



The Vacation Situation

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You've heard all the sayings: Vacation is a great way to relax, recharge and come away with a fresh perspective that can drive your career to new heights. Too bad these cathartic cliches ignore the realities of the 2000s: overwork, overbearing managers and overreaching technology that never let American professionals off the hook.

The results of recent research and polls on vacation attitudes and behavior confirm what many of us have long suspected: Employers give us scant time off, and we don't even take all that we're given.

Start with this depressing statistic: American workers will fail to use more than 421 million vacation days in 2005, according to a survey conducted by Harris Interactive for online travel agent Expedia. Worse still, this figure belies the fact that Americans don't get much vacation to start with, comparatively speaking. Granting an average of 12 days of vacation, US employers are much stingier than their counterparts in Canada (21 days) and Western Europe (Germany, 27 days), the survey says. Yet American workers tie Canadians in leaving the most vacation unused, at three days (German workers give back just one day).

Still, Americans do value their time off. Large numbers of them say vacation time is more important than extra money. Given the choice, 39 percent of respondents to a November 2004 Salary.com online poll would choose more time off instead of a \$5,000 raise.

Too Much Work

Many workers believe that their workload simply doesn't allow them to take all the time off their HR department says they have coming. In a Monster online poll, 24 percent of more than 23,000 respondents gave "too much work" as the reason they don't use all their vacation days. At the same time, some 47 percent of respondents said they do take all of their vacation.

Some observers say that having a professional career means taking vacation represents a stiff challenge to an individual's time-management skills, not a license to off-load projects. "White-collar work -- the kind that collects on your desk and in your inbox while you're away -- makes it truly hard to get off the grid," says Liz Ryan, CEO of WorldWIT.org, a women's networking group based in Boulder.

Further, communications and even transportation technologies make many managers' vacations an exercise in personal and professional triage. "Increasingly, people have been unable to compartmentalize their work lives and the rest of their lives," says Kevin Salwen, editor of Worthwhile Magazine. "It's so commonplace for people to be answering emails on vacation or having a FedEx [package] sent to their hotel."

Some workers say their employers fail to live up to the spirit of their vacation policies. "Businesses have discovered that if they pile on enough work, they can unofficially take back vacation time from the workforce," says a lawyer who is in-house counsel at a Fortune 500 company. "Given that vacation time is earned compensation, that's quite a deal for the employer."

Bosses Nix Vacations; Employees Fear Layoff

Many employees say it is pressure or fear that keeps them from using all their vacation, not their workload. Some 11 percent of respondents to the Monster poll said pressure from the boss prevented them from using their full vacation; 9 percent said they feared being laid off.

Some urge workers to resist if their employers put pressure on them to change their vacation plans. "Never cancel a vacation for any work-related reason, because the vast majority of people don't reschedule vacations," says Mark Sincevich, a work/life balance consultant in Bethesda, Maryland.

But in the volatile labor economy of the 21st century, it's not always that simple. "American workers are not using their vacation days, because they're scared of being replaced while they're away or that their employer would discover that they are not indispensable," says Joyce Gioia, a management consultant with The Herman Group in Greensboro, North Carolina.



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