



THE WORK MARTYR'S AFFAIR

How America's Lost Week Quietly Threatens Our Relationships

PROJECT:TIME OFF



INTRODUCTION

A curious thing has happened in America. In less than 15 years, U.S. workers have lost a week of vacation time. For decades, Americans used more than 20 vacation days. But as Project: Time Off’s [“All Work No Pay”](#) study revealed, today, they have hit an all-time low, taking just 16 days off each year.

America’s Lost Week takes a toll in myriad ways, some obvious—work stress, burnout—and some less so. Work martyr syndrome is quietly creeping into employees’ home lives, creating a major divide between the people American workers want to be and the people they are.

Project: Time Off’s study, “The Work Martyr’s Affair: How America’s Lost Week Quietly Threatens Our Relationships,” examines the balance in workers’ professional and personal lives, and suggests a solution for stronger relationships—one which may be sitting ignored in employee handbooks.

The report also warns that America’s Lost Week is harming relationships with the people who matter most and, what’s worse, the damage may be done before it’s realized.

METHODOLOGY

GfK Public Affairs conducted a survey of 1,214 adults living in U.S. households where someone receives paid time off, is in a relationship with a significant other, and/or has children. GfK fielded the survey from April 7-16, 2015 using its [KnowledgePanel®](#), a large-scale online panel based on a representative random sample of the US population.

To further explore the issue, GfK interviewed noted family and couples experts. Those experts include:

[Dr. Lotte Baily](#)n: Baily is a published author and professor emerita at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Baily holds a B.A. in mathematics from Swarthmore College as well as an M.A. and a Ph.D. in social psychology from Harvard/Radcliffe. She is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Association for Psychological Science.

[Dr. Gilda Carle](#): Carle is a professor emerita at New York's Mercy College. A licensed educator, Carle holds a Ph.D. in educational leadership from New York University, with a concentration in psychology, sociology, and social psychology. She is also the president of Country Cures, a non-profit organization that trains returning veterans and their families to heal their relationships.

[Michael Gurian](#): Gurian is a marriage and family counselor in private practice, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Lessons of Lifelong Intimacy* and the co-founder of [The Gurian Institute](#), a research and training organization that helps children thrive in school and in life. Gurian has served on the faculty of Gonzaga University, Eastern Washington University, and Ankara University.



STRESS DOESN'T HAVE BOUNDARIES

Work-life balance does not imply a total separation of the two. Survey respondents made it clear that their work stresses do not stay at the office, and their home stresses are not left at their front doors. Nearly half of workers with time off (47%) say they bring work stress home and a third (32%) admit to bringing home stress to work.

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Gurian prefers to think not of work-life balance, but blending, as the two are inextricably linked. “This is a stress issue,” he said. “Stress has a negative effect on workplace productivity and, of course, has a negative effect on family.”

Carle agrees that stress—particularly from the fear of losing one’s job—is a huge factor in work-life balance. “The fear that is permeating the American workers who I have seen is pretty overwhelming,” Carle said. “But they don’t have the same fear of losing their spouse or their loved one. Isn’t that interesting?”

WHEN UNDERSTANDING TURNS TO ANGER

American workers expect their families to understand when they have to prioritize work—and they universally do. A commanding 96 percent report that their families understand when work infringes on family time.

But understanding is one thing, liking it is another matter. The survey revealed that understanding doesn’t necessarily mean that partners are happy about work’s intrusions. More than one-in-three (36%) argue about the time needed for work versus the amount of quality time needed for each another. These disagreements aren’t always small arguments that quickly dissipate. In 36 percent of cases, conflict between couples lasts a day or more.

“The survey pointed out that arguments can go on for longer than a day and I started to laugh—it can go on for much longer than that,” said Carle. “If these issues are not discussed—and a lot of times, they aren’t—then resentment just builds.”

Carle also said that repeatedly choosing to work instead of choosing time with partners often goes unchecked until it's too late—and this lack of balance begins to affect our relationships. “Nobody talks about it until they realize that suddenly they feel that something is missing—that this *thing* is missing.”

From the employee's perspective, a third (32%) of workers feel that the time they spend working is for the people they care about—and that their partners don't always appreciate that fact.

Still, Carle said she sees workers rationalizing overwork, saying that their partners “know it's for them.” “Oh really?” Carle questions. “A lot of this thinking could be cleared up before the therapist's office if couples would only talk about it.”

WHO WE WANT TO BE...AND WHO WE ARE

American workers don't consider themselves “live to work” types. Nearly four-in-five (78%) of the workers surveyed say others would describe them as “work to live” personalities. But the reality of how they spend their time suggests they aren't being honest with themselves.

“There is an obvious disconnect with what people say they want from life and what they actually do,” said Bailyn. “You see a conflicting identity. You're supposed to be the good family person, but also this ideal worker.”

They know what's at stake. Vast majorities of respondents believe that people who do not take time off are losing out on quality time with their significant other (85%), their children (85%), and themselves (81%). Still, four-in-ten workers (40%) leave time on the table each year—a statistic that has been consistently upheld in three Project: Time Off research studies, including February 2014's [“Assessment of Paid Time Off”](#) and August 2014's [“Overwhelmed America.”](#)

Despite having time off available, the average person misses 3.3 events a year. Workers are missing out on things like vacations (24%), family in town visiting (22%), and other major life events.

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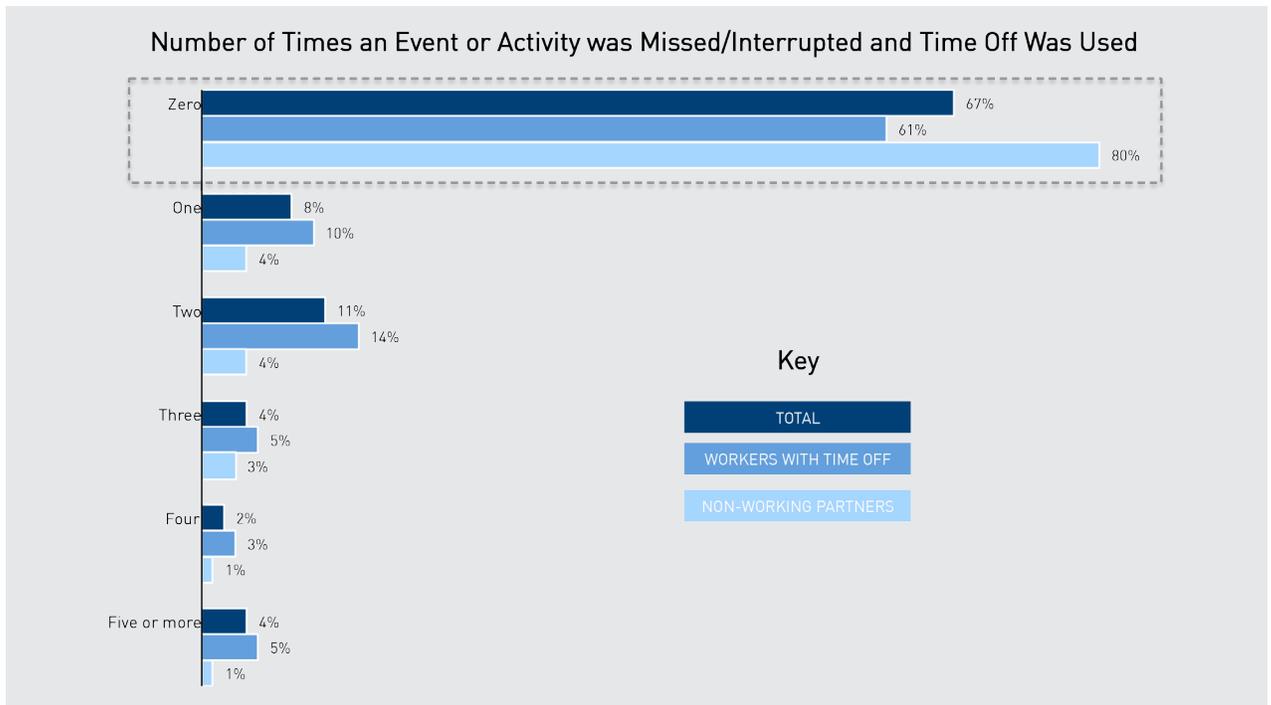
Ten percent of respondents confessed that work intruded on a funeral in the last year.

However, the number one missed event is a child’s activity, like a sports game or awards ceremony. Thirty-five percent of workers admitted they have chosen to work instead of attending a planned event for their children.

“I think the thing that people are most sad about later is that it took them away from their kids,” said Gurian. “Twenty years later when they look back, they’re really sad about not having that time with their kids.”

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES

Using earned time off to protect the events that matter significantly reduces the chance that employees will miss out due to work. Two-thirds (67%) of respondents said they never missed an event in the past year when vacation time was used.



Dedicating time off to protect important events is also important to partners. But eight-in-ten (80%) non-working partners do not see their significant others trying to protect these events or activities with time off.

The data suggests time off is an easy solution to avoid missing events. An overwhelming majority (85%) of workers believe they have the ability to take one more day of vacation time. Almost three-in-four (72%) indicated that they are likely to take at least one more day and spend it with their significant other or children.

“One day is going to have a positive impact,” Gurian said. “I can’t exaggerate that and say that one day is going to solve things, but it should have a positive impact.”

Gurian also said that the patterns are critical to our relationships. “I find that families are really understanding of workplace emergencies. The resentment comes in when there isn’t an emergency or it could wait until tomorrow.”

When work “emergencies” become regular patterns, significant others and children can become resentful. Bailyn agrees that work interruptions create tension, not immediately but over time, and that workers need to be honest about why they allow those interruptions. “It is classic for people who work to say, ‘I’m doing it for the family,’ and there are many cases where that is true,” Bailyn said. “But for those working 60, 70, 80 hours a week, saying they’re doing it for the family is a way of excusing the overwork.”

Workers need to stop making excuses, because, as Carle clarified, it doesn’t have to be difficult to make a change. “Whether balance for you is taking time off for a long time, going to a movie, or taking your kid to the zoo, no matter what you’re doing or who you are, you must break your usual pattern.”

Gurian confirmed that there is a way to change the pattern and improve relationships by making time off “sacred and ritualized.” He asserted that family vacations “could be life changing.”

Once an overworked person gets to the point on vacation that he or she starts engaging more with loved ones, it “feeds the soul of this very hard worker.”

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FAMILY AND WORK LIVES CANNOT BE TREATED SEPARATELY

A plurality of survey respondents (43%) reported dedicating less than 20 hours a week to quality family time. Just 19 percent dedicate more than 40 hours a week to quality family time.

Bailyn said that with quantity comes quality—that it takes a quantity of time for quality interactions to emerge. “Particularly with young children, the best relationships come when there’s enough quantity.”

Vacation, according to Bailyn, creates ideal conditions for better relationships. “Time off would allow much more time for good relationships to emerge under conditions that are not highly stressed, so you’re creating the time to build the family unit,” Bailyn said. “Vacation provides the conditions where organically these quality interactions can emerge, which are the core of a good relationship.”

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When asked to select their top three components of a good life that are most important to them personally, workers overwhelmingly (73%) said that spending time with family is the most important, though financial security is also significant, with almost half (49%) of workers ranking it as one of the most important elements. This result did not surprise Gurian, “Family and work are tied together. Workers can’t enjoy their family unless they feel secure. They are completely united.”

When asked to grade themselves on top priorities, workers are not grading themselves on a curve. Just over a quarter (27%) of those with a significant other gave themselves an “A” on spending time with their partner. Nearly the same amount (28%) of those with children gave themselves an “A” on spending time with their children. Highest marks came for providing for the family by earning a paycheck—43% of workers gave themselves a top grade, the best score in any category.

Gurian explained that the low grades are evidence of how torn workers are. “Their hearts go toward their families and toward the beauty and grace of being a family person,” said Gurian. “But the whole self has to go toward earning this paycheck and creating security, so they feel torn apart.”

PARTNERS PRIORITIZE TIME OVER MONEY

Workers’ partners recognize the importance of financial security, but prioritize time over money. Where almost two-thirds (63%) of workers select providing for their families by earning a paycheck as their first or second priority, just 24% of non-working partners placed their working partners’ paychecks as a top priority. For non-working partners, far outweighing paychecks were spending quality time with their partners (90% indicated this was a top priority) and spending time with children (96%).

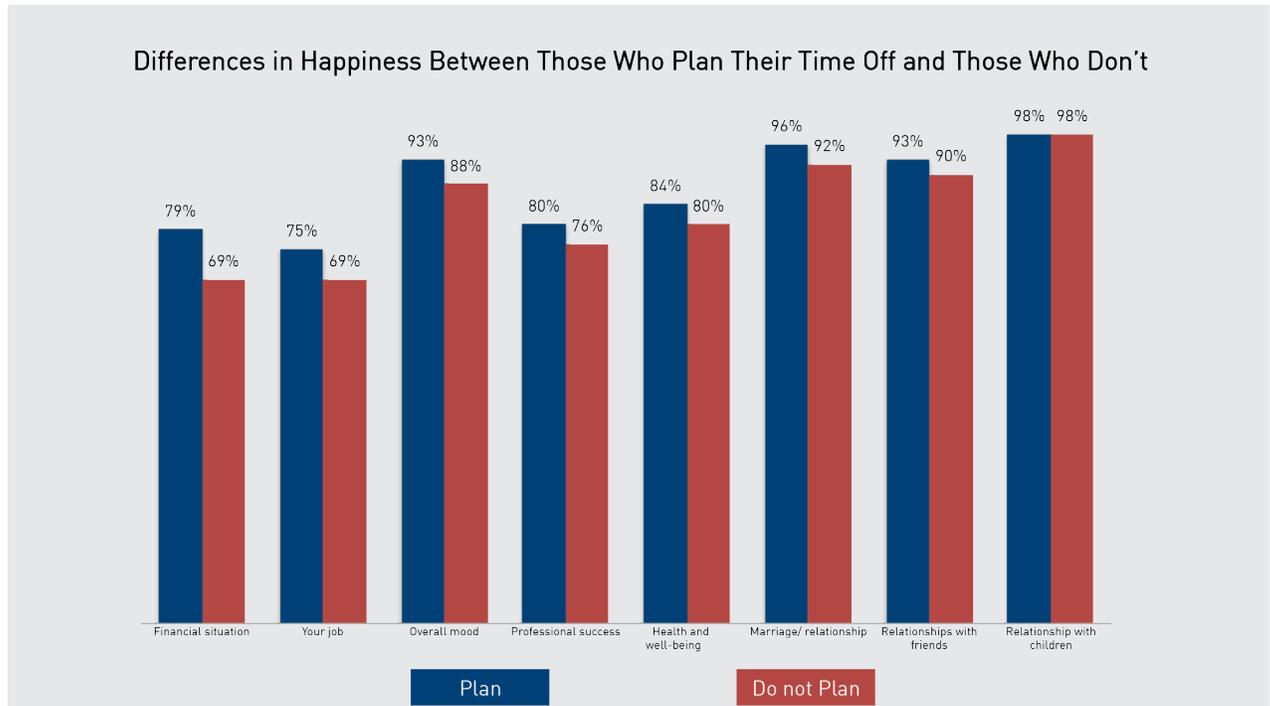
The critical question, according to Carle, is when does American society’s “more, more, more” thinking become enough? “People often say to me that they never knew their father or mother because he or she was always working—that they had everything they wanted, but they didn’t know their parent.”

Workers need to take responsibility for making vacation time—and the people it’s spent with—a priority. While a positive workplace vacation culture, supportive management, and other factors are important in motivating employees to use their time off, the biggest influencer is the individual employee. Of those who take all their time off, 66% hold themselves accountable for using that time. When looking at those who take little to none of their time off, just 49% do.

Gurian noted that the benefits of taking initiative and prioritizing time off can make workers better at home and in the office, “To support that professional drive, you have to find ways to decrease stress. Time off decreases your own personal stress and it will decrease the stress on your family.”

PLANNING LEADS TO HAPPINESS

Although differences in levels of happiness were subtle, it is clear that planning makes people happier. Just over half (54%) of all households surveyed set aside time to plan out the use of paid time off for the year. Households that plan are happier in almost every category measured in the survey. In fact, the only category that they weren't happier was relationships with their children, where planners and non-planners were equally satisfied.



Interestingly, the two categories where planners reported the greatest differences in happiness from non-planners were with their personal financial situations (79% of planners reported being happy, compared to 69% of non-planners) and their jobs (75% to 69%).

Beyond the numbers, there are benefits that cannot be measured quantitatively. “There’s a hidden advantage to planning,” said Carle. “When you are planning, you are also co-mingling, which defines you as a team. The team becomes much stronger than the individual by sharing a common goal, coming together, and communicating. As a team, we are more likely to fight for our relationship.”

Bailyn found the association between planning and happiness interesting, noting that it could be the planning that created the positive outcomes, or it could be that people who are already happy are more likely to sit down and plan. Regardless, she says, “It shows there is a feeling of togetherness in the family structure, particularly if the children, if they are old enough, are involved in the planning. It either creates or reflects a well-working family structure.”

CONCLUSION

The vacation decline in the last 15 years is a problem affecting Americans’ health and wellness, professional productivity and success, and personal happiness and relationships. It is the latter piece—relationships with those who matter most—that is often considered last, but may be regretted most.

Reversing the decline and recovering America’s Lost Week will benefit not just workers and their families, but employers as well. “Employees go back to work and they have new insights and new ideas,” Gurian noted. “The vacation is actually going to feed the workplace productivity.”

Companies are smart to respect the value of vacation and what it can mean to an employees’ happiness in their jobs. Carle hopes employers start to rewrite the script. She would like to see a scenario where employers prioritize time off by communicating with employees, saying things along the lines of, “We value your service more when you see things through clear, well-rested eyes,” and “this is a family-oriented company and our bottom line depends on your healthy relationships at home.”

But until the script is rewritten and this country’s hard-charging work culture learns to appreciate the necessity of a break, it is up to the work martyrs to change the pattern and help recover America’s Lost Week. Take another day, even two or three, to experience quality time with loved ones. That time to make memories, to be there for the important moments, to show loved ones they are priorities will never be regretted.

“The vacation is actually going to fuel the workplace productivity.”

A person is seen from behind, relaxing in a white hammock. The hammock is strung between two points, and the person is wearing a white shirt. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting with trees or bushes. The overall mood is peaceful and leisurely.

Project: Time Off is an initiative supported by the U.S. Travel Association to prove the personal, business, social, and economic benefits that taking earned time off can deliver. We aim to reclaim America's lost week and 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.