

## How some suburban firms are investing in their Millennial employees - and the future

Upon completing a rigorous insurance course at Assurance, Katie Tarpey was rewarded with \$100 and a big, red frog balloon hanging from the ceiling above her cubicle. Tarpey, 24, a human resources coordinator at Assurance, a Schaumburg-based insurance broker, said she loves receiving rewards. She is a member of Generation Y, a group of some 80 million Americans born roughly between 1982 and 2004. This generation, also known as the Millennials, grew up with gifted classes, helicopter parents and trophies for participating in youth sports. It loves instant feedback.

So monetary rewards and celebratory balloons for accomplishing goals is one way for Assurance to keep its young workers happy. “It’s just the little things — the little recognition — that makes you happy and wanting to keep working hard,” Tarpey said.

Assurance is not only keeping its young workers happy, it’s investing in the future. While Gen Y currently represents 15 percent of the U.S. workforce, it will account for 75 percent of all workers by 2025, according to Brill Street + Company, a Chicago-based employment firm. Unlike recent generations that passed before them — the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers and Generation X — members of Gen Y have unique characteristics to which corporations must pay close attention. “While insurance may sound boring, our business is about protecting and helping people. That appeals to Gen Y,” said Lisa Pinion, senior vice president of human resources at Assurance, which has 300 employees. “And we’re doing things to make Assurance an enjoyable and meaningful place to work,” Pinion said. “We want Gen Y to tell people that Assurance is a cool place to work.”

While Gen Y often gets a bad reputation for being lazy and unmotivated, companies like Assurance are identifying and playing to Gen Y’s strengths. A study by Fairleigh Dickinson University identifies the following positive workplace traits in Gen Y: Entrepreneurial; multi-tasking; tolerant; goal-oriented; technologically savvy; collaborative and socially conscious. To address the needs of Gen Y, Assurance offers such perks as yoga classes, massages, a variety of company-sponsored athletic events, on-site “latte ladies” and a monthly craft beer sampling. Assurance isn’t the only company offering special benefits. Brill Street publishes an annual list of 50 companies in Chicago and the suburbs that offer perks and programs to attract Gen Y workers. The Brill Street Gen Y Top 50 includes Assurance, SWC Technology Partners in Oak Brook and Sikich LLP in Naperville.

“These companies are identifying the value Gen Y workers bring to the workplace. They are rewarding Gen Y workers with benefits, perks and professional development opportunities which actually benefit all workers,” said Brill Street CEO Kevin Carlson. Consider Sikich, a firm offering accounting, advisory and investment banking services. Among the highlights in its Naperville headquarters: a pool table, a Wii console, health club, 1.1 mile running/walking track, private garden plots and an on-site Starbucks.

Other programs include a wellness challenge, where employees can run, walk, garden, read and other activities to achieve goals and earn gift cards; a relaxation room outfitted with a couch, fish tank and soothing music; and plenty of recognition, including daily email salutes to outstanding employees. “This is very much a fun place to work,” said Janel O’Connor, Sikich’s director of human capital. “I believe that any job candidate that walks into our office ends up wanting to work here. There’s a sense of pride here and it shows in how the firm invested in a really great office space.”

Companies like Sikich also realize that Gen Yers aren’t the only employees enjoying these benefits.

While workaholic Baby Boomers might need some prodding to pause for a massage, or Gen X'ers may at first be skeptical about a team-building activity, they ultimately partake in the extra perks. "It's good for everybody ... Companies are seeing the light. They are seeing people as an investment," said David McCaffrey, president of Predictive Personnel Assets, an Elmhurst-based employee recruiting and training firm.

Companies also realize that there's more to motivating employees than free lattes and yoga classes. Managers need to understand that different generations respond in different ways. At Sikich for example, training can take place in a classroom, a method many Baby Boomers prefer, or on a laptop, which Gen Yers prefer. "You need to address the different needs of each generation," O'Connor said. Some companies eschew the perquisites and go right to the bottom line.

Tasty Catering Inc. in Elk Grove Village serves as a business incubator, allowing Gen Yers to develop ideas for new companies and receive an equity stake in the new enterprise. Tasty Catering provided the support for Gen Y workers to start That's Caring, which makes eco-friendly gift baskets, and Nuphoriq, a marketing firm for caterers across the country. "Which would you rather have, a foosball table or self-actualization — the chance to be the best you can be," said Tom Walter, co-owner and chief culture officer for Tasty Catering, which has 80 employees. Jamie Pritscher chooses self-actualization. In addition to serving as director of communication for Tasty Catering, Pritscher, 30, started That's Caring, where she is the CEO. "There is a big emphasis on openness, flexibility and teamwork here. If you have an idea, they will listen," Pritscher said. "To be able to start and company and still have a full-time job was huge," Pritscher said. "They listen to you here. It's important to Gen Y to feel that you're being heard." Even traditional, button-down businesses are getting swept up in the spirit of Gen Y.

**First Eagle Bank in Hanover Park**, for instance, still runs a 9-5 business and expects employees to show up on time.

But CEO Andy Salk also has created a "fun committee" so employees can plan parties and events. This summer, First Eagle sponsored an outing for its 55 employees at Ravinia, where they ate dinner and saw Tony Bennett.

"There's kind of a knee-jerk reaction to criticize the younger generation for its work habits. But they're teaching us to bring more fun and balance to our work," Salk said.

"There are things Gen Y can learn from us Baby Boomers. But there are also things we can learn from them."