

## Taking a holiday ... from vacations

### More Canadians are unable or unwilling to take allotted time off, but those chained to their desks can play it to career advantage

WALLACE IMMEN

May 14, 2008

It's been six long years since David Alleyne-Martin last took a vacation.

"It was in 2002. My wife and I spent two weeks in Jamaica," recalls the Toronto-based director of accounts in Canada for tech company Verisign Inc.

It's not for lack of opportunity that Mr. Alleyne-Martin remains chained to his desk. He is entitled to 21 vacation days a year, and, though he daydreams annually about a road trip with his wife and two boys "to relax and not think about work," alas, he says, "that doesn't look likely to happen this year" - again.

Why does he stay indoors instead of in the sun? "There's no one who can do my job but me," he insists, adding he looks at the lack of time off as the price he has to pay for being on a management track.



#### Print Edition - Section Front



Mr. Alleyne-Martin is not alone in leaving vacation time on the table. Recent polls show that an increasing number of Canadians are unable or unwilling to take their allotted time off.

That has all sorts of repercussions, the experts say. Those who don't take a break risk exposing themselves to burnout that can lead to health problems. Those who can't take a break may feel resentment and envy toward vacationing colleagues who leave the work burdens behind.

With summer vacation scheduling starting to kick into gear, it's wise to start making sure that you will get needed time away. But if you're going to stay chained to your desk, it's also wise to put it to career advantage: Having to work while others play offers opportunities to gain visibility and new experiences that can lead to career growth, the experts suggest.

The number of those giving up vacation time is growing. Almost a third - 29 per cent - of Canadians did not use their full allotment of vacation days last year, leaving on the table an average of 2.43 days of 17 days they were entitled to, according to an online survey of 2,032 employees.

That's up from the 21 per cent who left an average of 2.06 days unused last year, the latest "vacation deprivation" survey by Ipsos-Reid for online travel site Expedia.ca found.

That doesn't make those chained to their desks happy: Fully a third of respondents said they consider themselves "vacation-deprived" and 42 per cent admitted to feeling envy when a co-worker is away while they have to work.

They also feel the burden: 34 per cent of nearly 6,000 respondents to a recent online Globe and Mail poll said they end up covering the workload when co-workers take holidays, leaving them stuck on the job. Another 28 per cent said they wished they were off work, too.

But others recognized how to use their predicament to advantage: 30 per cent said they get more work done and 8 per cent said they score brownie points with the boss.

If you find yourself vacation-deprived, you need to ask yourself why, suggests Beverly Beuermann-King, a stress relief specialist for Work Smart Live Smart, a consultancy in Little Britain, Ont.

There appears to be a cycle of guilt making people less likely to take all the vacation they are entitled to, she says. The Expedia.ca poll found 31 per cent said they felt guilty about taking time off and 20 per cent said they have cancelled or postponed a vacation because of work.

But if you think there is no way you can be away, "you have to decide whether that is perception or reality," Ms. Beuermann-King says.

"From my point of view it's critical to wellness to have breaks from your workload. If you are not taking your allotted time off, you are probably such a workaholic that you're not taking care of yourself in other ways, such as eating poorly and not getting enough sleep," she says.

"Even though it might not sound like a lot, giving up 2\_ days out of the average entitlement of 17 days is a significant amount of time you're not taking for yourself."

When you feel you can't let go of your job, health problems can develop, including neck and shoulder stiffness, backache, headaches, sleep problems, and mental fatigue, she says. And long bouts of work without a break can lead to difficulty focusing, obsessing about problems, being less creative and making poorly thought-out choices. Work overload can also lead to being short tempered with co-workers and managers and poor communication.

But what if you find there really is no alternative to working while co-workers are off playing? In that case, you need to develop a strategy to make it a plus for your career, says leadership coach Cassandra Gierden, president of Vancouver-based Prophet Coaching.

"The way to advance is to grab opportunities when they arise," and vacations are predictable opportunities to show your talent while the competition is absent, she says.

"Think of it as cross-training. Even if the job you are filling in for is a lateral or even a lesser position, it could be a different role that you would not normally handle, or a responsibility that is thought of as someone else's specialty."

The experience you gain will show your breadth and willingness to do what you can to help the company, which ought to get you noticed, Ms. Gierden says.

Advance planning will ensure that you get the most out of the experience, Ms. Gierden recommends. "You shouldn't wait until the Friday that a person is leaving to say 'oh, my goodness, I'm having this work dumped on me.'" Talk with the person you are filling in for to get a status report about the job, and what has to be done in his or her absence she says.

Then approach your manager to let him or her know your fill-in plans - and use it as an opportunity to get closer to your boss and toot your own horn, she says. The boss will be happy to know you're trying to solve a staffing problem.

If you stay confident and effective, you'll find managers and colleagues will be willing to hand you more responsibility, Ms. Gierden says. And this will build your own confidence because the experience will expand your beliefs of what you can take on and achieve.

This assumes, though, that you can look confident while juggling your own work and a second set of demands when someone is away.

"You must set boundaries in advance; otherwise, there's a risk you'll get completely buried in work," suggests Lisa Fried, division director at OfficeTeam in Surrey B.C.

She suggests approaching your manager to get agreement on what is considered essential and what work can be set aside until staff is back up to full strength. This gives you an opportunity to demonstrate to management that you are a team player, she says.

Managers should also be taking advantage of the summer holiday schedule to provide growth opportunities for promising employees, suggests Jodi Zigelstein-Yip, a leadership skills trainer with Employers' Choice Inc., in Brampton, Ont.

"There are employees who have a consistent fear factor that if they take on too much they will end up messing up or failing to do something critical and it will make them look bad," Ms. Zieglestein-Yip says. "They shy away because they don't feel they have the competencies to do the job well, and this is an opportunity to give them a challenge and encourage them by saying: 'Hey, I know you can do it.' "

Make sure you set people up for success, rather than failure, she adds: Cut the person some slack and allow them to take risks and try new approaches, "It's a way to shake people up and say I think you are capable of more," she says.

If you do want to get your vacation time in, make sure you get it slotted before it's too late: 12 per cent of those polled by Expedia.ca said they missed out because they didn't book far enough in advance.

"Make a vacation your priority, plan it well in advance and let everyone know you will be away. That you can't change the plan and won't be available during your time off," Ms. Beuermann-King says.

And when you do get away from the office, disconnect from business and focus on your family, friends and personal pursuits, she adds.

In the Expedia.ca survey, 48 per cent of respondents said that technology, such as Blackberries, personal computers, e-mail and cell phones, made it more difficult for them to get away from work. That's up from the 41 per cent who cited the technology tether in last year's survey.

But nobody is so indispensable that they can't take some needed time off, Ms. Beuermann-King notes.

"If you find it impossible to separate yourself from your work, it's time to ask yourself why you think everyone depends on you," Ms. Beuermann-King says.

If it is a reality, "it's time to make an effort to delegate some responsibility and get help to carry your load."

#### *By the numbers*

Findings of the vacation deprivation poll by Ipsos-Reid for Expedia.ca. (Total respondents, 2,032).

29

Percentage of Canadians who have not used all the vacation time they are entitled to take in the past year (compared with 21 per cent in last year's poll)

17

Average annual entitlement of vacation days

2.43

Average number of vacation days not used in the past year

33

Percentage who consider themselves "vacation deprived" (39 per cent of employees under age 34; 36 per cent of those 30 to 50; 26 per cent of those over 54)

42

Percentage who admit to feeling envy when a co-worker takes a vacation (48 per cent of women and 35 per cent of men surveyed)

48

Percentage who say technology makes it difficult to get away from work while on vacation

31

Percentage who feel guilty about taking time off

25

Percentage who say their employer does not encourage them to take all their vacation time

20

Percentage who have cancelled or postponed vacation plans because of work

12

Percentage who missed out by not scheduling far enough in advance

18

Percentage who believe their employer doesn't offer a fair vacation policy

*Fill-in follies*

Carrying the load for vacationing co-workers? Here are some expert tips on how to turn the burden to career opportunity:

Expand your horizons

Seek ways to increase your experience, competence and visibility.

Set priorities

Decide with colleagues and managers what are must-do tasks and what can be set aside.

Respect your limits

Listen to your own cues and know when enough is enough.

Set boundaries

If you can't handle it all, don't grin and bear it. Make a case to your boss why it would be wise to hire temporary help or spread the load among co-workers.

Keep a record

For work purposes, a written list will keep you organized, keep everyone apprised, and serve as proof of your accomplishments.

Debrief

When the co-workers return, a debriefing is a good way to show teamwork and remind your boss of how you pitched in.

Anticipate your own break

It helps to know you've got something to look forward to.

Plan in advance.

Some summer weeks are popular. Get your request in early.

*Wallace Immen*