

To Be More Productive At Work, Take A Vacation -- Or A Nap

F forbes.com/sites/delta/2014/06/05/to-be-more-productive-at-work-take-a-vacation-or-a-nap

June 5, 2014

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BRANDVOICE| Paid Program

Jun 5, 2014,12:26pm EDT

By Teresa Meek

If you're thinking about workplace productivity, vacations and naps probably don't come to mind. In fact, they may seem to be the very definition of "counterproductive."

But research shows that taking a break from work—whether it's a noontime snooze or a week or two off—makes you more refreshed and productive when you come back.

The problem is getting Americans to believe it.





Young woman enjoys view of Santorini, Greece (photo credit: iStock)

A new Oxford Economics study reveals that 42 percent of employees don't use all their paid time off, even though vacation time has been shown to reduce stress and lead to better health, productivity and motivation.

If all of us took all of the vacation time that we're entitled to, it would add \$160 billion to the economy in business sales and \$21 billion in tax revenue, the Oxford study says. Although vacationers aren't pumping money into their local economies — buying gas or having pizza delivered — during time off, people spend more overall while on vacation, says Adam Sacks, president of Oxford Economics' tourism economics division. The money they spend also is usually taken out of savings, so it wouldn't be circulating without the vacation.

“There's a real cost for everyone involved,” says Sacks. “Households are leaving money on the table that's part of their compensation. There's also a business cost: Employees are more productive and loyal if they go on vacation and come back refreshed. And there's a macroeconomic cost.”

Though attitudes toward vacation may be conflicted, the impact of unused vacation time on the travel industry, in particular, is clear. If unused leave were converted into vacations, there would be 580 million more days of travel and \$67 billion more in travel spending per year.

It's not just the travel industry that benefits from vacation spending. Many people choose to do home improvements on vacation time, adding money to building supply retailers and wholesalers. Even if they don't take a trip, they are likely to eat out more, Sacks says.

Americans are known for working hard. About 40 percent of workers feel too overwhelmed by workplace demands to take their full time off. Another 13 percent worry that so much work will pile up when they're away that they'll have trouble catching up when they come back, the study said.

Money and scheduling are also concerns. More than 17 percent of those surveyed didn't use vacation time because they felt they couldn't afford to travel. Others cited difficulties in coordinating travel plans with family and friends.

And then there's the perception problem. Even though "work/life balance" is one of our culture's hottest buzzwords, many people worry that they'll be perceived as less dedicated if they take time off.

They may be right.

Both managers and employees questioned in the study sang the praises of vacation time, emphasizing that it refreshes people and increases loyalty. Yet when managers were asked about how they perceived employees who took their full amount of time off, 17 percent described them as less dedicated, 14 percent as less productive and 13 percent as less likely to be promoted.

"The research shows schizophrenia in regards to vacation time," Sacks says. "There's a short-sightedness about the benefits."

Doing the study has made Sacks a vacation convert. "For the first time in 10 years, I'm taking off all the time to which I'm entitled and encouraging the team here to do the same," he says.

Can't swing a vacation? Take a nap

For those who feel they must remain chained to the desk, a nap can provide a refreshing mini-vacation-in-place, experts say.

Although in the past napping was subject to far worse social stigma than vacations, things are changing, says Michael Breus, a clinical psychologist and specialist in sleep issues known as the "sleep doctor."

"A lot of companies are now encouraging naps," says Breus. " Google has nap rooms, and AOL has napping pods. We're changing from 'this person's lazy' to 'this person's sleep-deprived, and they'll be more productive if they can sleep better.'"

Of course, not all companies coddle their employees like the tech industry does. But there's always lunch hour.

Breus says a 25-to-30-minute nap can help. But don't go over 30 minutes unless you're able to do a full 90-minute sleep cycle, he warns, or you'll feel worse when you wake up than you did before napping. And don't nap past 3 p.m. or it will affect your ability to sleep at night. In fact, if you're an insomniac, Breus doesn't recommend napping at all. But if you normally don't have trouble sleeping at night, it's a great idea.

For people who want to nap at work, "I have a trick I call a nap-a-latté," Breus says. He suggests drinking a high-caffeine blend of coffee very quickly, then napping for 25 minutes. When they wake up, the caffeine will kick in and keep them productive for several more hours.

But where can you take an office nap?

"Close the door to the office and use eyeshades or earplugs. Or go to your car. You have a lunch hour, or at least a half-hour, to do what you want."

So if you think you're being more productive by eating lunch at your desk or skipping vacation time — think again.

Taking breaks can help you live a more balanced life, so instead of thinking of them as guilty indulgences, see them for what they truly are: productivity aids.

Teresa Meek is a Seattle-based freelance journalist, writer, and editor whose work has appeared in Newsday, the Miami Herald, the St. Petersburg Times, the Baltimore Sun, and other newspapers and magazines.



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