



Are vacations meaningful when employees stay connected to the office?

Vacations are an expensive benefit, an investment in human capital and important to employee well being and productivity. It is designed to give employees a break from the work routine, gain perspective, give them a new sense of purpose, recharge their batteries and let them return to work rested and focused.

Yet, in a recent HR Magazine article written by Martha Frase-Blunt, she points to a study released last year by Andersen Consulting (now Accenture) in which they found that 60% of office workers took some piece of mobile technology on vacation. Cell phones at 56% topped the list, followed by laptops 16% and pagers 13 %. Of those who took a cell phone, 61% left the number with someone at work and more than half of those received a work related call while on vacation. The study also showed that vacationing workers often initiated office contact particularly checking voice mail.

While there are many exemplary companies who have a culture that shows respect for privacy, free time, and encourage days off, it appears that employees in today's world tend not to make a clean break when it comes to vacation.

Here are some suggestions for discouraging working vacations:

- Discuss the importance of vacation one-on-one, in staff meetings and in company communications, i.e., newsletters, new employee orientation programs, etc
- Stress to employees that e-mail accessibility is not necessary. Leave a phone number, if necessary, since co-workers and managers will be less likely to disturb a vacationing employee by phone, than through e-mail.
- Plan in advance for accumulating workloads and delegation.
- Tell managers to be role models and take vacations without contacting the office.
- Establish an explicit company policy for e-mail/voice mail use during vacations. Let vacationing employees know they are not expected to respond to messages.
- If employees seem unwilling or unable to disconnect from workplace problems, such as time management, stress or supervisory pressure, and take appropriate steps to resolve.



The bottom line is that vacation is an essential component of any employee wellness program. You don't want to burn people out, run the risk of increased disability and health expenses, and possibly higher turnover. Companies should communicate this message so that employees can have a healthy, stress-free vacation without having to feel that they have to stay connected.

Our own research on the subject fully supports this message and the importance of company culture in making certain employees disconnect and have meaningful vacations.

We have also found that Human Resources can play a key role by developing policies to support a culture of leaving "work at work," and for those employees who simply can't do it, provide the coaching to supervisors on how to counsel employees regarding managing their work loads better.