

# Five Reasons Employees Aren't Taking Vacation & What HR Should Do About It



By Paula Santonocito

If you've been following HR by the Numbers, you know that a majority of Canadian employees doesn't use all their vacation time.

There are various reasons employees postpone vacation, as well as good reasons for HR to ensure vacation is a benefit that gets utilized. Here are five common reasons, what HR can do, and why HR should get involved.

## Concerns about job loss

Even though the recession is technically over, a down economy has taken its toll on employees. Mass layoffs on a global scale resonated deeply with workers and concerns about job loss haven't gone away. A sense that out of sight could lead to out the door if layoffs again become necessary has employees reluctant to miss work. They also worry that taking time off for relaxation or fun may make them seem frivolous and less dedicated to their job.

**What HR can do:** Although business, like life, is uncertain, don't dwell on the negative. Use every opportunity to share positive news in order to create an optimistic, upbeat and stable work environment. At the same, promote a culture of work-life balance, using all communication channels at your disposal. Hold company picnics and other events to show employees the organization supports rest, relaxation, and fun. Because employees take their cues from leadership, encourage managers to take vacation.

**Why HR should get involved:** Time off allows employees to decompress and recharge. When stress levels are high, people don't perform at their best. Work-life balance really does have a positive impact on employee engagement, productivity, creativity, and the organization's bottom line. If this weren't enough, centered employees (think omm) avoid negative confrontation, which means less workplace conflict. Research shows managers spend as much as 25 percent of their time resolving workplace conflict, time they could put to use making a greater contribution to the organization.

## Heavier workload

As companies strive to compete in a difficult marketplace, more is demanded of the workforce. Organizations that downsized during the recession haven't replaced workers that were lost, yet business has begun to ramp up. It all translates to more work – in some cases, a lot more work – for current staff. Meanwhile, because organizations are lean, it's difficult to cover for employees when they're absent. The work that an employee puts aside while on vacation will likely be there upon return, with new tasks added to the list. Playing catch-up after vacation can be extremely difficult, causing employees to question whether time off is worth it.

**What HR can do:** Encourage managers to establish clear priorities with realistic schedules and deadlines. This process should take into account vacations and time off. HR has the ear of senior management, and this message should be conveyed to them as well. If large-scale organizational changes can be implemented when the workforce is most engaged (i.e., not during vacation season), changes will be more successful and employees will be happier.

**Why HR should get involved:** A heavy workload has the potential to negatively impact productivity and spike stress levels. On the other hand, managing the workload through scheduling and all-important communication lets employees know that while there is much to be accomplished, their health and wellbeing matter.

### **Inability to totally disconnect from work**

Thanks to technology, everyone's connected. All the time. While this offers amazing opportunities, it also creates boundary issues for employees seeking downtime. The expectation at many organizations is that employees will check in, even while on vacation. For employees in management positions, ongoing connectivity is a given. One senior executive of a multinational firm, who asked to remain nameless, says that while on vacation he gets up at 5:30 a.m. each day and spends several hours on email in the hope the company will leave him alone for the rest of the day so he can enjoy time with his family.

**What HR can do:** Encourage senior management to create a culture where vacation time is honored and employees are free from work. In lieu of this, encourage managers to establish standards with regard to communicating with employees when they're on vacation. For example, a manager will contact an employee by cell phone only when absolutely necessary. At the same time, HR should advise managers to follow the same protocol when they are on vacation. Finally, HR should practice what it preaches and disconnect as much as possible.

**Why HR should get involved:** Constant connectivity has created a culture where employees are close to burnout. Unplugging while on vacation helps ensure that when employees return to work they'll plug back in refreshed and ready to contribute.

### **Saving time for personal days**

Employees aren't only multitasking at work. Childcare, eldercare, and other family responsibilities, as well as household obligations, regularly compete for priority. Time off is often required to tend to these and other personal matters. As employees feel pressure on the home front, they are more inclined to save vacation time, just in case.

**What HR can do:** Establish policies that allow for single days off, but also

encourage blocks of time away from work. For example, if an employee receives three weeks vacation, no more than five days may be taken as individual days off.

**Why HR should get involved:** Research shows that it typically takes several days before a person decompresses and begins to enjoy vacation. Extended time off is healthy, and good for business. From a practical standpoint, it's also easier to manage a scheduled vacation period rather than a lot of individual days off.

### **Banking time for eventual payout**

Companies that allow employees to bank a portion of their vacation time are apt to have some takers. Ironically, among them are burned out and unhappy employees who could most benefit from vacation.

**What HR can do:** Set limits on how much time can be saved, carried over, and/or converted to compensation as part of a flexible benefits plan or when an employee leaves the company (where applicable).

**Why HR should get involved:** It can't be said enough: Work-life balance is essential to employee health and wellbeing, and employee health and wellbeing have a direct impact on the bottom line. By implementing policies and practices that encourage time off, HR contributes to the overall success of the organization.

*Paula Santonocito, a business journalist specializing in employment issues, is the author of more than 1,000 articles on a wide range of human resources and career topics. Paula holds a Workforce Career Coach Facilitator (WCCF) certificate and has been awarded the Global Career Development Facilitator (GCDF) designation. She is a contributing editor to HRInsider.ca.*