

Time off for good behaviour

February 29 is a free day of labour. Reclaim your time and save the world, says Ellie Levenson

Some employers seem decidedly more fun to work for than others. Take the National Trust, for example, which will be giving all its 4,800 staff and 49,000 volunteers the day off, paid, on February 29. The only catch is that staff are being asked to spend the time reducing their own carbon footprint in what the Trust is calling the Green Leap Day initiative.

But how much of a chore is that? And how lovely would it be if everyone was allowed that day off? There's certainly reason to demand it, given that for those on an annual salary the extra day at work that comes in a leap year effectively gives your employer a free day of labour.

British workers well deserve an extra day off. We have just eight bank holidays a year – that's half the number of Italy and fewer than most European countries, something Gordon Brown promised to look into earlier this year, with positive noises being made about an extra bank holiday to honour the armed forces.

In the meantime, some employers are rewarding their staff more than others. At PR company Salt, staff might have to haul themselves into work on February 29, but in return they are given their birthday off every year.

The Feel Good Drinks Company also believes in giving staff a break from work this leap year, although they will have to attend a (rather horribly named) "feel-goodness day" in exchange. "We give everyone in the company five days a year paid leave in addition to holidays to spread some feelgoodness by volunteering," says Dave Wallwork, managing director of the company. Last year staff used the time for projects including cleaning the Thames,

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planting allotments and helping out at Riding for the Disabled.

GIA, a surveying and design practice, also gives its staff five days off for volunteering each year, while Tesco offers managers a paid "make a difference day" to allow them to volunteer for community schemes. The first saw one senior management team spend their day renovating the City Farm in Vauxhall, London.

The John Lewis Partnership has a programme that allows staff to offer their time and expertise to good causes for up to six months, while still receiving their regular salary. Tina White, a delivery assistant at Waitrose in Leighton Buzzard, is working at local conservation project The Greensand Trust to help reclaim a sandpit that will become a public nature reserve. Bob Minter, from Waitrose in Bury St Edmunds, was seconded to the Suffolk Wildlife Trust to record biological data at a local woodland, where he monitored the activity of wildlife, trees, soil and fauna to ensure the area continues to thrive.

Even if it's unlikely that your company will offer you a six-month secondment

– or even just February 29 – to develop your eco skills, there are other ways you can encourage your workplace to make a real difference. Hugh Jones of the Carbon Trust says that companies need to do more than give employees one day off every four years to spend on environmental ventures. "Whatever your motivation for wanting to reduce your company's carbon emissions – be it CSR, marketing, cost savings, recruitment and retention, genuine environmental concern, or a combination of these – you're going to struggle if you don't take your staff with you," he says.

Often, this can be as easy as raising awareness throughout the office. "You need staff to think twice before printing documents, to turn off their PCs and lights at the end of the day, to participate in recycling schemes and to consider the carbon footprints of the method of travel they use and the products they source," Jones says. "Many of these changes are very much about culture change, so it's crucial that employees are fully engaged in the reasons and the thinking behind your carbon reduction strategy."

What to do with your day

Plant a tree

You can either plant a tree in your own garden or pay someone else to do it for you. For £10 TreeTwist (www.treetwist.co.uk) will plant a seedling in Scotland's Caledonian Forest and send a tree-themed present to you; for the same money the Woodland Trust (www.woodland-trust.org.uk) will also plant a seedling on your behalf, and will send a certificate and map showing the area where your tree is planted.

Make plans for the future

The One Life Live event at Olympia opens on February 29 and has a zone dedicated to helping people achieve a more sustainable lifestyle. The whole event is about helping people make positive changes to their lives, including ways to incorporate green living into their everyday lives. Visit www.onelifelive.co.uk

Stay in bed

There is one easy way to conserve energy. Wrap up warm and keep the lights off and your carbon footprint should remain small – what better way to celebrate an extra day off work than to catch up on sleep? **EL**



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