



NEWSLETTER

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IMPORTANCE OF VACATION TIME FOR HEALTHY WORKERS

“... American vacations average a paltry 8.1 days after a year on the job, and only 10.2 days after three years, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And even getting that meagre ration is a workout, as more and more vacations fall victim to approval gauntlets that result in holidays that exist only on paper.”—Joe Robinson, Founder of the Work to Live Campaign ¹

“... even with such a relatively small number of days off, studies show that short vacations are becoming even shorter as Americans take fewer days off than ever before. According to a 2004 survey conducted by Harris Interactive for online travel service Expedia.com, at least 30 percent of employed adults give up vacation time they have earned, a situation that resulted this year in a total of 415 million unused vacation days. In fact, the average employed American sacrificed three days of vacation this year--up 50 percent from the two days they gave up in 2003, the survey found.”—Gretchen Weber in Workforce Management ²

“According to one recent online Harris/ Decima poll, nearly 25 percent of Canadians aren't taking the full number of vacation days they've been allotted, leaving 34 million vacation days unused every year. That amounts to workers handing back about \$6 billion in wages annually to their employers. Not surprisingly, 42 percent of poll respondents said they're feeling stressed, tired and vacation deprived – up from 33 percent in 2008.” — report by Expedia.ca, an online travel agency ³

“The pressures of market globalization, the feminization of the work force, and the impact of emerging technologies have meant that in order to keep up, many workers must work at all times (e.g., weekends, nights, vacations, etc.) and from anywhere (e.g., at home, in the bus, in restaurants). People who work irregular hours (e.g., weekends, nonstandard shifts, etc.) or who log an excessive amount of overtime also spend less time with their children and spouses and, once at home, they spend part of their time doing household chores to the detriment of family interactions.”—Vanier Institute of the Family ⁴

As Joe Robinson notes on his [Work to Live Campaign](#) Web site, in the 24/7 office, vacations are now rapidly shrinking. One-third of American women get no vacation leave anymore, as well as one-quarter of men. Those who have paid-leave benefits have a hard time getting to use them. The long weekend now appears to be the standard North American holiday.

Canadian labour standards legislation normally entitles employees after a given period of time, usually one year of service, to at least two weeks of annual vacation leave. Indeed, standard practice generally

¹ *Work to Live*: Joe Robinson (The Berkley Publishing Group, New York, NY, 2003)

² *Lost Time: Vacation Days Go Unused Despite More Liberal Time-Off Policies*: Gretchen Weber in Workforce Management, December 2004, pp. 66-67

³ *Stressed workers have 34 million unused vacation days*: Kim Covert, Canwest News Service, May 14, 2009

⁴ *Work/family balance: what do we really know?* Dr. Jacques Barrette, Vanier Institute of the Family, January 15, 2009

“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”

assures more annual leave, and vacation time tends to lengthen with tenure in a job. However, recent surveys have shown that Canadian workers are hard pressed to take such annual leave in one shot.

According to Expedia.ca, an online travel service, it is estimated that Canadians fail to take millions of vacation days every year. Expedia engaged Ipsos-Reid to do a yearly study of Canadian vacation habits. In 2005, 23 percent of those surveyed reported that they postponed or cancelled vacations because of work commitments. In 2004, that figure was 38 percent, representing a whopping 40 million vacation days.⁵

On the other hand, in 2008 it was reported by Ipsos-Reid, again for Expedia.ca, that the apparent growing trend is that people want more vacation time. The problematic side was that 29 percent of Canadians (on average) still weren't using their vacation time and were feeling vacation deprived.⁶

Why is vacation time so important to employees and organizations?

Most people would agree that it is important to find some leisure time away from the daily stressors of work. From time to time, one needs to recharge one's batteries so-to-speak. Not taking vacations can affect not only one's mental state, but also one's physical state. Moreover, the effects of taking too little vacation time play out in various forms —mental illness, physical illness, stress and burnout, relationship and family problems, higher absenteeism and benefits costs, and a general sense of dissatisfaction with one's life.

With respect to physical illness for example, a few years ago Psychology Professor Brooks Gump of the Department of Psychology at SUNY Oswego drew national media attention when his nine-year study showed a link between taking annual vacations and reducing the risk of coronary heart disease.⁷ For organizations, such mental and physical consequences can lead to reduced productivity, higher absenteeism and presenteeism, and increased compensation and health benefits costs.

Several studies have found that a significant percentage of workers would even consider taking a lower salary in exchange for more vacation time. Furthermore, an organization's policies vis-à-vis annual leave may or may not enhance it's ability to attract and recruit today's generation of new workers. Work-life balance is increasingly being seen as an important consideration by new recruits.

According to Chuck Bean, president of Baxter Bean, a management and human resources consulting firm in Calgary, Canada, smart companies should know by now that the war for talent requires them to pay more attention to ways that can help employees recharge. The trend also raises safety concerns in the workplace, since sleep-deprived, vacation-deprived workers are more prone to accidents and mistakes. — Warren Redman, founder of the Centre for Inner Balancing in Calgary⁸

What are some of the negative impacts on the quality of time taken away from work?

Once on vacation, it is also important to ensure that employees are allowed to truly relax and be physically and mentally separated on a continuing basis from their work and daily operations. Unfortunately, today's instant telecommunications and current technologies have made such separation even more difficult to attain.

According to the findings in 2007 of the secretarial and office support recruitment consultancy firm, Office Angels, three quarters of workers refuse to turn their blackberrys and mobiles off when on

⁵ *Vacation: Cancelled: It's true:* Stephanie Whittaker, Montreal Gazette, February 18, 2006

⁶ *Canadian workers feel vacation crunch:* Derek Sankey, Canwest News Service, Ottawa Citizen, June 07, 2008

⁷ *A Researcher with Heart:* OSWEGO Alumni Magazine, Summer, 2003

⁸ *Take your vacation -- you've earned it.:* Derek Sankey, The Calgary Herald, August 05, 2006

holiday. As a result, over half of those surveyed admitted that they felt stressed, anxious and concerned about their workload even before they had packed the suntan lotion.⁹

Another survey in 2009 by The Creative Group, based in the U.S., found that 61 percent of marketing and advertising executives polled said they checked in with work at least once a day while on break. These more recent findings by The Creative Group compare to 47 percent of executives in 2006 and 38 percent in 2001.¹⁰

What can be done to avoid vacation deprivation?

“Professionals should prepare for their vacation as if they won’t be available, rather than planning to check in. Handing off projects ahead of time can help workers come back genuinely refreshed.”—Megan Slabinski, Executive Director of The Creative Group¹¹

According to Jerry Glass, a managing partner at F&H Solutions Group, a human resources consulting company, organizations need to be proactive and ask employees early on in the year when they are planning vacation days. He suggested that being proactive is important because there are two things that will upset an employee:

- ☞ One is if a company tells them they can take a vacation and then says they can’t.
- ☞ The other is not allowing them to take the days when they want to.

Glass further noted that canceling a vacation appears to be a rare occurrence. However, if an organization does need to do this, it should reimburse the employee at least partially for any expenses they may have accrued from booking a trip or through other vacation planning.¹²

The Industrial Accident Prevention Association (IAPA) suggests an approach to preventing vacation deprivation.¹³ IAPA would start by assessing employee attitudes and behaviour. For example, a review of vacation usage statistics should occur to identify the extent of the problem and potential hot spots. Also, a perception survey would then be conducted on vacation usage and other indicators of work-life imbalance. If the assessments reveal problems or shortcomings, IAPA suggests that a multidisciplinary team, preferably including employee representation, be established by the organization to identify possible solutions. The following examples of possible solutions are provided by IAPA.

- ☞ Create a vacation-positive environment. Where requested and needed, support the taking of annual leave over longer periods of time rather than intermittently.
- ☞ Encourage reasonable working hours.
- ☞ Discourage employees from continuing to work during off hours.
- ☞ Help employees plan for time-off.
- ☞ Don’t allow employees to bank their holidays, possibly by establishing limits to discourage over-banking of unused vacation leave entitlements and monetary forms of compensation.
- ☞ Ensure managers set an example.

Once organizations have established a vacation-positive environment, the next step is to ensure that the quality of time-off is good and not counter-productive. This means ensuring that employees are

⁹ *Blackberry and mobile communication fuels holiday blues*: HR Zone 27-Jun-2007

¹⁰ *Sun, Surf and Cell Phones*: The Creative Group, News Releases, May 13, 2009 (<http://creativegroup.mediaroom.com/>)

¹¹ The Creative Group, News Releases: Op. Cit.

¹² *Summer Vacations Can Pose Thorny Issues for Employers*: Jessica Marquez, Workforce Week Management, June 4 - 10, 2006. Vol. 7 Issue 23

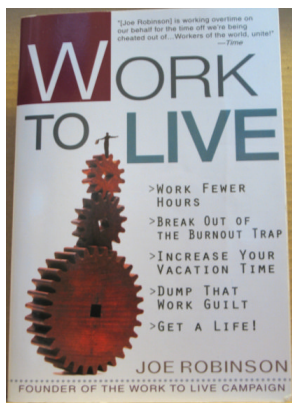
¹³ *Avoiding vacation deprivation*: Accident Prevention e-News, IAPA, Volume 3/Issue 7/July 2008

basically leaving their job behind while on vacation. For example, ensuring quality time-off may include the following measures:

- ☞ Managers could select someone whose judgment they trust to make decisions during the employee's absence. It is very important to give the point person the responsibility and authority to make judgment calls.
- ☞ If an employee has a hard time breaking away from the office, one might consider vacationing in a spot that doesn't have cell phone or Internet access. Vacationing employees should be encouraged to leave electronic devices behind and not to provide contact information.
- ☞ However, if there is an urgent need to check in on occasion, employees could set specific times when to check in, rather than having people contact them throughout the day.
- ☞ Employees should use out-of-office electronic functions to let colleagues, clients and customers know when they are away. The names and contact information of colleagues to contact while absent should also be provided.
- ☞ Managers should delegate projects that must continue during the employee's absence. Delegated coworkers need to be informed as to where to find key materials and information.
- ☞ Organizations may consider hiring temporary or freelance professionals to bridge gaps in order to help projects stay on course.

Given the evident stress and fast pace associated with today's workplaces, it is essential that organizations introduce work-life balance policies so as to support healthier and more productive workers. In addition, organizations and their members must work closely and continuously together to ensure that such policies are implemented effectively in actual practice.

Recommended Reading:



“Work to Live”

by Joe Robinson

(The Berkley Publishing Group, New York, NY, 2003)

- ◆ A chapter outlining examples of best practices by various employers with respect to quality time-off can be found in the publication [2009 Guide to Bold New Ideas for Making Work Work](#) by the Families and Work Institute.

Recommended Web Sites:

- ◆ Vacation Campaign – *Work to Live* by Joe Robinson: http://www.worktolive.info/poen_vaca.cfm
- ◆ Families and Work Institute: <http://familiesandwork.org/>
- ◆ Centre for Work-Life Policy: <http://www.worklifepolicy.org/index.php/>
- ◆ Work-Life Balance in Canadian Workplaces – Human Resources and Skills Development Canada: <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/lp/spila/wlb/01home.shtml>

“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”