

The restorative powers of employee breaks

According to Watson Wyatt Worldwide, 55 per cent of 18 to 34 year olds identify "the freedom to take extended leaves or sabbaticals" as a key workplace benefit

Last month I took a well-deserved (if I do say so myself) three-week vacation, during which, I will admit, I didn't think about business for more than five minutes.

There was no laptop, cell phone, email or calendar. Also absent, but not missed, were bills, housework, kids and errands...it was a delicious escape.

My husband and I went to Europe, and the truth is that it wasn't so much relaxing as it was stimulating, exciting and exhausting, which if you've ever driven in downtown Paris, navigated the Autobahn, or tried to sleep on a Euro pillow you will understand perfectly. But although it wasn't a "veg-on-the-beach" kind of getaway, it was a wonderful mental break from what I'm accustomed to doing - which is thinking way too much and juggling more than my 50 year old brain can easily handle.

Once a proponent of long weekends, ("they're so efficient..."), I am now a passionate believer in the restorative power of extended vacations, leaves and sabbaticals. And apparently I'm not alone.

There is an increase in the interest in extended vacations, leaves and sabbaticals spanning the past 10 years, especially among younger workers.

According to global consulting firm

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Another 2001 survey conducted by New York based company Catalyst found that 18 per cent of Generation Xers (born between 1964 and 1978) currently take leaves and

sabbaticals; another 43 per cent would like to if they could.

When a 2004/2005 Watson Wyatt WorkCanada survey asked 3,000 Canadian employees about their work attitudes, 22 per cent of employees said that their workload is too high, up from 16 per cent in 2002.

According to Roger Herman, CEO of The Herman Group in North Carolina, a company that offers sabbaticals: "Employees are driving the movement (towards sabbaticals) themselves. They're saying, 'I want control of my career destiny and if I feel like I need a break, I'm going to take one. If the company wants to support that, fine. If not, good bye.'"

There is a growing trend among North American corporations to enhance their employees' work / life balance by offering greater flexibility and adopting measures that will attract and retain the best talent.

One of those measures is time off - longer vacations, leaves and sabbaticals. The idea of sending employees away to have them come back refreshed and energized is no longer just a privilege for tenured university professors. Sabbaticals seem to be slowly going mainstream in North American organizations.

When it comes to extended time off for employees, there are many options for employers to explore such as extra vacation weeks, leaves of absence, fully paid

sabbaticals (often tied into service milestones), or deferred salary leaves in which the time off is funded by the employee over a number of years.

Whatever the scheme, the perceived benefits are said to include higher retention of talented employees, more passionate / engaged employees, higher productivity / better performance by refreshed employees, and an improved corporate reputation as an "employer of choice" resulting in the attraction of top talent. Some organizations (e.g. American Express, Genentech) have attributed a drop in employee departures directly to the implementation of a paid sabbatical plan.

"Employers are finding that employees are more engaged, more productive, and more loyal when they come back from sabbaticals," affirms Rose Stanley, practice leader of compensation and benefits for World at Work, an association for compensation professionals.

Apparently, the employee landscape is changing. And it seems that the new key to keeping employees is to let them go...on an extended vacation, leave or sabbatical.

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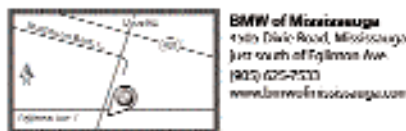


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