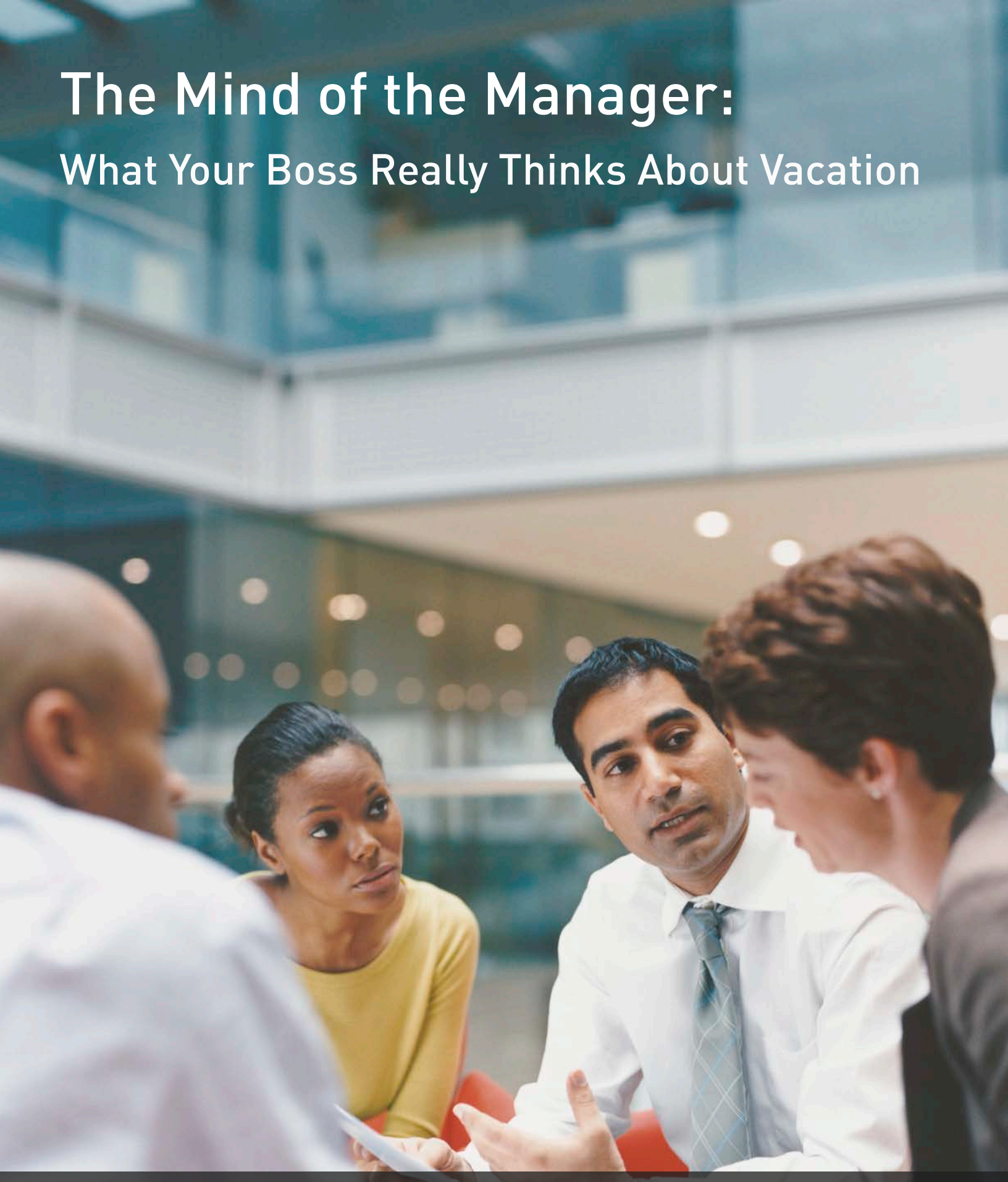# The Mind of the Manager:
What Your Boss Really Thinks About Vacation

PR⊙JECT:TIME OFF

Introduction

More than 100 billion business emails are sent every day.[1] No email communication is more fraught with tension than the vacation request. Is the timing right? Is the tone appropriate? Is this a good enough reason? Does the reason matter? Employees would have to be mind readers to get it exactly right. But what if they could read their bosses' minds?

Managers are much more supportive of time off than America's 429 million unused vacation days would suggest. As the research shows, they understand and support the benefits of taking time to refresh, but the utter lack of communication has helped define an always-on, 24/7 work culture that is burning us out, affecting our well-being, hurting our relationships, and damaging our businesses and economy.

"The Mind of the Manager: What Your Boss Really Thinks About Vacation" uses results from a Project: Time Off survey conducted by Heart + Mind Strategies of 500 managers across the United States to provide employees with the opportunity to peek inside the minds of their bosses and rethink how they use vacation time.

The Communications Disconnect

There's only one thing employees really need to know when it comes to how their bosses view vacation time: it's important and has the ability to make you a happier, more productive colleague. The problem? Those thoughts never leave the manager's head.

Here are the facts: managers believe that using vacation time is important to maintaining team energy levels (80% report this feeling describes them "perfectly" or "very well"); giving employees better attitudes (74%); and making employees more productive (67%). Sixty-nine percent even feel that their interactions with employees encourage taking time off.

But—and there's always a "but"—employees aren't getting the same message. In Project: Time Off's Overwhelmed America Study, 67 percent of employees said they heard either nothing, mixed messages, or negative messages about taking vacation time.[2]

"When people are uncertain about how many days it's okay to take off, you'll see curious things happen," Mathias Meyer of Travis CI wrote in a blog post on Paper Planes. "It's a race to the bottom instead of a race towards a well rested and happy team."[3]

The company isn't talking much either. Thirty-nine percent of managers reported that their organization communicated the importance of using vacation time never or once a year or less.

There are exceptions. Amy Fox, president and CEO of Accelerated Business Results, shared her perspective with the Association for Talent Development on communicating with employees about vacation time. "Having specific parameters and guidelines around vacation and time off in your employee handbook is a great leadership tool. But all rules require action. It boils down to managers' communication with employees and sharing expectations. If I honor that with my employees, I know they will work their tails off and do it in return for me."[4]

> " Martyrdom is simply bad for business. "
>
> - Donna Levin,
> Co-Founder of Care.com

TOP INFLUENCERS OVER EMPLOYEE VACATION, ACCORDING TO MANAGERS

Managers (me): 22%


Family: 21%

HR Department: 12%

Do as I Don't Say, Not as I Do

Beyond hearing about the importance of vacation time, employees aren't seeing their managers lead by example. More than half (53%) percent of managers admit that they set a good example for using vacation only somewhat well (34%), not very well (14%), or not at all (5%).

"Martyrdom is simply bad for business," Donna Levin, Care.com Co-Founder and Vice President of Policy, Corporate Social Responsiblity, and Global Workplace Solutions, wrote for Fast Company. She went on to say, "Company culture is established from the top down, and the management team needs to model the work-life fit they want for their employees. If leadership doesn't value time away from the office enough to take it themselves, why would an employee feel empowered to take advantage of their own [paid time off]?"[5]

Stayful CEO Cheryl Rosner agrees. "It's super important to model the behavior you want to see, and we want people to get out and take their time off," Rosner told Fortune. "We need to help people shift perspective. It's not a perk."[6]

The lack of example becomes even more critical, as managers reported that they had the greatest influence when it comes to information about why employees should be using more vacation time—even slightly more than the employees' own families.
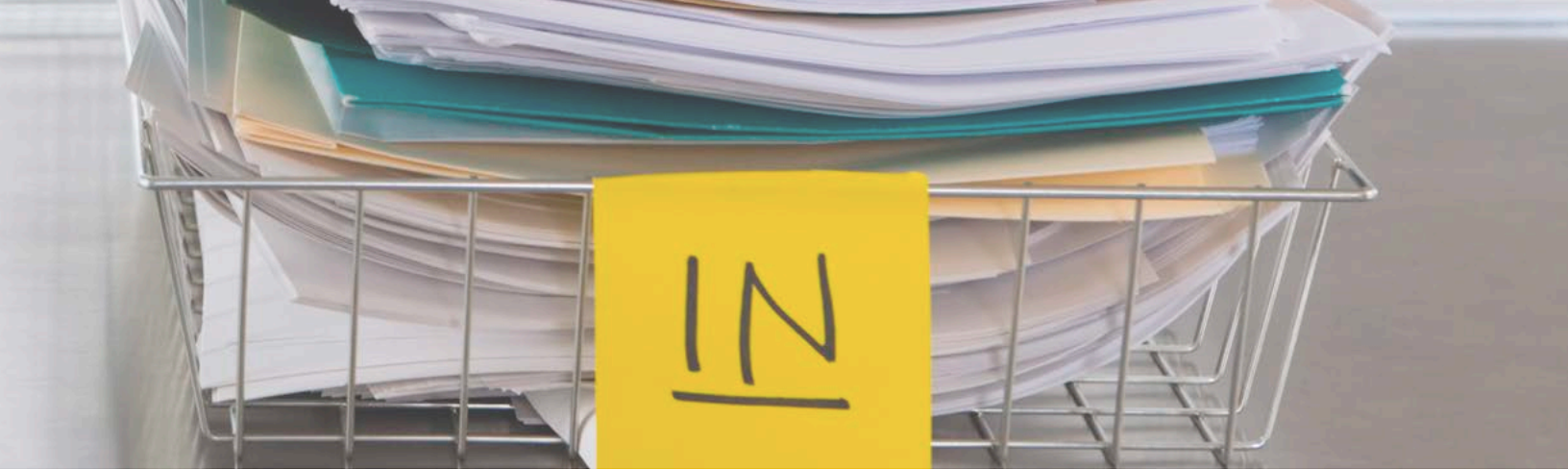
Vacation Benefits from a Manager's Point of View

Your boss wants you to be happy—really! Why? Because managers associate personal happiness with productivity.

In fact, managers ranked increased personal happiness (31%) first when asked what benefit derived from vacation time would be most effective at motivating managers to talk to their employees about using more time, followed by productivity (21%), and improved mental health (16%).

Simply put, happiness drives productivity. Zac Carman, CEO of ConsumerAffairs, offers employees a stipend of up to $1,000 if they take five consecutive days off. "We do it not only because we want to be the coolest, hippest place to work, but because we find it increases productivity," Carman told Tulsa World. "This is especially true when you can be gone for a week at a time, turn off your phone and quit thinking about work."[7]

It's not just the employee's personal happiness—it's also the team's. Managers are very focused on ensuring an energized, cooperative team. The single most important reason managers cite as why employees should use vacation time is to allow them to recharge and re-energize the team.

When asked the single most important benefit to the organization, managers put a more positive work environment as number one (22%). Employees feeling more valued (20%) and increased productivity (19%) followed closely behind.

TOP REASONS FOR
EMPLOYEES TO USE
VACATION TIME

Recharged and
energized team: 31%

Give employees
family time: 21%

Enable them to be
more relaxed: 13%

> ❝ **Renewed energy and positivity is contagious and can help the entire team be more productive.** ❞
>
> -Lisa Evans, Fast Company

Fast Company's Lisa Evans referenced a 2011 Intuit Study that showed 82% of small business owners who took a vacation experienced an increase in job performance upon returning to work. She wrote, "That renewed energy and positivity is contagious and can help the entire team be more productive."[8]

Why Your Request May Be Denied

Denying vacation requests is not something managers do lightly. They believe in the importance of time off and report that feeling a sense of accomplishment is the most important value they derive from approving vacation requests.

Timing is everything—and requesting vacation during the busiest season of the year isn't likely to win anyone employee of the month. Forty-three percent of managers acknowledge that there are certain times of the year where they cannot allow employees to take time off.

Coordinating with coworkers is also important, as 31 percent of managers admit they worry about the optics of having too many employees on vacation. And while it is a smaller group, more than a quarter (27%) of managers say the pressure they receive from above prevents them from approving vacation requests.

In fact, 76% of managers surveyed expressed interest in creating organizational policies that protect employees from negative actions resulting from using their time off.

Appetite for Policy Change

In short, there isn't an appetite for policy change. Most managers (87%) indicate that they like their current policy and, if given the opportunity to make a change, 78% still want to keep it as-is.

For those who are open to a policy change, it might be one of the least costly benefits a company can alter. "Changing a company's benefits package can be a lengthy, challenging, and expensive process; re-evaluating the vacation policy is fairly straightforward in comparison," said Bill Driscoll, district president with Accountemps. "Offering additional vacation time shows employees you're committed to helping them achieve greater work-life balance."[9]

The simplest opportunity is to increase manager to employee discussion about vacation time. Managers tend to overestimate their efforts at promoting the importance of taking time off, with 69 percent reporting that they encourage employees to take vacation, a disconnect from employees who see their managers' encouragement as neutral.

Dan Finnigan, president and CEO of Jobvite, wrote in Inc.com, "The best workplaces communicate to their employees that vacations are well-deserved respites—rewards for being productive contributors."[10]

Beyond the Manager—What Company Leadership Should Understand

Paid time off is more than a perk. It can be a training program, a retention tool, and the most wanted benefit companies can offer.

Vacation matters to employees. In fact, in a survey conducted by Accountemps of chief financial officers (CFOs) and employees, there was a disconnect between what the C-suite thought was at the top of employee benefit wish lists and what employees actually wanted. CFOs placed "better benefits, such as an enhanced healthcare plan" at the top by a large margin, but employees placed "more vacation days" as their most wanted benefit.[11]

Plan for time off well in advance

Be conscious of your busy season

Get as much done in advance as possible

Coordinate with coworkers

Support teammates when it's their turn for time off

For some enlightened companies, vacation is an opportunity for employees to learn new skills and cross-train. Motley Fool offers a "Fool's Errand," a monthly drawing that sends an employee on a two-week vacation that must be taken within the month. Even better, the winner gets $1,000 to help facilitate the time off.[12]

But this perk is more than just fun, it's an opportunity for other employees to learn and grow. "Typically an unplanned absence is a result of something unpleasant like illness, and only then the team learns where the single points of failure are," Kara Chambers, vice president of people insights at Motley Fool, wrote on the company's blog. "This way Fools can get a much needed and enjoyable break, while we as a company can make sure everyone is cross-trained in the event someone on our team needs to take time off unexpectedly."

Time off can also benefit the manager. Not only are employees afforded the opportunity to grow with new responsibilities, vacation gives the manager a chance to regain perspective. "A true leader steps back, trusts his or her people, and allows them to succeed," Jim Moffatt, chairman and CEO of Deloitte Consulting LLP, wrote for Forbes. "By taking a break from the day-to-day operations, not only was I spending some much-needed time with my family, but also I was able to focus on the bigger picture of where we were and where our business was heading."[14]

"When a team leader takes a vacation, it gives everyone else the opportunity to navigate day-to-day duties and challenges with full responsibility," wrote Nada Aldahleh, co-founder and CEO of Sandglaz. "This makes your team more independent and stronger."[15]

In addition to helping the team, vacation can be part of creating a company culture that attracts—and retains—talent.

"One of our goals as a company is to be the best place to work," Eric Jenkins, chief operating officer of ConsumerAffairs, told USA Today. "So we've looked for innovative ways to create a culture and environment that's going to attract high-performing individuals."[16]
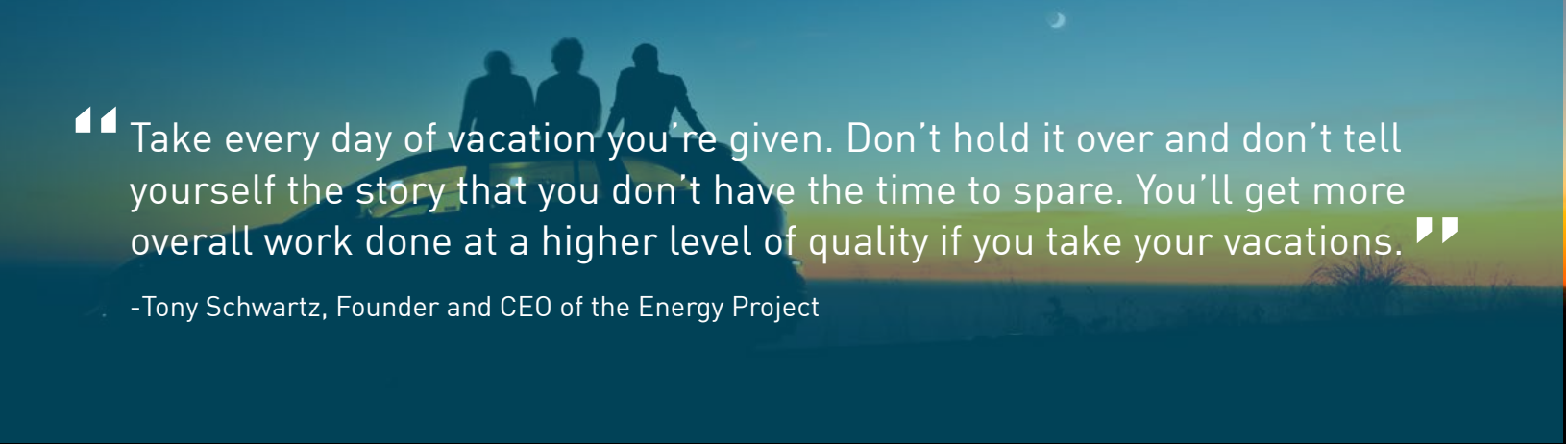
Vacation Responsibly

Creating a work environment supportive of vacation time doesn't happen purely on paper. The behavior of employees—managers or not—shape the culture around time off.

While most employees, particularly senior leaders, are taking the right steps leading up to and during their vacation time, there are still plenty of employees who may be sabotaging their own company culture. Project: Time Off's "Overwhelmed America" report found that many employees are not taking the basic steps that make taking vacation simpler:[17]

- Seventy percent of people coordinate with their coworkers to ensure their responsibilities are covered while they are away— but that leaves 30% of employees who are not. Senior business leaders are decidedly better at coordination, with 82% reporting they take steps to ensure their responsibilities are covered when on vacation.
- Sixty-three percent of employees report that their coworkers encourage each other to take vacation time. In this case, senior business leaders are not much better, with just 64% indicating they are encouraging to their coworkers about taking time off.
- Just 60% of employees send a reminder of when they will be gone in advance of taking vacation. Senior business leaders perform better here, with 72% sending a reminder.
- Fully 77% of employees report that they would be more likely to take more time off if their coworkers supported their vacations, and knew they would be supported when they take time off.

Care.com's Levin encourages employees and managers to plan together. "Have employees list out their daily tasks and deliverables, and encourage their fill-in to assume some of those responsibilities beforehand to establish a routine both are comfortable with," Levin recommends. "Knowing that the team's taking care of business is crucial for employees to completely separate from work during their time away.

> "Take every day of vacation you're given. Don't hold it over and don't tell yourself the story that you don't have the time to spare. You'll get more overall work done at a higher level of quality if you take your vacations."
>
> -Tony Schwartz, Founder and CEO of the Energy Project
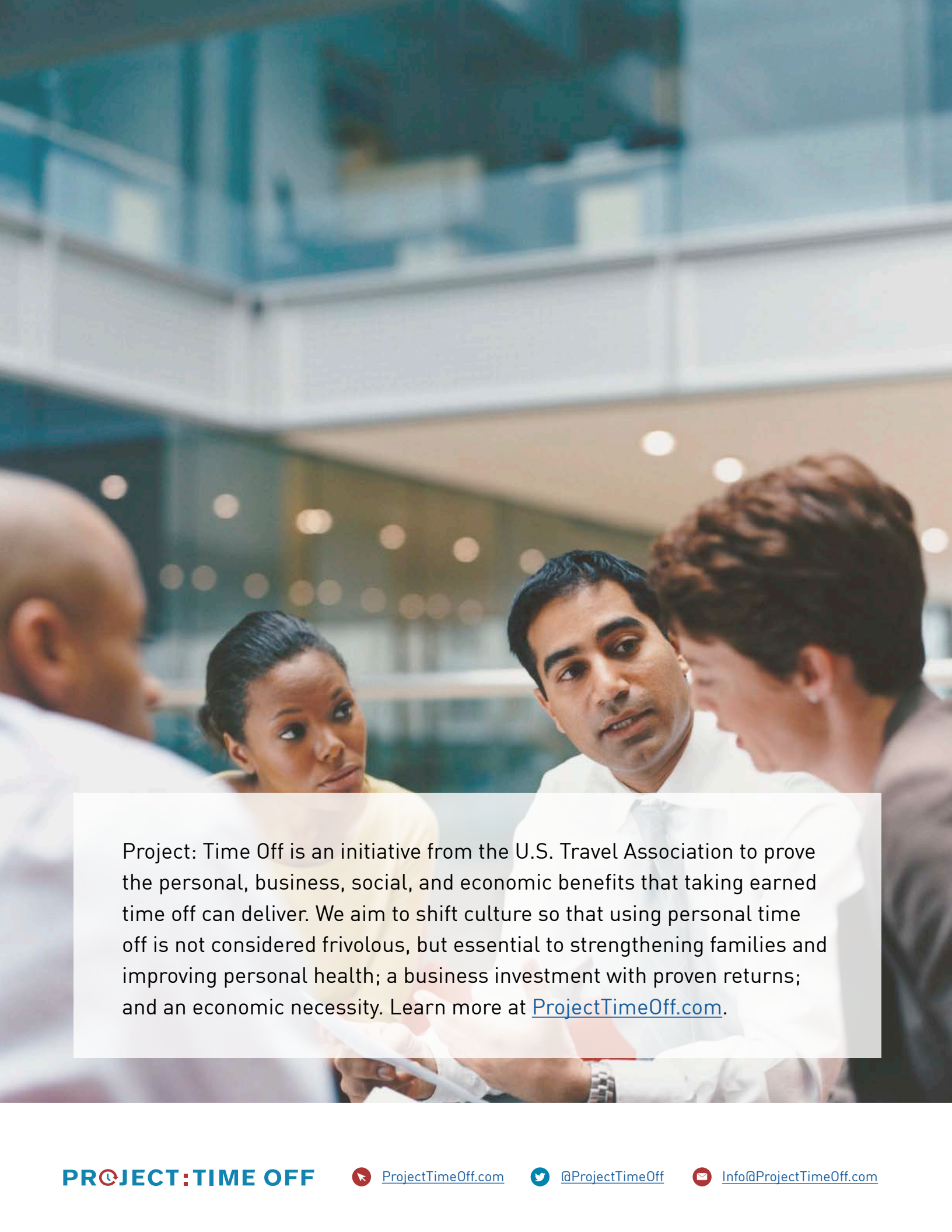
Conclusion

Change is needed when a majority (58%) of American employees believe that America's work culture stresses productivity over personal balance. Vacation is not something to be feared; it is a solution for more productive employees, a better team environment, and higher overall performance.

The business case is clear. But from the top levels of company leadership to the first-year manager, the importance needs to be communicated to employees, exemplified by every member of the team, and made an integral part of organizational culture.

"Take every day of vacation you're given," Tony Schwarz, founder and CEO of the Energy Project, advised in Harvard Business Review. "Don't hold it over and don't tell yourself the story that you don't have the time to spare. You'll get more overall work done at a higher level of quality if you take your vacations."[18]

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Project: Time Off is an initiative from the U.S. Travel Association to prove the personal, business, social, and economic benefits that taking earned time off can deliver. We aim to shift culture so that using personal time off is not considered frivolous, but essential to strengthening families and improving personal health; a business investment with proven returns; and an economic necessity. Learn more at ProjectTimeOff.com.