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Pedaling proves profitable

Bike to Work Week highlights rewards for eco-friendly, healthy workers

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Bike-to-work inducements aren't all that different from the basics of day-to-day happiness: security, hot showers, clean clothes and a little extra cash.

Those are the very things that Milwaukee-area employers use to encourage their workers to bike, walk or bus to work, long after Bike to Work Week - which starts today - and its free coffee and festivities have ended.

Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Co. provides an in-house cycling club, a secured bike parking area and two locker rooms for men and women at its downtown and Franklin offices, for its workers who arrive in Spandex and work in suits.

Eppstein Uhen Architects has the locker room facilities and the bike storage area, and last year added a company bike, which its workers in the Third Ward can pedal to nearby meetings and lunches.

It's the environmentally focused nonprofits, though, that put cold, hard cash into the equation. Both the Urban Ecology Center and the Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers pad their employee paychecks by \$1, after taxes, for every day they bike, walk, or take a bus to their job.

"That little bit of motivation seemed to be enough," said Ken Leinbach, the executive director of the Urban Ecology Center. "Everybody became engaged, and it became a camaraderie and a friendly competition."

Leinbach figures at least a dozen of the center's 18 full-time employees either bike or bus to work on a daily basis, and he counts himself in that group, whether he's on a bike or in-line skates. He also adds that daily \$1 to his paycheck, using the same honor system as the rest of the employees.

The ecology center's eco-bucks concept has spread to other businesses around the country and close to home. Lynn Broaddus, executive director of the Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers, copied the program Leinbach started in 2003.

"People compensate employees in a lot of different ways," Broaddus said. "This is a way for us to show that we appreciate when staff are doing the right thing."

Keeping employees happy

Eco-bucks seems like a natural fit for the green-oriented businesses with relatively small payrolls, but variations can be found on slightly bigger scales. Diablos Rojos Inc., a Milwaukee-based restaurant group with more than 100 workers, offers extra vacation time for cycling managers and in-house credits for food, drinks and clothing for its hourly workers.

"We reward our staff to be environmentally friendly," said Gordon Goggin, director of operations for the company, which owns Trocadero and Café Hollander.

It's not entirely altruistic.

Staff turnover can be one of the biggest expenses in the restaurant business, and Goggin sees some savings in retaining staff and keeping them happy.

It's reasonable to wonder how those eco-credit incentives, or locker room and other infrastructure investments, would transfer from smaller businesses into larger, more institutional manufacturing or financial concerns.

Mark Mone, a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor who teaches strategic management, said managers will look for a return on investment and find it through reduced health care costs, better productivity and attendance.

Encouraging cycling should be part of an overall wellness effort that maximizes a company's investment in its workers, its most important resource, Mone said.

Sustainability trend

Rich Tennesen, the executive vice president of Eppstein Uhen Architects, has noticed that more businesses are incorporating bicycle storage areas and employee locker rooms into their building or expansion plans. It's part of the trend toward sustainability, in building design and corporate mission, he said.

Eppstein Uhen, with 135 employees split between offices in Milwaukee and Madison, also has used incentives to encourage workers to take part in Bike to Work Week activities.

Last year, the firm put \$1 into a fund for every mile its workers biked or walked during the annual May event. That money was used to buy the company bike, now available for employee use.

Even with the trends that Tennesen and Mone have identified, cycling remains a minuscule part of Milwaukee's overall commuter mass. The 2000 census found that cycling accounted for roughly one-third of 1% of all trips to work in Milwaukee, just below the national average of 0.4%, according to the League of American Cyclists.

Those numbers are likely to be bolstered by the rapid rise in gas prices, which have pushed motoring commuters to look for alternatives, according to news accounts across the country.

Saving money on gas appears to be its own eco-bucks incentive, leaving the parking and the showers up to the employers.

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