

What did your employees do on their summer vacations?

by Boyd A. Byers

A back-to-school ritual when I was a kid was writing an essay titled “What I Did on My Summer Vacation.” But these days, it seems, fewer workers and their families are taking vacations.

But what will they do without me?

The percentage of Americans who planned to take a vacation in 2008 dropped to 33 percent, compared to 40 percent last year, according to one survey. Other studies show that 15 to 33 percent of employees don't use all of their paid time off. And a significant number of workers — 20 to 50 percent, depending on whose numbers you believe — bring work along with them when they do go on vacation.

Why the vacation aversion? For some employees, it's overwork. But for many workers, it's *concern* about being away from work. They think things will fall apart if they're gone because no one else can do the job as well as they can. Or the thought of checking out, only to return to stacks of paper and hundreds of e-mails, is just too demoralizing.

For some employees, skipping vacations may be about job security. They're afraid they'll appear less committed to work. Or worse, someone else will do the job better in their absence. Managers may discourage employees from using vacation time intentionally or unconsciously because it can disrupt workflow.

Whatever the cause for vacation aversion, its effects are negative for employees as well as the companies they work for. Employees' happiness, productivity, and long-term health may depend on periodically “getting away from it all.” Nonstop work creates (or at least fails to relieve) stress, and stress negatively impacts physical and mental health. A recent medical study suggests that failing to take a weeklong break from work at least once a year significantly increases the risk of depression. Other studies show a correlation between annual vacations and a reduced risk of death from heart disease.

Enjoy yourself — that's an order!

A good vacation policy, together with a support system that allows employees to take advantage of it, can provide tangible benefits to your bottom line:

- **Recruitment and retention.** Mandatory vacation time can be a good way to attract and keep quality employees and thus lower turnover costs.
- **Productivity.** Burned-out workers are less productive, make more mistakes, and are more prone to anger. Employees who take time off to relax and recharge will (let's hope) return with more energy and enthusiasm and thus be more productive over the long haul.

- **Wellness.** Everyone's concerned about the rising cost of health care; think of required vacation time, and its resulting benefit to your employees' physical and mental health, as a wellness issue.
- **Oversight.** Some companies have discovered that employees who refuse to take time off simply don't want anyone to find out what they're doing (or not doing). Requiring employees to take a vacation for at least a one-week block once a year provides an opportunity to look closely at their processes.

Many employers have embraced the concept of mandatory vacations. Here are some steps you can take if you think such a policy would benefit your company:

- Have a written vacation policy — and enforce it. Require employees to “use or lose” their vacation time rather than roll it over or cash it out. Encourage or require employees to use part of their annual time off in increments of at least one week. Track vacation time and send reminders to employees and their supervisors if they haven't used enough of it.
- Foster an environment where employees, with proper planning, can take time off without worrying about missing meetings, phone calls, or e-mails.
- Create a cross-training program — for both managers and the rank-and-file — so employees can cover for each other during absences. Teaching employees new skill sets and exposing them to different jobs and work areas can also improve morale, lead to better processes, and create a more adaptable and flexible workforce.

Remember that employees, like material assets, need proper maintenance. So take time to look at your time-off policy and make sure it's serving its intended purpose. Do it just as soon as you get back from your next vacation.