



# Vacation Deprivation

Workers and employers suffer the consequences of forfeiting time off.

BY HOLLY RIDDLE

**VACATION DEFICIT DISORDER**, vacation deprivation, overworked, burnt out — however you refer to it, the causes and results are still the same.

Americans are at risk for not using all their vacation days and, when they do use a portion of those days, not truly getting away from their workplace or using their time off for mundane tasks like doctor appointments or household chores. Not only can this negatively impact personal fulfillment and relationships, but also it negatively impacts the workplace, resulting in decreased productivity and creativity.

In fact, Katie Denis, chief of research and strategy, Project Time Off (a national movement aimed at creating an American attitude transformation toward vacation time) said those not taking their vacation days aren't even the ones getting the promotions and raises at work.

"We've got some research that shows that people who are forfeiting their vacation time are actually less likely to get promoted. They're less likely to get raises and bonuses. So those traditional metrics of success we don't see lining up with the people skipping vacation, and we think there are a lot of reasons for that," she said. "The biggest one to me, though, is that if you're doing the same thing day after day and you're not giving yourself and your mind that chance to breathe, you're not



coming up with the next big idea; you're not going to be as forward-thinking, as motivated."

So why does this issue exist? Denis notes that when you look at macro trends of vacation usage from the 1970s until now, you see a decline in usage starting around 2000. As technology and productivity increased, vacation usage largely decreased.

"There are a few moments where things will go up or down a little bit year over year, but on the whole, we're using a lot less time than we did 17 years ago. I think a lot of that is that we feel not just connected to the workplace, but that we're always needed, we're always plugged in. It becomes that much harder to pull yourself away and prioritize vacation time," she said.

Vacation deficit disorder isn't just a byproduct of technology, though. Many countries have the exact same technology in the workplace that Americans enjoy, so why aren't Europeans suffering from the same fate? Could it be tied to an evolving idea of the American work ethic?

"The only other countries that seem to struggle with this in the way we do are in Asia — South Korea and Japan. They definitely have issues with vacation usage as well, to the point that Japan was considering making it a government mandate ... but here, I think this is so much a part of what people think is the American work ethic, and that's where I take issue with that idea," said Denis. "When you look at historical vacation usage, from the 1970s to 2000, we were much better about taking vacation, so this is not part of the storied American work ethic. We have always had a strong work ethic; we have not always been work martyrs, and that is the shift we've seen over the last 17 years or so. We're so connected, it's so ingrained in us to be constantly wired in, that it's changing our mindset in a way that isn't good. It's obviously playing on something we believe as a country because last I checked, they have smartphones in France. We're not the only people with that [technology], so how can we start thinking differently about what it means to be a valuable, productive employee?"

The American issue is most dire within certain demographics —



primarily millennials and females. According to Alexis Tiacoh, public relations representative, Expedia, Inc., commenting on the brand's recent studies, "Research shows American millennials are the most vacation-deprived age group, and they receive the least vacation time. They are also the most likely to shorten their trips due to impending workload (53 percent) compared to their older counterparts. American women also report feeling more vacation-deprived than men."

Denis refers to these groups as "work martyrs," always worried they're asking too much of their colleagues when needing coverage while out, or even worried they may be viewed as replaceable or unneeded if things go entirely smoothly while they're not in the office.

These worries are unwarranted, though, with most teams perfectly fine with covering for a colleague who's on vacation — when, of course, there's enough notice, which can be a big issue. Project Time Off found most employees give six weeks' notice or

less, which isn't ideal.

"Every company or team can be different; but if you're not giving plenty of heads up and aren't working toward that, and everyone's not aware that you're going to be out, I think that's where resentment can come in," said Denis. It also sometimes results in employees avoiding asking their colleagues for assistance altogether and taking work with them on their vacation.

There's also no need for employees to fear asking their bosses for vacation time at the risk of appearing lazy, undedicated or like they're skipping out.

"[Employers] want their employees to take their vacation," said Denis. "They want them to be creative and productive. They're worried about burnout. ... You are going to get an employee that's at least as productive if not more if they're taking their time off because they are motivated and they are driven, and that's a different brand of employee. Every company wants the best version of the person they hired."

Denis clarified traveling somewhere new when using vacation days adds a whole other level of work benefits. "Travel is the solution to really getting the true benefits of time off ... stepping away, seeing something different, getting a new perspective, being inspired differently. It's tougher to do that if you're staying in your house getting chores done. I think it's just giving yourself that time and space to think and do different things, see different things, try different foods and just be inspired."

Thankfully, the issue is improving in certain ways. Tiacoh confirmed, "While vacation deprivation levels worldwide are on the rise (53 percent, up from 49 percent in 2016), Americans were among a handful of countries that saw reduced deprivation levels — down 4 percent from 2016. Another positive change is that the U.S. workforce is feeling less guilty for taking time off, down to only 8 percent from 14 percent in 2016. However, the number of vacation days received, used and lost remained consistent year over year, with Americans on average receiving 15 days of vacation and only taking 12. So while perceptions and anxiety about taking vacation might be changing for the better in America, this shift has yet to translate into people actually using up more of their allotted vacation time."

Both Denis and Tiacoh offered some tips for making the most of your vacation time and changing your thought patterns on vacation day usage, whether you're an employee or employer.

"I think the single biggest step anyone can take, whether it's to take more time or enjoy it more or not feel like you're putting too much on your colleagues, is to plan ahead more," said Denis.

For employers, she said, "The biggest thing people can do is talk. About two-thirds of employees hear nothing about vacation in their workplace. If we are not talking about what is expected and also behaving accordingly, [employees are] not going to go [on vacation], and that's one of the simplest things you can do."

"If the thought of taking a week or more off work is causing you to put vacation plans on hold, consider taking a long weekend or adding personal time onto a business trip," Tiacoh advised. "Hold yourself accountable when you are on vacation so you don't end up spending all your time