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Get a life ... take a vacation

By Sheryl Smolkin

With memories of spending Canada Day on a dock in Muskoka behind me, and a trip to China ahead of me, it's a little difficult to think profound thoughts about any employee benefit except vacations.

It seems to me that spending evenings, weekends and holidays with old friends, new friends and family is really what life is all about — the reason we work five or more days a week for most of the year.

And apparently many other Canadians agree.

In a recent

Expedia.ca survey, more vacation time tops the list of perks employees say they would like to receive for loyalty or years spent with a company — 40% choose an additional vacation day over the second most popular perk — a nicer work place (selected by 10%). In fact, approximately one

in five employed Canadians would be willing to take a lower salary for more vacation time.

Yet many Canadians are not using up the vacation they are already entitled to. Survey participants report that they forfeit an average of two days of vacation per year that could be used to relax or travel, totalling 32 million untaken days and \$5.1 billion in wages handed back to employers. The situation is even worse in the U.S., where employed workers, on average, leave four days out of a meagre 14 vacation days on the table.

Why do so many people forfeit valuable vacation days?

Employed Canadians say that the top reasons for not taking all of their vacation days are “not scheduling in advance” (11%), “too busy at work” (9%) and “taking cash in lieu of days” (8%). About two in ten (22%) have cancelled or postponed their vacation plans in the past because of work, and 18% check their work messages while on vacation.

But why should you care?

Because an employee who works all year without a vacation is like a car that has been driven for 12 months without an oil change. It might keep running, but it could be heading for a breakdown.

Over the past two years, one in five Canadian workers experienced physical health problems caused by a mental health issue, according to Desjardins Financial Security's National Survey on Health. Of this group, 62% maintained regular work schedules, but made

sacrifices in their personal lives. Survey results show that 59% of these workers decided to cut back on personal commitments — at the expense of relationships with family and friends.

“Presenteeism — the feeling that you must show up for work even if you are too sick to be there — is the main factor in employee stress and distraction,” says Desjardins' Senior Vice President of Group and Business Insurance Alain Thauvette. “The results are productivity losses for companies. Employers

The importance of work-life balance and taking a vacation is paramount.

need to pay attention.”

That so many people are reluctant to take time off even when they are ill troubles Irvin Wolkoff, a psychiatrist at Bayview Community Services in Toronto. “It was once obvious to people that convalescence is necessary to sustain individuals, families and work. Nowadays some people interpret it as reduced productivity or career limiting.”

He counsels patients suffering from workplace stress “to find activities and relationships with their fingerprints on them.” He also reminds them to schedule regular quality time with loved ones, because “building relationships is like building muscles. If you don't go to the gym regularly, you'll end with nothing.”

In other words, get a life!

Vacations are not just a luxury, but a necessity. They allow people to escape from the everyday grind, and help them to replenish their mind, body and spirit. This helps them to be better parents, partners, children, friends, and employees.

“No matter the profession, the importance of work-life balance and taking a vacation is paramount,” says sociologist and stress expert Beverley Beuermann-King. “With 55% of Canadians feeling rested and rejuvenated after a vacation, and another 44% feeling better about their job after a vacation, it's crucial to make time to plan for a vacation, even during busy periods.”

Employees view a good vacation policy and a culture that allows them to take regular vacations as key components of their total rewards package.

So lead by example, and make sure you get a reasonable return on your investment.

Pull up your calendar, schedule a vacation, and encourage everyone on your team to also take some time off before the end of the year. The result could be happier employees, a healthier organization and a better bottom line. — \$\$.

