



03-26-23 | FUTURE OF HEALTH

# Why I pay my teams to pursue a passion that feeds their souls

Employees are happier and more engaged because this marketing agency founder funds their intellectual curiosities and passion projects.



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BY SARAH HABERMAN

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Great things happen when people are engaged with their passions, both personally and professionally. That's why some companies do their best to match their employees' passions with the type of clients that they work with—then everyone wins. Clients get the best work and employees get the satisfaction of contributing their energy to something that is meaningful to them.

However, managers must also recognize that passions extend beyond work itself. For employers to foster their employees' mental, emotional, and spiritual health, there must be a way to harness employees' passions outside of work.

Consider adding "passion projects"—brief paid experiential learning opportunities—to your list of benefits. Here, at my eponymous marketing agency, we encourage employees to participate in a passion project after one year of employment. The agency reimburses associated expenses up to \$1,000 and provides three days of paid time off. The project is approved by their manager and the employee must present their learnings within 30 days of completing their project.

Workplace strategist and author Jennifer Moss **believes** that employers were headed in this direction before the pandemic, pointing to Silicon Valley companies that send teams to Asia to immerse themselves in the culture with the goal of improving global collaboration. But the passion project benefit goes beyond professional utility; it is designed so employees can focus on their individual passions and curiosities, not necessarily ones that benefit the company.

For example, an account director took a social justice bus trip to Alabama to learn about our nation's history of racial injustice while visiting sites of the civil right movement; another creative director developed and published a children's book; an account supervisor had a passion for women's wellness and enrolled in a birth doula program. Currently, a creative director is making a documentary film, "**The Pickle Juice Project**", on midwest trail running.

## PASSION PROJECTS SUPPORT WELL-BEING

In a 2022 study, **the American Psychological Association (APA)** found that seven in 10 workers believe their employer is *more* concerned about the mental health of employees now than in the past. In fact, 81% of individuals said they will be looking for workplaces that support mental health when they seek future job opportunities. Additionally, more than 30% of those surveyed said that employer support for mental health will factor into their future job decisions.

Employers can support mental and emotional health through traditional benefit programs, but for many employees, particularly Gen Z, there is more to happiness than therapy; fitness, travel, and life experience are all just as valued. Passion projects support all aspects of holistic well-being by giving employees a chance to further their own values and visions for their lives.



develop various skills, which may include exploring one's creativity, research, project management, budgeting, and presentation/storytelling skills.

Pursuing a passion can also call for creativity, courage, and risk-taking, which all great leaders must practice. And, from a new business perspective, an agency may gain a new client from the employee's passion project experience.

## RECRUITMENT/RETENTION

The gift of enriching a person's life is greater than the risk of losing an employee to their passion. While there is a risk in unexpected career changes, people often become even more connected to the organization following a passion project opportunity. Agencies that offer this unique benefit are showing that they genuinely care about the mental health and well-being of their staff and understand that people are multidimensional beings who have a variety of interests in their lives.

## BUILDING CULTURE

Culture is what binds human experiences together in a shared paradigm, and what is more human than helping someone explore the question, "What brings you alive?" Offering a program that supports employees to pursue their passions is co-nourishing for the employee and the agency. The employee can dive into a passion, explore more about it, have a unique experience, and then create a presentation to the staff. It's a mini hero's journey and staff relationships deepen as a result.

The reality is, we all have gifts to offer and the organization benefits when there is a culture where people feel supported, seen, and heard.

Thinking of starting a passion program? Consider these elements:

- **Eligibility:** consider how long an employee needs to be in service to be eligible and how many years until they can pursue another passion project.
- **Budget:** think about how much money and/or time you can provide for each employee.
- **Approval Process:** who needs to authorize approval and manage any time constraints; projects need to be subject to client demands.
- **Learning Goals;** consider the questions you need to cover in the employee application; specific learning goals and how they tie back to organization; timing of project, date of presentation, etc.

Striving to be a supportive, continuous learning organization is truly enriching. Agencies that embrace passion projects as an employee benefit can look forward to whatever exciting, educational, and life-affirming passion projects that the future might bring.



*Sarah Haberman is the cofounder and managing partner of **Haberman**, a marketing communications agency with a mission to tell the stories of pioneers making a difference in the world. Out of the office, you will find her in a pasture facilitating equine experiential learning activities or at her home leading breathwork sessions for adventurous souls.*



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