



EXECUTIVES UNLIMITED, INC.

Connecting Companies with Leaders

The Value of Vacation

Short Term Breaks Lead to Long-Term Gains

By Tomilee Tilley Gill, President

Many executives are reluctant to take a vacation for fear that they will lose their business edge or fall hopelessly behind. Unfortunately, more and more of the workforce in general are feeling this way – not only the executives – and the trend is growing.

Even those executives who do manage to get away, literally carry a piece of the office with them wherever they roam as a result of wireless communication in the form of laptops, PDAs, cell phones and satellite technology. Rather than lessening the amount of work by increasing productivity, all of this technology has had an unintended consequence – people can't truly seem to break away. Recently, an occupational survey published by The Capital of Annapolis, MD found that, "25 percent of all vacationers took work with them in 2006 and 70 percent made calls to the office during their trip." This is more than a matter of widespread connectivity convenience – it has evolved into an absolute inability to turn wireless technology off. The result is never really getting away. Tomilee Gill, President of Executives Unlimited, expresses concern over this increasing lack of "downtime" for executives. "I've seen the amount of work hours steadily increase so that now 12-hour work days are the norm and 24/7 on call availability is an expectation. Couple this with corporate cultures that misinterpret loyalty and commitment as the right to encroach upon employees' private time, including vacations and you find a serious problem developing."

Nearly 600 million vacation days will not be used this year by U.S. employees according to a survey entitled Vacation Deprivation taken by Expedia.com. Working steadily under this constant pressure will ultimately take its toll by negatively impacting both morale and productivity. Not only will a decrease in leisure time lead to stress and personal frustration, but it can also result in burnout and health issues as well. The bottom-line is that a fatigued work force is a less effective one. Gill explains that "executives are at their creative and productive best when they are relaxed and refreshed. When an executive's life is out of balance, they can not possibly do their best work." Corporations that are out of touch need to promote a balance of home, family and professional life for their employees, or they will soon experience a negative ripple effect which will ultimately lead to excessive turnover, which is not good for any organization. Because many corporate cultures have mistakenly equated loyalty with always being available, executives will leave their positions rather than take the much needed break they have earned.

Of all the industrialized nations, the United States is the only country that does not require paid time-off and according to the Bureau

of Labor Statistics, 25 percent of the American workforce does not receive paid vacation or time-off benefits at all. This differs greatly from other countries such as France, Austria and Denmark where employees receive 25 paid days off per year and Italy, Germany, the UK and Belgium where employees receive 20. Gill states, "I'm not in favor of executives "cashing in" their vacation because time off has a very beneficial purpose. Nor am I in favor of rolling vacation days and weeks over to a new year. Frankly, I believe the best incentive is for executives to either use or lose this time. More and more, I see executives forfeiting this valuable benefit because they're worried that time off equals losing one's edge."

PricewaterhouseCoopers placed a "use it or lose it" policy on their vacations which still didn't prompt employees to take time off. Thus, the accounting firm simply decided to shut down U.S. operations for ten days during the year-end holiday season. Other corporations are responding to this trend with disincentives such as lower performance ratings and lesser pay raise if vacation time is not used.

For many executives, the fear of "missing a beat" at work is very real as globalization has the world humming 24/7. Today's downsized corporations are lean and one may be perceived as part of the "fat" if they take the luxury of a vacation they earned. Time-off does not cost a company additional money because it has already been factored into the budget equation. Unfortunately, American executives are increasingly buying into the notion that allegiance to the company means always "being available," however possible. While occasional crisis management may dictate a short-term sacrifice of personal time, continued reliance on 24/7 availability to the detriment of family and friends will result in long-term negative consequences.

Essentially, time management is at the heart of this issue. Effective use of time in managing a business and its customers will allow space for outside activities. The most effective problem solvers save time and money but what is increasingly being lost is their own reward for good work. "Executives must be accountable in their personal lives as well as in their business lives," states Gill. "Moreover, a healthy, well-rounded executive makes a better team member. Corporations need to respect and support employees who seek balance in their lives." A happy, relaxed and well-adjusted executive will ultimately impact a company in many positive ways. Remember that employees rarely leave a company that promotes a balanced lifestyle. Therefore, corporations can't afford NOT to enforce time-off for their workforce.