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TAKE YOUR VACATION!

A MANIFESTO FOR KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

Maura Thomas

I'm struck by how pervasive the erosion of actual vacation has become.

A common refrain I heard during the pandemic that frankly left me speechless was "I'm not taking any vacation time because there's nothing to do besides work."

To me, this illustrates how much we have lost our way with regard to the importance of downtime and its relationship to burnout, physical and emotional well-being, creativity, and motivation.

An overlooked fact about vacation is the return on investment. If you offer your employees paid vacation, the company is making an investment in their opportunity to recharge, refresh, and refocus. If team members are available for work issues when on vacation, they aren't really getting the benefits they're being paid to receive, and the organization is not receiving any return on its investment.

A vacation allows you distance from your work and your everyday life that provides a new perspective, creativity boost, and clarity of thought that gets buried by the fast pace and regularity of your daily routine. With new perspective comes new insight. Think about it this way: you can't get a fresh perspective on something you never step away from.

Studies show that time away from work provides many physical and mental health benefits, including lowering the risk of heart attacks, anxiety, and depression.

And remember: physical and emotional well-being are the grease and the gas that allow the machinery of knowledge work to operate. The most important tool of knowledge work is the brain, and overworking degrades the performance of that tool.

Paradoxically, one of the biggest reasons that people resist taking time off—because they think their work or their career will suffer if they do—has been debunked by a wealth of research over the last decade. Productivity and job satisfaction have been shown to increase with time off, but there is also evidence that people who take vacation time can increase their odds of raises and promotions.

DEFINING TERMS RELATED TO DOWNTIME

Vacation is one of the many words that are critical to explicitly define for your team. Not only vacation but other words related to time other than working time, such as workweek, paid time off, emergencies, and downtime also need to be explicitly defined.

I often tell my leadership clients and their team members that the best thing they can do for their work is work less. This is because the downtime our brains need to be inspired and innovative is usually undervalued in the service of more work. Daydreaming, resting, and doing other things all help restore motivation and creativity.

But with the expansion of working from home and the resulting flextime (which has really become “always on”), most knowledge workers never have the opportunity to fully disconnect. This seriously undermines productivity.

Workweek

First, be explicit about your expectations of your team members. Is it hours or outcomes, or both? For example, if it's a common belief of your employees that fifty-plus-hour weeks are required, does that align with your company values and your leadership beliefs? Contribute to being intentional about the way the organization is being run and whether assumed or unstated beliefs are undermining your culture.

Strictly results-based work environments are less common, harder to implement and manage, and outside the scope of this piece. So if you don't already have one, it will be easier to start with an expectation of hours worked.

So the first term to explicitly define is workweek.

By clearly defining when employees should and shouldn't be routinely available—establishing business hours or expected workweek durations—you'll help them unplug on a regular basis. As a result, they'll be much better able to apply their focused attention at work. Going forward, however, it may be that different employees on the same team keep different work hours from each other.

But just because an employee is on the clock at a certain time doesn't mean that others have to be, and making clear what you expect from a typical workweek is critical (forty-five hours? fifty? fifty-five? Studies show that productivity takes a serious dip after fifty-five hours per week). This should also be considered an average, as work volume often varies.

Vacation/Paid Time Off (PTO)

A vacation renews perspective and clarity of thought that gets buried by the fast pace of everyday life. Research from Project: Time Off actually shows that people who take vacation are more likely to get promoted and get a raise. Not bad.

Unfortunately, American workers are less likely to take vacation than ever before; they believe doing so will negatively affect their reputations. And workers in companies with unlimited vacation policies often feel even more pressure to show their commitment to their jobs.

But for vacation time to truly work its magic—happier employees while away, increased productivity and revenues upon return—the vacation has to be a time of true disconnection from the office. Employees who check email “only” once a day still won’t reap the benefits of a fully unplugged vacation; they’ll lie on the beach anxiously running through all the tasks they aren’t doing at work. There is an important difference between “working while traveling” and “vacation.” The former is work time. The latter most decidedly is not.

Think about it this way: you can't get a fresh perspective on something you never step away from.

Specifically define vacation at your company in a way that allows your team to have a crystal-clear understanding of what you expect when they're away—absolutely nothing. And model a vacation-friendly culture by ensuring the leaders don't head out with instructions like, "I'm off to Aruba with the family, but feel free to call me if you need me." This will undermine your message about the importance of vacation, make your leaders look like hypocrites, and erode the trust in your culture.

Your initial thoughts about this idea might be that it's relevant for some of your staff but not all (like leadership). This is a mistake. The benefits of vacation are true for everyone.

If there are any people in your organization you feel are absolutely critical to operations all the time and can never be out of touch, then you're not empowering and growing your team, you're not cultivating an appropriate succession plan, and the organization is at serious risk if something should prevent that central person from continuing to do their job. And it may be that this person is at greater risk of a burnout-related absence, so the organization is at risk in two ways: it can't function without that person, and that fact creates added stress on that person which increases their risk of being absent.

You'll never know how and if the organization can function without certain individuals if those individuals are never out of touch. Insisting that everyone takes time away and that they don't work when they're gone is a good initial test, and will also support more efficient operations and succession planning moving forward. This is in addition to the increase in creativity, motivation, and inspiration provided by the vacation that will benefit both the individual and the organization.

Emergency

A common refrain is that no one should “bother” someone on vacation “unless it’s an emergency.” Or a staffer departing from the office might say, “Call me if there is an emergency.” You’ll need to define what constitutes an “emergency” in advance, and it may be different for every job role. There are likely some staffers for whom there is no situation that would require their assistance while they are out. Often, defining emergencies is the first step in contingency planning for an organization, which can be a very helpful exercise.

The most important tool of knowledge work is the brain, and overworking degrades the performance of that tool.

LEADERS MUST MODEL HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

The U.S. Travel Association’s State of American Vacation Report from 2018, the last year that data was available, showed that 52 percent of employees forfeited some of their vacation time (sometimes referred to as “work martyrdom”), and the following were the top reasons: fear of looking replaceable, thinking their workload was too heavy for them to take time off, and having no coverage or feeling that no one else can do their job.

What I often hear from my clients is something like, “Why take a vacation at all? What’s the point when I have to check email from the beach just to keep up with the constant stream of work and avoid a massive backlog when I return?”

In other words, workers feel the need to be “always on” to keep up with workplace demands. This was true before the pandemic, but is exponentially more of a problem post-pandemic as we struggle with new work environments that involve much more working from home.

Since team members often struggle with the idea of taking vacation time, leaders need to create a vacation-friendly culture in order to reap the rewards and gain the competitive advantage of a creative, motivated workforce.

When it comes to work-life balance and time-off behavior, leaders wield an outsized influence. If you (or your team members) work incessantly and meet your professional goals, but you’ve done so at the expense of your personal life, your family, or your mental or physical health, is that the kind of “success” you aspire to? And is that what you want for your employees?

Even if you believe that your employees’ single-minded focus on work will help you achieve your department or company goals, I hope I am beginning to convince you this is a misguided perspective. In the short term, your employees are likely not offering their best work, and the detriments will become more apparent over time in employee burnout, turnover, difficulty in recruiting the best people, and the erosion of a positive work culture.

Research done by the Energy Project in conjunction with Harvard Business Review of nineteen thousand employees around the world, resulted in the following conclusion:

When leaders model in their own behavior sustainable ways of working, the effect on those they lead is far bigger. Unfortunately, only 25 percent of our survey respondents told us that their leaders model sustainable work practices. Those leaders' employees are 55 percent more engaged, 72 percent higher in health and well-being, 77 percent more satisfied at work, and 1.15 times more likely to stay at the company. They also reported more than twice the level of trust in their leaders.

For companies to reap the benefits of their investment in vacation time for their employees, the solution has to be more comprehensive than simply adjusting to a new policy like "unlimited" vacation time. It's not sufficient to just state that employees need to take time away from work to restore. Company leaders must do more than talk.

I often hear leaders say that they hold themselves to higher work standards than they expect from their employees. But this too is a misguided perspective. First, you benefit from downtime the same way your team members do. Second, you can't create a vacation-friendly culture if you don't model the behaviors. If you won't take time off for your own good, think about doing it for the well-being of your employees.

Don't neglect the most important resources, which are neither time nor money, but body and mind.

HOW TO SHOW SUPPORT FOR TIME OFF

If you think you have a neutral stance on vacation time by neither vocally encouraging it nor discouraging it, employees are likely to interpret your silence on the topic as meaning you implicitly discourage time off. Likewise, if you reach out by phone or email to an employee who's on vacation, you're communicating an expectation that they should work during their time off—even if you argue that they “should know” that you don't expect a reply until they're back at work.

The benefits of vacation are true for everyone.

Here are other ways that leaders can show support for time off, help employees feel good about taking time to recharge, and reap the benefits of increased productivity and fresh creativity inside the organization:

Engage in a frank discussion with your leadership team about what managers and executives truly believe about time off. Do they discourage, even inadvertently, using vacation days or fully unplugging while on vacation? Some on your leadership team (maybe you?) may need to be convinced of the benefit of sustainable work practices. Once you achieve buy-in around this belief in the well-being of your employees, ensure that your workplace culture, leadership behaviors, and employee assumptions are in line with those beliefs.

Use your own paid time off, and don't check in with the office. This means not reading your email (not just refraining from responding to email) while you're on vacation. You'll get all the restorative benefits of vacation yourself, of course, and you'll be modeling healthy behavior for employees. Encourage everyone, especially the leaders and influencers at your organization, to do the same.

Clearly communicate your support for taking paid time off and being fully away from work during vacations. In today's work environment, failing to encourage vacation time (or failing to support unplugging) is awfully close to actually discouraging vacation time.

Help employees acquire workflow management skills and tools. Most knowledge workers, despite the levels of career success they have achieved, don't have the skills to manage their responsibilities most efficiently. These skills facilitate their ability to set boundaries, better understand priorities and deadlines, and protect their vacation time. Workflow management skills aren't taught in school, and as technology and communication channels proliferate, managing work effectively and efficiently is getting harder and harder.

Implement a policy that a manager going on vacation can choose a trusted staffer to take on all of that manager's responsibilities. This provides incentive to the manager to avoid checking in, because that would be perceived as a lack of confidence in the staffer. Additionally, the staff person has an opportunity to learn, grow, and be groomed for advancement. (One of my clients told me that this "boss for a day/week" was a common practice at IBM in the 1980s, designed to support the "promote from within" culture famous at IBM.)

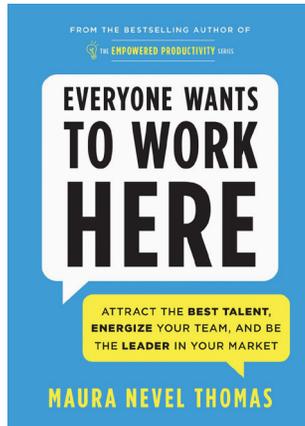
Employee downtime and vacation are important components of company culture, and your company culture deserves thoughtful consideration, especially in light of the post-pandemic changes to work. Productivity ultimately suffers when employees skimp on time off or work while they're on vacation. Give your staff the support, policies, and tools they need to truly get away and recharge.

To be more productive and efficient is to make the best use of the resources available to you. In your quest toward productivity, for yourself or your company, don't neglect the most important resources, which are neither time nor money, but body and mind.

If your pursuit of productivity or success comes at the expense of you or your team's physical or emotional well-being, it is ultimately destined to fail. 🚫



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[Maura Nevel Thomas](#) is an award-winning international speaker and trainer on individual and corporate productivity and work-life balance, and the most widely-cited authority on attention management. She is a TEDx Speaker, founder of Regain Your Time, author of six books, and was named a Top Leadership Speaker in Inc. Magazine. Maura is a frequently-featured expert in major business outlets including Newsweek, Fast Company, and the Wall Street Journal, and is also a regular contributor to both Forbes and Harvard Business Review.

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