

Working—America's Answer To Taking A Vacation

If you are a manager or supervisor of staff, the surest sign that the summer season has arrived is the increase in employee vacation requests. Doesn't it seem like this or that employee just took a week off. How could they possibly have accrued vacation time so quickly? In contrast, you can't remember when you last took a week off. So just how much vacation time do American workers take each year?

- By comparison to most every other industrialized country, American worker's work longer and harder and vacation the least. That is if we actually take all the vacation days we are due.

It's a fact of the modern workplace, and our ever competitive global economy, that efficiency means doing more with less. Most organizations' single largest operating expense is labor. Therefore, to remain competitive, the number of full-time workers has been reduced, while outsourced functions and process automation has increased. The result is the breadth and depth of task, project, and program responsibility heaped on the backs of our more agile workforce has significantly increased. Bottom line: fewer workers are responsible for doing more. As a result planning time off is more difficult.

- According to an Expedia.com survey taken March-April 2007, a full 33% of U.S. workers don't always take the full amount of vacation time they have coming. Why? Here are some reasons:
 - 14% said it was because it required scheduling it in advance.
 - 11% said work kept them too busy to get away.
 - 10% preferred taking money (if company policy allowed) for unused vacation time.

Then there is the whole issue of completing two weeks worth of work before taking time off because you will be out for one week. Or perhaps more daunting, the mere thought of coming back to all the work that piled up in your absence. It certainly is no stretch to see why a stressed out, overworked employee would actually choose to stay on the job. Taking time off is too much work.

- U.S. workers are likely to give back more than 574 million vacation days this year. That is an average of four unused vacation days per employed adult age 18 and older. This represents a rise of a full unused vacation day per worker since just last year.
- For 25% of U.S. workers, the first few days back from vacation are the most stressful; for 20% it's the last few days before vacation.

What about those of us that do take vacations. Are we really leaving work behind?

- 23% of U.S. workers checked voice or e-mail messages, took calls, participated in teleconferences, or brought work with them while on vacation. Thanks to more portable and powerful communications devices and widespread access to wireless Internet access, this represents a 16% increase from just 2005.

Again, according to the Expedia survey, this year, about 40% of U.S. workers expect to take at least one full week of vacation and use any remaining time scattered throughout the year; only 16% will take a two-week vacation.

That's the bad news. The good news is that we get paid vacation at all. The United States is one of the few industrialized countries where the government doesn't regulate benefits in the private work sector (i.e., there is no law that says any company is required to offer paid vacation time).

Consider this:

- 90% of full-time American employees have paid vacation.
- According to the global human resource consulting firm Hewitt Associates, the methods for determining vacation time in Europe and the U.S. are distinctly different. American employers typically base vacation time on length of service, while vacation time is normally mandated by government agencies in Europe.

- On average, European employees get four weeks of vacation. It would take the typical American employee 15 years or longer to attain the same vacation privileges. And as job-hopping becomes more common, fewer Americans ever qualify for such extended vacations.
- According to Hewitt, the country with the most vacation days is Denmark with 31, followed closely by Austria and Finland at 30 days. France and Norway are at 25 days, Germany at 24 days, Belgium, Ireland, United Kingdom, Netherlands and Switzerland each at 20 days. Non-European countries measured include Brazil at 22 days, Australia at 20 days and Colombia and New Zealand each at 15 days. The U.S. is second from the bottom with 10 days, tied with both Canada and Japan. Only Mexico, with a piddly six days, offers employees less vacation time.
- American companies mimic each others' vacation policies to remain competitive in the market for top talent, making the standard one to two weeks paid vacation a survival tactic, offered begrudgingly by employers. Thanks to this method, U.S. employees receive an average of 9.6 paid vacation days after one year of service, 11.5 after two years, 13.8 after three years and 16.9 after five years, according to an employee benefits survey from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

So does Europe have the right idea? Does having a more rested workforce equate to better company performance and higher productivity? The data would suggest quite the opposite.

- By comparison Europe's industry output is lower when compared with the U.S. and unemployment is generally higher—the European gross domestic product has grown 2.4% compared to America's 5%, over the past five years—many economists believe their four to six-week vacation mandates are partly to blame because when governments force businesses to pay workers to be idle beyond what is justified by the businesses' productivity, less profit is generated, more capital is consumed and the result will be lower job-creation rates, lower real pay, or both.

So what can overworked American workers do to get the most out of their well deserved vacation time? The most important thing is use the vacation time. Beyond that here are a few more suggestions:

- Inform key contacts you will be gone and provide names and contact information for those who will step in during your absence.
- Change voice mail and set up an automatic e-mail response to inform others that you are on vacation. Include a return date. Include a contact name if matter cannot wait for your return.
- If you must check e-mail or voice mail, do so at most once a day and limit it to 15 minutes.
- Turn off your cell phone and handheld computer and keep it off. If you must check, do so only periodically for possible emergency messages. Better yet, leave the laptop or Blackberry at home.
- Do not provide the office or customers with your cell phone number. If you feel you must provide contact information, provide the number of the hotel where a message can be left.
- Before leaving, make a list of tasks and key deadlines to address upon your return to work... (so you remember where you were).

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