



# THE WORK MARTYR'S CAUTIONARY TALE

How the Millennial  
Experience Will Define  
America's Vacation Culture

U.S. TRAVEL  
ASSOCIATION®

**PROJECT: TIME OFF**

The growth of domestic travel is central to U.S. Travel's overall [mission](#). We support policies to improve travel infrastructure and national parks, among others, and foster programs and research that encourage increased domestic travel.

In the fall of 2018, U.S. Travel folded its domestic leisure-focused Project: Time Off initiative into an expanded public affairs portfolio, enhancing the association's advocacy and research on domestic travel. Analysis that informs and advances this area of focus—including tracking America's vacation usage and its benefits to travelers—is included in U.S. Travel's research and messaging platforms for our members' use and in support of activations such as National Plan for Vacation Day.

# INTRODUCTION

## **The majority of Americans are not using their hard-earned vacation.**

The always-on, 24/7 work environment has eliminated office boundaries and created the new challenge of making time to take time.

American workplace pressures have produced ideal conditions for the rise of the work martyr. And that rise may not have reached its peak. In 2015, 55 percent of Americans combined to leave 658 million vacation days unused.

The first generation of America's work martyr era is here—and it is poised to not only continue the downward trend, but to accelerate it.

As a follow-up to The State of American Vacation 2016, The Work Martyr's Cautionary Tale takes a closer look at who the work martyr is and the consequences of a work martyr's decisions.

# METHODOLOGY

**GfK conducted an online survey using the GfK KnowledgePanel® from January 20-February 16, 2016 with 5,641 American workers, age 18+, who work more than 35 hours a week and receive paid time off from their employer.**

GfK's KnowledgePanel® is the only large-scale online panel based on a representative random sample of the U.S. population.

This report also looks at a subset of this data, including work martyrs as defined in this report and generations as defined by Pew Research Center: Millennials (1981-1997), Gen X (1965-1980), and Boomers (1946-1964).

# WORK MARTYR WANNABES

**The pressures of American work culture have produced ideal conditions for the rise of the work martyr.** Out of all survey respondents, a staggering four in ten (39%) employees say they actually “want to be seen as a work martyr” by their boss. But at home, it is a different story—the overwhelming majority (86%) of employees believe it is a bad thing to be seen as a work martyr by their family.

Not surprisingly, unhappy employees are more likely to buy into work martyr mythology. Forty-seven percent of employees who are unhappy with their job and 46 percent of employees unhappy with their company believe that it is a good thing to be seen as a work martyr by their boss. Employees who want to be seen as a work martyr by the boss are also more likely to report feeling stressed at work.



## Stress at Work

**43%** of those who are stressed at work think it's a good thing to be seen as a work martyr, compared to **30%** of unstressed employees.

## Happiness with Professional Success

**48%** of employees unhappy with their professional success say it is a good thing to be seen as a work martyr, compared to **38%** of happy employees.

## Happiness with Job

**47%** of employees unhappy with their job say it is a good thing to be seen as a work martyr, compared to **38%** of happy employees.

## Happiness with Company

**46%** of employees unhappy with their company say it is a good thing to be seen as a work martyr, compared to **38%** of happy employees.



# DEFINING THE WORK MARTYR

**Too many American workers have subscribed to a philosophy that prizes hours worked over true productivity and a belief that not taking a break will reap greater professional success.** However flawed, such thinking has taken hold in American workplaces.

This point of view is dissonant from the traditional American work ethic. So, what defines a work martyr? The belief that it is difficult to take vacation because:

- “No one else at my company can do the work while I’m away.”
- “I want to show complete dedication to my company and job.”
- “I don’t want others to think I am replaceable.”
- “I feel guilty for using my paid time off.”

Based on that definition, there is much to be learned about the negative outcomes of work martyrdom—both for the welfare of workforce and the health of American business.

## WHO ARE THE WORK MARTYRS?

Workers who meet the work martyr definition tend to be slightly more female (52%) and slightly less likely to be married (55% are married, compared to 62% overall), but they are overwhelmingly Millennials. More than four in ten (43%) work martyrs are Millennials, compared to just 29 percent of overall respondents.



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# CONSEQUENCES OF WORK MARTYRDOM

The desire to be seen as a work martyr is even more confounding when the consequences are laid bare. Zeroing in on the workers who meet the work martyr definition presented above reveals sobering results.



## Stress at Home and at Work

From stress levels at work to those at home, there is no upside to being a work martyr. **While 71 percent of respondents said they felt stress in their work life, that number is notably higher, at 84 percent, for work martyrs.** At home, the stress equation is even worse. Where just 43 percent of all respondents say they feel stress in their home lives, 63 percent of work martyrs do.



## Unsupported at Work

The stress levels may be unsurprising, considering that 76 percent of work martyrs do not believe their company's culture encourages taking time off, compared to 65 percent overall. **Work martyrs also receive significantly less support at work for taking time off, with 70 percent saying they are not supported by management (compared to 58% overall),** and 63 percent saying they are not supported by their colleagues (compared to 53% overall).



## Pressuring Themselves

Work martyrs also burden themselves. A majority (55%) pressure themselves to check in with work while on vacation, compared to less than a third (31%) of all workers. Work martyrs were almost twice as likely (49%) to say they agree that their company expects them to check in while on vacation or are unsure of their company's expectations; just 25 percent of the overall survey audience felt the same.



## Earning Less

If the burdens at work and at home are not enough to prompt a change, work martyrdom may also be costing workers money. **Despite sacrificing time off with family and friends to put in more time at the office, work martyrs are slightly less likely to have received a bonus in the last three years.** Seventy-five percent of work martyrs reported receiving a bonus in the last three years, where 81 percent of the overall audience received one. The difference is clear evidence that work martyrs' perceived commitment may not be valued—or as valuable—as they think.



## Misplaced Pride

Unsurprisingly, those who qualify as work martyrs are proud of their martyrdom. **A staggering 59 percent want their boss to call them a work martyr — fully 20 percentage points higher than overall respondents.** Worse yet, their desire to be seen as work martyrs goes beyond just the boss. They also want to be seen as work martyrs by their colleagues (43% of work martyrs, compared to 27% overall), their friends (31%, compared to 16%), and their families (24%, compared to 13%).

# MILLENNIALS ARE NOT JUST YOUNGER, THEY'RE DIFFERENT

**Nearly half (48%) of Millennials think it is a good thing to be seen as a work martyr by the boss, far outpacing the average (39%), Gen Xers (39%), and Boomers (32%).** Millennial workers also want to be seen that way by their colleagues in greater numbers. Thirty-five percent of Millennials agree it is good to be seen as a work martyr by their colleagues, compared to 26 percent of Generation X, and 20 percent of Boomers.

This finding aligns with a [survey conducted by Alamo Rent A Car](#) that revealed **Millennials are the most likely to make others feel a sense of shame for taking a vacation or “vacation shame.”** They are significantly more likely than older generations to say they shame their co-workers (42%, compared to 24%). They are not joking around when they “vacation shame.”<sup>1</sup> Millennials who admitted to shaming their co-workers were significantly more likely than older generations to say they are at least somewhat serious (42%, compared to 22%).

Some of the work martyr behavior that Millennials exhibit may be symptomatic of being early in their careers and working their way up the ranks. As expected, they have substantially less tenure. More than four in ten Millennial respondents (43%) reported being with their company two years or less, where the greatest number of Generation X (47%) and Boomers (64%) reported 10 or more years.

But Millennials' point of view is unique from previous generations. The popular cultural narrative is that Millennials are entitled and spoiled, expecting to be handed achievements rather than working for them. Not only do the survey findings run counter to this narrative, this stereotype ignores the circumstances of the Millennial experience which helps explain why they are most susceptible to work martyr thinking.

**Millennials entered the workforce in the midst of the Great Recession, the longest and arguably worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.** But even after its official end, economic aftershocks lingered. [Sluggish growth](#) and high unemployment, particularly among young adults, persisted month after month, year after year.<sup>2</sup> As the recession hit its peak, [job seekers per opening swelled](#), only stabilizing to pre-recession levels in 2014.<sup>3</sup>

Even as the national economy has recovered, the personal economy for many Millennials remains a challenge. Student loan debt has steadily risen, hitting Millennials particularly hard. The Class of 2016 [averaged a record \\$37,173 in student debt](#), according to an analysis by Edvisors.<sup>4</sup> The number of students carrying loans is also up, with [70 percent](#) of the most recent graduating class saddled with debt.<sup>5</sup>

Wage growth, while also rising, has not come close to keeping pace with student debt. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York puts wage growth over the [last 25 years at 1.6 percent](#), adjusted for inflation.<sup>6</sup> Student loan debt, however, has grown 163.8 percent. In 1990, the [average college student graduated with debt equivalent to 29 percent](#) of annual earnings; 25 years later, in 2015, that number rose to nearly 75 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Coming of age during an economic downturn has consequences. When Millennials landed jobs, they brought with them a strong desire to prove themselves, intensified by the often long and painful search that preceded their first day. All of this occurred amidst changing



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American work culture and attitudes toward taking time off.

**Millennials are the first generation to enter the workforce in the era of vacation decline.**

After decades of using an average of 20.3 days, Americans' vacation usage began to decline in 2000 and it has not slowed its downward trajectory since. Older Millennials entered the workforce in the early-2000s, timing that may have given them a different perspective on vacation from the start.

They are also the first generation that has had Internet and email as a fixture of their work life from day one. These digital natives view and use technology differently than older generations. A 2015 Workfront survey revealed that 52 percent of Millennials said answering a work email during dinner was acceptable, compared to just 22 percent of Boomers.<sup>8</sup> When it comes to vacation, Millennials are more likely to stay plugged in, and less likely to benefit from time off. Alamo Rent A Car found that 34 percent of Millennials said they worked every day of their vacations and felt less productive upon return.

## ON THE OUTS WITH THE OUT OF OFFICE

Ironically, the most connected generation ever is more likely to perceive a culture of silence surrounding vacation in the workplace. Where 65 percent of the overall audience reported their company culture says nothing or sends discouraging or mixed messages about taking time off, seven in ten (70%) Millennials say the same. Though a smaller segment, twice as many Millennials (16%) say they feel disapproval from management about taking vacation than their Boomer colleagues (8%).

Feelings of uncertainty and disapproval are translating to more forfeited vacation time—days that cannot be rolled over, banked for later use, or cashed out. **Millennials are the most likely generation to forfeit time off, even though they earn the least amount of vacation days.** Twenty-four percent of Millennials either forfeited days or do not even know if they forfeited days last year, compared to just 19 percent of Generation X and 17 percent of Boomers. The forfeited days are made worse given that the majority of Millennials (37%) earn 10 vacation days or less, compared to just 20 percent of Generation X and 18 percent of Boomers.

**The forfeited time can be explained by the elevated levels of fear and guilt stopping Millennials from taking their time off.** When presented with ten challenges to taking time off, they are more likely to find all ten more problematic than other generations.

In many ways they are not that different than older generations—like Generation X and Boomers, Millennials' greatest fear is the mountain of work they would return to after taking time off. They are particularly close to Generation X in feeling that no one else can do the job (34% of Millennials, compared to 31% of Generation X) and that taking time off is harder as you grow in a company (33%, compared to 30%).

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**23% of Millennials don't take time off because they are afraid of what their boss might think, compared to just 10% of Boomers with the same fear.**

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**But where Millennials' differences really come through are in the reasons closely associated with lingering economic fears.** Compared to Boomers, they are at least twice as likely to say they are afraid to lose their job (20%, compared to 9%); that they are afraid of what the boss might think (23%, compared to 10%); that they want to show complete dedication (30%, compared to 15%); and that they do not want to be seen as replaceable (27%, compared to 11%). While not as stark as the differences with Boomers, Millennials are also more likely than Generation X to be held back from taking vacation due to these fears.

Ten Challenges to Taking Time Off	Overall	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers
Return to a mountain of work.	37%	41%	38%	33%
No one else can do the job.	30%	34%	31%	26%
I cannot financially afford a vacation.	30%	36%	32%	24%
Taking time off harder as you grow in the company.	28%	33%	30%	23%
<b>Want to show complete dedication.</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>Don't want to be seen as replaceable.</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Feel guilty.</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>Don't want to lose consideration for raise or promotion.</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>9%</b>
Afraid of what boss might think.	16%	23%	15%	10%
Afraid I would lose my job.	14%	20%	14%	9%

Greater support from management would alleviate Millennials' fears about taking vacation. Three in ten (30%) Millennials call the boss the most powerful influencer over their time, beating out the employee's family by 10 percentage points. Boomers are much less prone to this thinking, with just 20 percent saying the boss is the most powerful influencer. Boomers place family at the top of their influencer list, with 25 percent saying their families are the most powerful. Health is also important to Boomers, with 21 percent saying their doctor is the most powerful influencer, compared to just 13 percent of Millennials.

## THE FUTURE OF THE WORKFORCE

The future of the workforce will be largely shaped by the Millennial generation. Already the [largest segment of the workforce](#), Millennials will only continue to gain influence in the workplace.<sup>9</sup>

**Millennials are more likely to say employees should shape company culture.** [Kronos' Employee Engagement Lifecycle Series study](#) found that four in ten Millennials felt that employees should define work culture, somewhat more than the 29 percent of overall respondents, and far more than the 13 percent of managers, and 9 percent of HR professionals who said the same.<sup>10</sup>

Though just more than a quarter (28%) are in management roles now, that number will undoubtedly grow with time.

The good news for Millennials' direct reports is that these young managers believe in the benefits of time off. On the more extreme "very convincing," Millennials were just as likely or more likely than average to say that when their employees take time off they are less stressed and prone to burnout (56%, compared to 53%); that employees are recharged and more productive (50%, compared to 47%); and that employees are more willing to put in the long hours when necessary (39%, compared to 34%).

**The acknowledgement of the benefits of time off would be more meaningful if Millennials were practicing what they claim to believe. But with more forfeited time and greater susceptibility to pressures that stop them from taking time off, their actions speak loudly.** Millennial managers also admit to being under a lot of pressure—and their direct reports feel it. Nearly half (47%) of Millennial managers said that company pressure prevents them from approving time off requests for their teams, compared to just 34 percent of Generation X and 37 percent of Boomers who feel the same pressure.



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# CONCLUSION

**The work martyr mindset is fundamentally flawed and poisonous to company cultures.** The negative results of such thinking should be presented to work martyrs so that they may reconsider their approach to time off.

America's vacation future hinges on its youngest professional generation. Millennials and work martyrs must reconsider their thinking. But it will take good managers who are willing to work as change agents in order to reap the business benefits of time off: more engaged employees, an improved team environment, and greater productivity, to name just a few. The alternative is to settle for higher stress levels and worker unhappiness, a damaging combination that will hinder any company's success.

**The choice is simple—it just needs to be made.**

## ENDNOTES

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