

Time Is on Their Side

By Gina Teel -Calgary Herald
Sunday, May 07, 2006

For most busy working stiffs, lunch hour and coffee breaks are gobbled up running personal errands and lulls in the workday are pounced on to do tasks like online banking, register the kids in swimming, or plan a vacation.

According to Cynthia Pickering, owner of Time is Money Executive Concierge Inc., people spend, on average, three to four hours a week at work on personal tasks, never mind U.S. numbers that indicate 92 per cent of workers take personal or sick days to get errands done.

So imagine how much employee productivity and morale could improve if those tasks still got done -- but by someone else.

Such is the notion Pickering and her associate, Nancy Bichel, are shopping to cash-flush corporate Calgary: that with today's hectic lifestyles, there's no better gift to give than the gift of time.

And what better way to fortify loyalty in a hot job market riddled with poaching than to offer a concierge service to valued employees as a corporate perk?

"Companies are looking for ways to differentiate themselves, doing unique things for not only employees but their customers," said Pickering.

Time is Money is putting the final touches to separate proposals for two Calgary companies interested in offering concierge services to their employees. One company has 20 employees, the other nearly 100, and neither is from the oilpatch.

Hiring a concierge service is a johnny-come-lately idea in Canada and is just starting to catch on in Calgary, where a handful of service providers have sprouted up in the past few years.

But elevating a concierge service to the upper echelons of corporate perkdom from its current status as personal taskmaster of well-heeled executives has long been a hard sell in Calgary, and remains so even now as most companies report record earnings.

At least that's the experience of Lucile Edwards, director of business development for Concierge on Call, who has operated in the Calgary market for the past seven years.

Even with the job market the way it is, Edwards has thus far been unable to convince organizations who buy time as a reward for valued clients to buy it for their own employees. "And we've offered packages, even if it's (just) for top people, the people you really don't want to be headhunted," she said.

Ditto for Cheryl Northy, owner of Quest for Time, which opened its doors last fall. Northy said while it's clear everybody could use a concierge service, "it's still only a select group of people that are willing to support it financially in order to get back some time."



CREDIT: Grant Black, Calgary Herald

Cynthia Pickering, Owner, (in white) and Nancy Bichel, of Time is Money Executive Concierge Inc., believe with today's hectic lifestyles, there's no better gift to give than the gift of time. They operate a concierge service that focuses on Calgary's corporate sector.

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But Pickering argues that offering a concierge service as a corporate perk -- long a popular business trend in the U.S. -- is an idea whose time has come. "Calgary, and Canada in general, tends to be about five years behind what the United States is doing," she said.

Sort of a grown-up Girl Friday, today's concierge is the ultimate taskmaster, capable of executing any number of tasks for a fee, be it planning a corporate function, taking a pet to the vet, picking up the dry cleaning, finding a roofer or researching a vacation.

But it's not all about mundane tasks. Concierge services are tapped to do the seemingly impossible, often on a moment's notice from clients. In an extreme example from the U.S., the owner of a high-end concierge service in Orlando, Fla., bragged recently that she was able to fulfil the request of a celebrity client who'd promised his fiancée he'd grant her any request. She wished to sleep in Shaquille O'Neal's bed (presumably with her fiancée).

Back in corporate Calgary, the errands are a little less outrageous but often just as urgent. Pickering proudly recalls the time she was tasked to get an important package delivered to the Isle of Man in 12 hours. (She did.)

Although many CEOs and top executives already have personal assistants they can delegate these sorts of tasks to, Pickering argues that by outsourcing them, support staff can focus on more profitable functions .

But concierge services aren't cheap, and Northy notes that may well be the hurdle businesses face to incorporating it as a corporate perk.

Although it varies, service providers generally charge an hourly fee on top of a membership fee. Hourly rates at Time is Money, for instance, range from \$65 to \$110 for non-members and \$48 to \$93 for members, depending on the level of paid membership. As such, Pickering said her service makes sense for those in the executive salary bracket range.

But as far as industry trends go, Karen Valin, manager, certification for the Human Resources Institute of Alberta, said there's nothing in the pipeline indicating corporations are using a concierge as a retention tool.

Melanie Rowan, president of the Human Resources Association of Calgary, said in terms of value, a concierge service isn't a "make it or break it perk" from organizations recruiting people in.

That's exactly what Forzani Group Ltd. discovered. The company previously offered all head office employees access to a concierge service at a preferred rate, but the concept didn't mesh with the company's youthful demographic, said Leslie Shikaze, Forzani's vice-president of human resources. "When it was introduced here, I thought, what a great idea . . . but it didn't take hold here," she said. Forzani's employees were more interested in having access to other services, like an on-site day care and fitness facility.

Given the current job climate in Calgary, however, Edwards is convinced it's only a matter of time before corporations here understand the importance of offering employees the value-added perk of buying time. Edwards adds that when her clients purchase time, "we don't just run for the guy that's working, we run for the wife. We do whatever they need us to do and it's hugely valued," she said.