



Time for Vacation ---Yeah – Right!

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Every day, economists and politicians are telling us gas prices are only going to rise – that means airlines will soar – price-wise that is and many Americans are deciding to put any vacation plans on hold for this year. The recent economic stimulus refund was an attempt to stimulate spending but it's predicted most Americans are

using those extra funds just to keep up with the increases in gas, food prices and credit card interest. So what happens to vacation?

Studies have been out for years suggesting **Americans work harder and longer than folks in other countries**. We take fewer vacation days. Americans are far behind the rest of the world in annual vacation days. Italy leads the world with 42 days a year. France has 37, Germany 35, Brazil 34, Britain 28, Canada 26, and South Korea and Japan 25. The U.S. comes in at a paltry 13, according to the World Tourism Organization.

And, the National Survey of the Changing Workforce found in 1997, that **Americans averaged working 8-10 hours per week** more than their counterparts in many European countries. (www.commondreams 1991) Experts tell us the reason is that we have to work harder and forego vacations because we are transitioning from a manufacturing economy to a service economy that requires attention 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Outsourcing and global competition place even more stress to work harder, longer for less or risk losing jobs completely.

Clearly Americans are taking less vacation time each year. But what are the implications? It's called – stress. **If people don't use their vacation time but continue to work longer hours with even greater work-related stresses, eventually it comes up as sick days or unexpected days off**. As everybody else has to work overtime to cover those absences, it adds to others' stress and we keep repeating the cycle.

A study by Circadian Technologies found that the average overtime rate in extended-hours business in 2004 was 16.2 %- that is almost one extra day of work each week. With **this increase in overtime came an increase in the absenteeism rate** up from 5.8 % in 2003 to 12.4 % in 2004. In general companies with high amounts of overtime had absenteeism rates of 17 %, versus 9 % in companies with low amounts of overtime. (Braun Consulting 2005)

Less vacation, more absenteeism, more overtime. It seems to be a vicious cycle.

To complicate our issues more, The New York Times in 2006 published a study by Reuters that learned “**The number of Americans who work during their vacations has nearly doubled in the last decade**, with the laptop computer replacing the cell phone as the most useful tool for working on holiday.” Edward Hollowell, a psychiatrist and author of “Crazy Busy: Overstretched, Overbooked, and About to Snap!” said the reasons for the working vacation have a positive and negative twist to them. “The good way would be someone who says, ‘Look, I really want to get away with my kids, but I do have work to do...I’m going to combine work and vacation,’ he said. The bad one would be someone who is just so addicted to work that they can’t ever leave it. It’s their only way of amusing themselves, and that’s a problem,” he said.

A study by the Opinion Research Corporation of 640 randomly selected full or part time workers found that **only 61% of Americans use all of the vacation time** they have coming to them. (NY Times Co.2006)

Despite all the arguments against using our vacation time – like demanding work expectations, can’t find the time, can’t afford to go anywhere, etc.---**some companies realize it is in their best interests to strongly encourage employees to use their time off.** Sure it stresses the schedule, complicates life in the short run sometimes. But, in the long run –the argument can surely be made that **vacations not taken or skipped, affect absenteeism rates later. Vacations can reduce or perhaps provide the balance needed to prevent job burnout or potential job loss.**

So maybe this is the year to get creative. Maybe we need to adjust how we think of vacation time. **Maybe it’s not just getting away as much as changing the routine.** Maybe we’ll stay home but do all the cultural things in town we never have time for – the museums, art galleries, the gardens. Maybe we need to play more or take pleasure in long leisurely walks or explore new bike trails. Perhaps you’ve wanted to learn more about digital photography or want to do something creative in the shop. The issue is restoration, nurturing, time to re-create ourselves.



From an HR perspective, vacations can add stress to the most carefully planned schedules, but in the long run potentially, bring us back a much healthier and balanced employee. So let’s embrace, encourage and make it as easy as we can for people to leave their jobs for a break. Everybody wins!