

Why do workers have a love-hate relationship with vacations?

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Something spectacular happened this week but you wouldn't know it unless you were under 18. Give up? Here's a hint: It's warm and school's out. Summer vacation is upon us.

For those still of school age, every passing day in June means one step closer to sunshine, enjoyment and freedom. But as the years in the work force add up, the concept of summer enjoyment starts becoming more elusive and a good number of us prefer to remain chained to our desks according to yet another study showing that one in four workers would prefer work over play. Many can extol the virtues of holidays and the role it plays not only in preserving our health and well-being but also the energy we bring to work. Like others, I know these advantages and believe in them, but carry on working nevertheless, like a pesky addiction.

So it's time to dig deep and uncover why we continue to have this love-hate relationship with holidays and, more importantly, how we can shake up our traditional understanding of "vacations" to make them more palatable to today's work force.

At the heart this resistance, especially in North America, lies the belief that hard work will get you ahead and not working translates into a lack of progress – or worse – losing critical momentum. We are stuck in this Sisyphean exercise despite the fact that there is no evidence that more work and less play has any impact on professional success. In fact, research dating back to the days of Henry Ford in the 1920s shows that productivity diminishes after eight hours a day, five days a week.

Another factor that hinders our vacation motivation is the never-ending tsunami of e-mails. That sense of dread of returning after a week sipping margaritas on a beach to 1,000 e-mails requiring immediate attention can turn off even the most devoted vacationers.

For me, this disdain toward holidays comes down to the existential angst that hits me while I am away. During my time as an employee, it would take at least two days to transition from a working mindset to that of a pleasure seeker. Then, for three glorious days I could almost completely forget about work and convince myself that I'm not only independently wealthy but this vacation could somehow turn into a long-term lifestyle.

During the final two days of any vacation, I start fretting about approaching deadlines and start checking my e-mail and calendar for upcoming meetings. On the way home, my angst hits a peak where I begin to rethink my life choices.

As a die-hard entrepreneur, I no longer fantasize about quitting, but I can't remove myself from work enough to even hit that two-day nirvana.

"If your return to work is causing you to reconsider your commitment to your work, you aren't alone," said Lisa Taylor, president of Toronto-based Challenge Factory, which offers career and talent programs for the over-50 work force. Ms. Taylor explained that many employees mistakenly believe that their only options are to stay on in their current role or risk unemployment. But the situation is rarely that black and white.

She suggested some innovative approaches for those who find traditional one or two-week vacations unsettling, including shortening the work week. That could mean taking 10 long weekends instead of 10 consecutive days off. Ms. Taylor also suggests workers follow the business cycle, take advantage of slow periods to take an afternoon off or engage in an activity outside their regular routine.

"Staying in the office and not being productive makes for long, dissatisfying days. An afternoon at a movie or checking out a new gallery or playing a sport can be an energizing luxury," she explained. Finally, Ms. Taylor advises building time away from work into your daily routine, such as holding walking meetings.

For companies, it may be time to rethink the pre-emptive three to five weeks off that employees can use or lose. At Netflix, for example, employees aren't delegated a formal number of days and can decide to take whatever time they feel to be appropriate. And since senior leaders are role models, the company encourages them to take vacations.

From a company's perspective, there remain many compelling reasons to emphasize the importance of vacations, other than the obvious benefits of promoting the health and well-being of their employees. They provides critical career growth opportunities for colleagues.

"Enforced vacation policies creates opportunities to practice meaningful delegation and development of [staff]," said Martin Birt, a Toronto-based human resources manager and consultant. He explained that the fear of delegation and being seen as indispensable is a faulty trait in companies that senior management must nip in the bud.

"Larger organizations cannot allow that attitude of indispensability to take root and grow. It stunts employee development and is ultimately bad for business," said Mr. Birt.

So set the inbox to "away" and order another pina colada. It's not only good for you, but also good for your company.

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