 2007/2008
- The most popular policy to promote wellbeing among employees is access to personal counselling
- The government is beginning to take stress more seriously and is placing more responsibility on employers to look after the mental wellbeing of staff
- Only 10% of UK's working population currently has access to EAPs
- A survey of EAPs showed that people think telephone and face to face counselling should be included in the service, but performance management should not.
- EAPs can assist the HR function and managers' duties when dealing with tricky situations in the workplace – such as increases in workload, conflict management and coping with redundancy issues.
- Improved results in absence, turnover and productivity can be seen as a result of offering an EAP service to employees

Mike Govier, director at Personal Group, gave his 'Golden Rules' of voluntary benefits.

His key points were:

- Companies are increasingly asking staff to produce more – but with no extra pay as budgets become ever more restricted
- It's important to reward those who go the extra mile – voluntary benefits can help do just that
- When implementing a benefits package – ask your staff what they want in their benefits package. To make sure it's within reason - give staff controlled choice
- Know what you want the benefits package to achieve – align it with employees' choice and business culture, benchmark against your competitors and have a clear objective of what success would look like
- Choose your supplier carefully and have a clear agreement with them
- Think about your timings and methods of communications thoroughly
- Be innovative when communicating – use all methods available to you
- One-to-one communication can increase take up of up to 50%

- Get feedback from your staff and reciprocate it
- Be patient with the uptake of benefits – they are slow burners
- Keep it fresh – promote, revise, get feedback and promote again
- Take it seriously – don't just 'tick the box'

Richard Davies, head of employee benefits at P&MM, announced the innovative arrival of Spree Plus – the benefits shopping card with all the voluntary benefit discounts ready to go.

His key points were:

- A card that contains benefit discounts was considered as a panacea to the voluntary benefits industry.
- The Spree Plus card means no more completing vouchers – planning ahead for your discounts is not necessary anymore.
- The employee loads money onto the card and discounts of 4.5%-15% are automatically obtained when using it at participating stores
- Some retailers include: Boots, HMV, ASDA, Halfords and Topshop
- The card can be branded by the company offering the scheme
- Spree Plus is in conjunction with Mastercard – so the fraud and negative balance risk sits with P&MM
- It is a debit card, so the pre-loaded balance can not be exceeded. No cash can be withdrawn at an ATM
- The employee pays an annual membership fee and is charged a fee for each monetary load to receive a personalised card – their partners are also entitled to receive a card (if they have the same address)

David Taylor, reward manager, and Holly Horton, reward adviser, at TNT Express UK explained how they effectively introduced a voluntary benefits programme into its business – with great results

Their key points were:

- TNT Express is much more than just parcels. It is a multinational, Dutch owned, organisation - with 160,000 employees worldwide, 10,900 UK staff, 8,150 union representatives and sales in excess of £870 million.
- Its engagement survey revealed that its benefits package needed to be improved, but had to remain cost effective.
- It needed a savvy programme that would reach all employees – the demographics of which are typically male, shift workers, aged 40, whose average length of service is 6.5 years and have minimal access to the internet.
- Preparations to launch the scheme included: presentations to key senior managers and the Union, teaser posters and articles in the company's magazine – all of which helped create a buzz.
- Implementing the scheme with a punch included: one-to-one depot presentations, Head Office and employee presentations, surveys,

improving intranet accessibility and a dedicated e-mail address all ensured a smooth process.

- Measuring success: 24% signed up for the Hospital Plan, 29% increase in take up of childcare vouchers and satisfaction was up by 13%
- Lessons learnt: Bring in the experts, stay motivated, ensure the timing is right and engage your stakeholders
- Future: Keep communicating, re-launch in 2010, and explore salary sacrifice schemes, flexible benefits and benefits technology.