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Working environments

What do you need when you go to work every day? Are you happy enough with a cubicle and a chair or would you prefer an office with a view from the window, lawns with deckchairs, a lake and a sports arena?

What about dropping your keys off at reception so you can have your car washed and polished or being able to order groceries to be delivered to your car boot or booking a massage at your desk in the afternoon?

How about social events every Friday lunchtime and sports leagues shared with neighbouring companies? Maybe you would appreciate a choice of work-based evening classes? Perhaps a giant toy box in reception packed with games and goodies would help you while away your lunch hour?

If you think I am getting a little carried away with a recipe for employee-cossetting on a grand scale, think again. All these benefits and more are provided for people who work at Chiswick Park, the 33-acre business park in west London being developed by Stanhope and designed by the Richard Rogers Partnership.

The first two phases of the park have been completed, with all but one of the six buildings fully let. The central features of the development are already in place and work on the final two phases begins in the autumn. The most innovative concept underpinning the park, however, is not the physical landscaping or the design but a branded, employee-focused service aimed at creating contented, productive workers.

The concept, called Enjoy-Work, is based on the theory that happy workers do better work. The friendly atmosphere starts at the entrance with yellow-shirted support staff. Most business parks would refer to these people as security guards and the on-site companies as tenants. Chiswick Park calls its tenants "guests" and its security team "guest support".

These hotel service undertones are no accident. Kay Chaston, chief executive of Chiswick Park Estate Management, whose job is to deliver and develop the Enjoy-Work concept, has a career background, not in human resources management, but in the hotel industry. This explains why each reception desk is equipped with the kinds of odds and ends you would expect the concierge to produce in a five-star hotel: sticking plasters, glue, needles and thread, shoe polish, and so on. They even have a fleet of free bicycles.

"We are trying to create something here that recognises that the war for talent is over. The employees have won the argument and those who can supply the best talent are adding true value to an organisation. But people need support and our job is to reduce the hassle for those who work here," says Ms Chaston.

All the services are listed on the Enjoy-Work intranet which also includes contact numbers for hand-picked tradespeople such as electricians, plumbers and decorators. The estate managers have negotiated discount deals with some suppliers. Most of the 400 listings on the intranet are local services - in line with the park's policy of building strong links with the Chiswick community. In November, the park holds a firework display for the whole community and its businesses are

becoming active in supporting and running local charity events.

The sports programme has been designed to promote contact between the different businesses on the site. "A sense of community doesn't exist in society any more. How many of us know our neighbours? Yet this is something intrinsic to the human spirit so we are developing a sense of community here very quickly," says Ms Chaston. "Anyone who comes down to one of the events can join a team and there is no quicker way to establish relationships than by playing sports together."

Friday lunchtimes are designated for special events such as a remote-controlled speed boat competition on the lake, tai chi, fencing or golf. The complex also includes a gymnasium and employs a sports coach for consultations on personal training.

So why don't all employers do this kind of thing? Well, many do. Sports events and in-house services are not so rare these days in City firms. What sets Chiswick Park apart is the detail, the variety and the constant refinement of employee services.

In fact the thinking behind these policies can be traced back at least 200 years to the textile mill complex established by Robert Owen in New Lanark. Owen angered his business partners when he built schools for employees and their children on plots that had been earmarked for production.

At the time, Owen recognised his employees as "vital machines". While today's employers would no longer describe employees as machines, we still seem prepared to describe people as "human resources".

Quaker entrepreneurs in Britain and the US were in the vanguard of a social welfare movement that established sports and social clubs to promote health and well-being among employees. It seems odd, therefore, that some companies today should be selling off their old playing fields for development when the most enlightened planners and designers are trying to create workplaces with in-built social structures and sports facilities.

Underneath the apparently soft centre of these support systems, however, are measurable advantages for businesses. When the Disney Corporation came to the Chiswick site, it expected to lose 5 per cent of its staff in the move. In the event it lost hardly any.

Companies that have moved to the site believe the environment is an important factor in attracting and retaining good staff. "It means that people's expectations have grown. We have a young workforce and for some people this is their first job. When they move on they will have quite a shock when they see what it is like to work elsewhere," says Andy Porter, resources manager at France Telecom, one of the businesses on the site.

Mary Finucane, product development manager in the commercial development team at Teletext, another of the site's "guests", says: "I love it here. I absolutely love it. There are so many little services they provide to make life easier, such as umbrellas when it rains and the bikes."

There may be some who believe that the well-being and leisure of employees should not be the responsibility of the employer. But even the most puritanical of managers must accept that a stimulating workplace is far more likely to lead to good work than

a job in a dreary office with colleagues who remain strangers.

The real test of developments such as these is maintaining the commitment to employees when people begin take the pampering for granted or when money gets tight. Nearly all the tenants are in expanding information, media and entertainment businesses prepared to pay what is needed to retain good people. But will they pay through any bad times in future? Who knows? For now, though, there is so much going on at Chiswick Park, you can't afford not to come to work

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