

House? Van? 'Beyonce Moment?' Work Perks Go Beyond the Bonus --- Companies offer modeling stunts, coding classes, family road trips

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FULL TEXT

David's Bridal LLC tried the usual methods to recruit and retain workers in a tight labor market, including raising wages and offering cash bonuses for referrals. Then the wedding dress retailer decided on a different approach: inviting employees to model in its advertising.

Companies across industries are dangling new incentives to counteract a labor shortage that has made it harder for U.S. employers to find and hold on to workers. The Labor Department said last month that the number of people voluntarily quitting their jobs surged to a record high in August.

Beef and pork giant JBS USA Holdings Inc. is helping to build homes for employees to buy. Jeans maker Levi Strauss & Co. is offering free computer coding classes. Target Corp., Walmart Inc. and Amazon.com Inc. are offering to help pay for college tuition and books. Staffers at Chicago technology firm project44 can use a company-subsidized van -- complete with a bed, a toilet and shower, and Wi-Fi -- so they can combine work with family road trips.

At David's Bridal, the modeling idea didn't start out as a retention tool. When the Covid-19 pandemic sent the U.S. into lockdown last year, the retailer couldn't get access to professional models. So it turned to its 11,000 employees. Staffers wearing the chain's bridal gowns, bridesmaid dresses and tuxedos shot footage in their homes, as volunteers, and posted them to the retailer's social-media accounts.

Modeling proved so popular with employees that once the stores reopened, the retailer continued using its staff, this time in professional photo shoots.

"Having employees participate in our advertising helps get across the message that we are a great place to work," said CEO James Marcum.

Employees get manicures and have their hair and makeup professionally done, services paid for by the company. They are trained to walk and pose for the camera. The images appear on David's Bridal's social-media accounts, website and in its stores and corporate offices.

"Modeling was harder than I thought it would be," said Carly Mandarano, David's Bridal's director of visual merchandising, who recently donned a black, one-shoulder dress, dangling earrings and a sequined mask for a professional photo shoot at the company's headquarters in Conshohocken, Pa. She said the gig was worth it, though, because she got her "Beyonce moment" -- when fans blew her hair back while cameras snapped away. The van idea, from project44, which makes freight-tracking software, initially launched as a pilot program. It proved so popular, that when the company opened up spots recently through the end of the year, dates were booked within five minutes, says Kendall Raymond, a vice president of talent attraction and development. Employees can work from the van or use it for vacation. The company covers the cost of the rental.

Joshua Austin, a software engineer, used the van for four days in October, driving more than 12 hours from Chicago to South Dakota to visit Badlands National Park and Mount Rushmore with his wife. Accustomed to the noise of Chicago, Mr. Austin said he found the silence of South Dakota evenings almost jarring at first. "It was like being put in a padded room," he said. "It was eerie." Mr. Austin, who joined project44 a few months ago, said the

van made him think even more highly of the company. "This was like the perfect spontaneous trip," he said. David's Bridal said employee engagement scores – which it says measure the connection employees have to the company – are up nearly 20% compared with pre-Covid levels. The company said almost all workers who were furloughed during pandemic lockdowns returned to their jobs once its nearly 300 stores fully reopened last year. For traditional photo shoots, employees are paid a flat stipend. Depending on the shoot, workers get to keep the clothes they wear, or receive free merchandise later. To be considered, employees must send photos. Once cast, employees provide their height and size so they can be fitted for garments, executives said. About 300 have participated.

Evan Collison, David's Bridal's senior director of supply chain, proposed to his girlfriend, who was a senior buyer at the company, during a modeling session this year. The only problem was she didn't believe him. "She was super confused," Mr. Collison said. "I had to explain to her that this was real. It took a bit of wind out of the proposal." Now, any time Mr. Collison walks through the retailer's stores and distribution centers, he sees life-size posters of himself and his wife, Pam Ferretti. (The couple married in August and she no longer works at the company.) "Everywhere I go, co-workers are like, 'Are you the guy in the ads?' " Mr. Collison said. "It's super embarrassing." When a colleague dared Jessica Moreau to model, the customer-service supervisor accepted, even though she was 10 weeks pregnant. "I was afraid I would throw up on the dress," she said. She made it through the shoot without getting sick, but her husband hasn't stopped teasing her. "He'll say, 'Are you going to start giving out autographs?' " she said.

All employees are eligible to participate. They can be called upon to wear wedding gowns, bridesmaid dresses, mother of the bride gowns and tuxedos. David's Bridal also sells lingerie, but – that's left to the professionals. They might be called on to strike unusual poses. In one shot, Samantha Neira, David's Bridal's public relations and influencer marketing coordinator, fed a male colleague spaghetti. "That was a flirty pose we could pull off in the studio," Ms. Neira said.

Credit: By Suzanne Kapner By Chip Cutter

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