

Bloomberg Businessweek

Do Us A Favor, Take A Vacation

Business begins to notice the perils for wired, overworked executives

5/21/07

Futurists in the 1970s predicted that by now technology would have so shrunk our workloads that we'd all be paddling about in a leisure-and-vacation playland.

How wrong were they? Vacation season is upon us, and a new survey by employment firm Hudson says more than half of American workers fail to take all their vacation days. Thirty percent say they use less than half their allotted time. And 20% take only a few days instead of a week or two. Among so-called extreme jobholders—what author Sylvia Ann Hewlett calls the professional class panjandrums—42% claim they have to cancel vacation plans "regularly." Americans take even less vacation than the Japanese, the people who gave rise to *karoshi*—the phenomenon of being worked to death.

Even when managers do go away, they don't get away. Instead of mentally checking out in cabanas with cocktails, Americans have become the bent-headed people of the handheld or laptop—gear that was supposed to be the mighty liberator but has turned into a wireless manacle. Which is why hotels are offering to lock up workaholics' BlackBerrys, companies are frog-marching people off on vacation whether they like it or not, resorts are springing up that offer an unplugged respite from the world of work, and doctors are starting to write prescriptions for—yes—vacations.

If anyone needs that kind of intervention, it's Gian Paolo Lombardo. His last faux-cation was three years ago. He holed up in his luxury hotel room in Carmel, Calif., for three days with his "mistress" (a.k.a. Pearl, the BlackBerry). Meanwhile his wife, Ellen Hart, was marooned in the hotel bar, left to hang out with the other guests and their dogs. (Yes, even pooches take vacations.) "I think he needs to go into rehab," says Hart, adding that no meal or movie goes by without her husband's assuming a head-down position, glued to his PDA. "Yes, it's true," says Lombardo, who with his wife—irony alert—manufactures luggage for luxury travel. "I am a total nutcase."

He may be right. Scrolling through e-mail and punching out text messages fire up the dopamine-reward system, unleashing a pleasure-inducing hit that for an estimated 6% of Internet users has become clinically addictive, says University of Michigan psychology professor David Meyer.

It's as if we've all become characters in Graham Greene's novel *A Burnt-Out Case*. Everyone moans about how fiercely they're banging away, too swamped and spent to truly vacate. But is that true? More often than anyone wants to admit, vacation aversion is less about overwork than about self-delusion and narcissism. How many times have you heard a variant of: I can't go on vacation because Jim won't be able to handle my job?

The always-available executive is dangerous. He subtly undermines the people around him by telegraphing that his team is incapable of running things on their own. "There is no executive who is so indispensable that the enterprise will collapse in his absence," says Ken Siegel, president of Impact Group, a Los Angeles-based consortium of psychotherapists who counsel CEOs and other executives. "We're all going to die, and our companies will go on without us."

ANGER MANAGEMENT

But that gives those who get mortality another rationale for not taking a vacation. What happens if Jane not only comports herself admirably while I'm away but does a better job than I do? Executives returning from vacation to find their teams haven't missed a beat may never go on holiday again.

The vanishing vacation has many perils. Refusing to take time off burns people out and wreaks havoc on productivity. Vacation deprivation is one reason workers are reporting more mistakes, anger, and resentment at co-workers, according to the Families & Work Institute. Former NASA scientists, working on behalf of Air New Zealand and using testing tools normally reserved for astronauts, recently found that vacationers experienced an 82% increase in job performance post-trip. The now-popular micro-vacations—taking two or three days off—do not deliver the same stress-reduction benefits as vacations that last one and two weeks, research shows. Moreover, experts agree that a key ingredient in peak performance is a drastic change of venue coupled with shutting down for extended periods of time. "Making yourself available 24/7 does not create peak performance," says psychiatrist Edward Hallowell, an instructor at Harvard Medical School. "Recreating the boundaries that technology has eroded does."

To that end, Kelly Services Inc. (KELYA) CEO Carl T. Camden has started giving his wife gifts of time and attention as opposed to cars and baubles. Every year, Camden and his wife jet off for a week or two to a small island near Maui that is off the grid, without wireless. Not that CEO getaways are always looked upon with unwavering approval. President George W. Bush gets beaten up in the press all the time over his extended sojourns at the ranch. When Wal-Mart Stores Inc. (WMT) CEO H. Lee Scott Jr. announced he was taking an entire month off last year, rumors swirled that he might be losing his job. Maybe the guy just needed a break.

Unused vacations, techno-stress: The situation has grown so dire that the Sheraton (HOT) Chicago Hotel & Towers offers wrecked and wasted white-collar types a cold-turkey detox program where they can hand in their cell phones and PDAs for lockup in the hotel vault during their stay. More than 1,000 guests have written the hotel to express their thanks. Hyatt hotels offer a BlackBerry-thumb massage.

Then there's the kick-out-the-door approach. Companies such as PricewaterhouseCoopers track employees who have not taken enough vacation, sending reminders to them and their supervisors that they should do so. At Intel Corp. (INTC), all full-time employees get two consecutive months of paid time off after seven years of work. They can even stack the sabbaticals on top of their regular vacation. Going in a totally different direction, Netflix Inc. (NFLX) has done away with vacation time altogether. The company tells workers that so long as they get their jobs done, they can take as much time off as they like.

Alden Cass, a clinical psychologist and performance coach, counsels traders and advisers on Wall Street. This gang finds it particularly difficult to let go. One of Cass' clients, a top-tier financial adviser, was so

fearful that his clients would leave him if he took time off for his honeymoon that he wrote them all a letter asking for permission. Clearly, Wall Streeters require delicate handling. Cass knows that if he encourages them to take vacations for their health, they'll guffaw in his face. But if he frames the argument in terms of lifestyle portfolio diversification, he makes headway. "These people are all about winning and losing, so if I tell them that they are going to lose assets, they relate to that. Their spouses and their kids—these are the only commodities they have any control over."

Last but not least, there's the forced vacation. The Professional Renewal Center in Lawrence, Kan., is a career rehab for executives who have sexual harassment, substance abuse, and emotional issues in the workplace. Employers often refer executives to the center for treatment that lasts up to seven weeks. One thing the burned-out patients usually have in common, says Professional Renewal Center CEO Kirtsen Judd: "They never took vacation."

© 2007 *Business Week*. All Rights Reserved.