

Can choose
which days
I'll work and
my own hours
depending on
childcare.



PLAYTIME Susan Lord drops in to see colleagues at Salt with daughters Jessica and Ella, right.

Nice can

Have a massage at your desk, bring the dog to work, take a paid day off to go shopping — smart firms are making life nice for valued staff. So why, asks **BRONWYN SELL**, aren't all employers catching the wave?

HERE'S WHY you should envy Brenda Stevenson. One day this year, the Auckland recruitment consultant will decide she doesn't want to go into work. "No," she'll say, "I'm going to get a manicure or a massage or something instead."

Not only will her boss not mind, but she'll happily give Stevenson the day off. And slip \$100 into her pocket to pay for the pampering session, with the condition that the money is not to be spent on anything boring like groceries or paying off the credit card. It must be spent on herself.

And then in May, Stevenson will slip away from the company's conference in Melbourne to go shopping or sightseeing for a day — and she'll get a \$250 shopping voucher to kick-start her spree.

These things are nothing unusual at Newmarket recruitment company Salt. It's what all 14 workers get. Along with homework spaces for their children to use after school with computer and internet access, fresh baking once a week and flexible working arrangements, including the opportunity to work at home or part-time and choose hours to suit their commitments.

Lunch breaks are monitored, but not in the way you might expect. A staff member is tasked with shooing employees away from their desks to make sure they have a break. And last year every employee received a week's extra leave and a one-off \$5000 travel fund as an incentive.

It might come as a surprise if you're labouring away in a job for which you count yourself lucky just to be paid on time, but these sorts of "soft" employment benefits are slowly catching on in New Zealand.

Employees are realising that wages aren't the only incentive for working or the only measure of worth. Other benefits can help bridge the gap between life and work, easing the pain of leaving the former to pursue the latter. And employers, especially those badly hit by skills shortages, are increasingly having to compete to meet this demand for "work-life balance".

Take law firm Buddle Findlay, which gives all staff a week's paid marital leave. Or Telecom, whose employees get two company holidays a year, in addition to normal leave. Westpac is building childcare centres. Staff at the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries can buy two weeks' extra leave by sacrificing 2 per cent of their

work if you get it

salaries. Pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca gives every employee five paid work-life balance days off. Crown prosecutor Meredith Connell provides subsidised yoga in its central Auckland offices. Business training firm David Forman gives all workers a day off for their birthdays and discounted gym membership.

"All the little things, they're important," says Stevenson, sitting on a red couch in a room of Salt's renovated villa-cum-office on the edge of the Auckland Domain. "We've all worked for large organisations. I used to work for a big corporate, in a role that was more senior and earning more money. But I'm so much happier being in an environment like this, with job satisfaction and contentment."

Stevenson isn't planning to leave her job. No-one leaves. Her colleague Susan Lord actually laughs at the thought. Lord, a part-timer on maternity leave, is sitting on the couch next to Stevenson, being handed stones, one by one, from a pot-plant container by her daughter Ella. She's brought Ella and her younger sister Jessica in for a visit.

"I could be paid all the money in the world and not have the care and the flexibility I get here," says Lord, who returns to Salt next month and has been allowed to choose which days she'll work as well as her own hours. "Ultimately, it's about the trust and the respect and knowing that I won't be made to feel guilty. There's a lot more to it than dollars."

In the almost four years since the firm launched, just one person has resigned. And this in a competitive industry with 30 to 40 per cent staff turnover, says company director Jacqui Barratt, who is also New Zealand president of the Recruitment Consulting Services Association.

"The most important thing was getting the right people in the business," Barratt says of setting up the company. "I had to look at what could we offer and what did people want. What was going to make it attractive, because here we were a smallish business. Why would someone risk leaving a global organisation, a high-paid salary. What was going to bring them to Salt?"

THE ANSWER was work-life balance, tailored to the needs of each employee. For one woman — and the workforce is mostly women — that means working four days a week. For another it's about flexible hours and being able to bring her children into work in the hours between school and quitting time, for another it's working from home, for another it's a condensed week. For others it's a fun working environment and being encouraged to take time out for themselves.



WORTH IT: Salt director Jacqui Barratt, above, keeps on dreaming up new ideas to keep staff such as Brenda Stevenson, left, feel valued.

And Barratt is open to suggestion. "They're charged with the responsibility of doing a job and they get that job done in the time they need to spend to get the outcome. They know how to manage their workload.

"I think if you treat people like adults, then nine times out of 10 they will deliver. It's give and take. We try to look at people as a whole, not just as a worker. There's still a mindset out there in a lot of organisations that the working week is an 8.30 to 5.30 week.

And we've really got to break those shackles. If they want to do 10 until 6, is it really going to disadvantage the business? If you want to attract the best talent and hold on to them, you have to consider other options."

But for most New Zealand employees, that's the grass on the other side of the corporate fence. One woman, who didn't want to be named, tells of a former boss who she says treated her staff like irresponsible children.

"One of my workmates was pregnant and having a bit of a hard time of it. She was completely capable of working, but it was the trip into the office and having to sit at a desk that killed her. So one day

her supervisor quietly gave her permission to work from home. Unfortunately, her carpark was right next to the boss'. When the boss saw the parking spot was empty she stormed upstairs demanding to know why my colleague wasn't at work."

David Glover, managing director and co-owner of David Forman, says New Zealand employers rate poorly compared with other OECD countries when it comes to looking after their employees.

"There's a lot of research emerging that says we're very, very poor leaders. We're average managers. We are not enlightened in the way we deal with our 'human capital', to use a nasty accounting term.

"It's quite a shock because we think we're a nice, relaxed, casual, easy-going, lucky country. But that's just the other view of being a slightly repressed, insecure, introverted, Kiwi-bloke culture. And that's still the working culture in New Zealand. So a lot of people in business find this sort of thing hard to address. We've got a long way to go."

When Glover took over the company in 2003 he was determined to create an environment that practised the management wisdom that it preached in other workplaces — that people come first. His own 20-year experience in "ugly" multinational corporates provided him plenty of inspiration of how not to do it.

When *Canvas* visits the company on a warm summer day, most of the desks in the open-plan Newmarket office are empty. Evidently, their occupants are busy with their work-life balance — some are still on holiday, others are working from home.

The company lets its employees choose their hours within a



I won't go to work today; I'll have a manicure or massage instead.

Offer work-life balance tailored to the needs of each employee.