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Free college tuition? Maybe, depending on who you work for



by *Kenya McCullum* | *September 10, 2012*

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Do you hope to move up in the ranks of your job, or advance in your career, but you can't afford to get the degree that you need to do it? In many cases, the solution to this problem can be found right on the job.

It is becoming more and more common for employers to help their workers go back to school and earn the

degrees that they want. In fact, according to a survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 61 percent of the organizations they spoke to offered financial assistance so that their employees can pursue undergraduate degrees. In addition, 58 percent of surveyed organizations reported that they offer assistance to their employees for [graduate-level degrees](#) and 17 percent offered educational assistance to their employees' families.

How tuition assistance programs work

Every organization handles tuition assistance programs differently, and depending on where you work, you may be required to follow one or more of the following rules in order to receive the benefit.

Relevance requirement. In many cases, employers require that the degrees their workers pursue have some relevance to their jobs. But that doesn't mean there's no room for flexibility when organizations decide whether or not to reimburse tuition, according to David Twitchell, the director of human resources at Rutland Regional Medical Center.

"This rule is very broad. For example, someone might wonder how going back to school to get a degree in education is going to benefit their job. But you can use that degree to teach within an organization because there will either be a learning and organizational development department or an education department within your respective company," he said. "We're going to try to stretch it as far as we can go without breaking it."

Maximum benefit. Employers generally have a limit of how much they will contribute to their employees' education each year. Some organizations have an exact dollar amount that they will reimburse, while others outline a certain number of credits that students can take.

Making the grade. Employers want to feel like their workers are taking the tuition assistance benefit seriously, so they will oftentimes only pay for classes when employees have earned good grades -- meaning they generally have to earn at least a B in their classes.

Time is of the essence. Most employers require that their employees work for the organization a certain amount of time before becoming eligible for tuition reimbursement benefits. In addition, employees may be required to stay at an organization for a certain amount of time after they have completed their degrees -- otherwise they will be required to pay back the tuition money.

The benefits of tuition assistance programs

Employees who are able to take advantage of tuition assistance through their jobs can reap many benefits -- but it's not a one-way street. Employers also find that offering tuition assistance to their workers can vastly improve the quality of the workplace.

Recruiting and retention. Organizations find that tuition assistance benefits are an excellent way to attract -- and retain -- good workers.

"When we're recruiting somebody, this is definitely a great tool," said Gail Carbol, the employee benefits manager at the University of Kentucky. "For example, I had one individual that came to work in my department who had no college education and, by using this program, she went through and received her bachelor's degree. She is still here and is now working on a master's degree."

A more qualified workforce. When employees are able to pursue their degrees, they can bring the knowledge they gained in school back to their jobs. And as workers build on their qualifications, organizations have a greater pool of current employees to choose from when they're trying to fill new positions.

But even if employees don't plan to move up the ranks of an organization, they still can apply the skills and knowledge they have gained in their degree programs to their current jobs -- making them more efficient and effective workers.

Employee engagement. Employees who know that their employers are committed to them will feel more connected to the workplace -- which goes a long way toward making them better in their jobs.

"Not only does it build loyalty, but it also improves employee satisfaction and employee engagement," said Twitchell. "When your employer is investing money in you, you feel like there's something of value that you can give back to the organization."

What if there's no employee assistance program?

Just because your employer doesn't have a formal tuition reimbursement program doesn't necessarily mean that you can't get your tuition paid. In some cases, you may be able to convince your employer to help you go back to school.

Show and tell. If you want to successfully convince your employer to help you get your degree, you have to do your homework. Do research on the policies of other organizations out there -- especially competitors -- to find out how much they are giving their employees in education benefits and the parameters associated with these programs.

What you will bring to the table. You should also outline for your employer how you will be able to contribute more to the organization if you have the opportunity to go back to school. How will more education make you a better worker? What will this enable you to do that you can't do now?

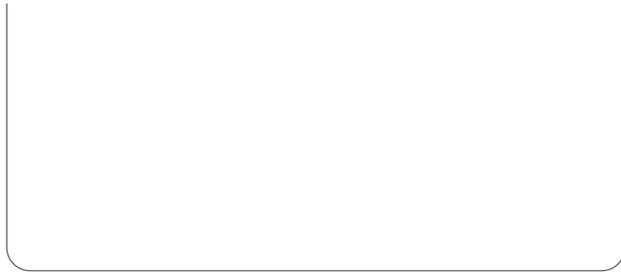
Tuition assistance and reimbursement could be a crucial component in your quest to improve your value to your employer and meet your career goals. Some schools offer class schedules designed for working professionals, and attending [online classes and training](#) could enable to you make a seamless transition from work to school and back again.

About the Author

Kenya McCullum is a freelance writer based in California.

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