

I love taking vacations. It's part of the reason I started my own business. The typical two weeks a year given by my former employers (with the exception of my time spent teaching) just wasn't enough time off for me. So imagine my surprise (and horror) when my husband, who works in corporate America, told me some of his colleagues have to be forced to take their vacation time! That got me to think about how our culture views time off. The findings are sad, but true.

Did you know that by October 24 of every year, the average American will have spent as much time working as the average European spends in a year? That's right. Europeans, on average, work 35 hours a week and receive 4-6 *mandatory* weeks off per year. In fact, when you add the shorter workweek, holidays, and the longer vacation time, Europeans get an average of nine weeks more free time per year. ¹

Not only do we have less time off, we also work the most hours of any industrialized country. For many Americans it's normal to work 50-60 hours a week. So we work more hours and take less time off and then feel guilty when we do escape from the office for a few days. This is crazy!

You work hard, so you deserve to get away for a while. Studies show you need to take time off from work for your health and sanity. Vacations have been found to reduce the risk of heart attack in men by 30 percent and in women by 50 percent.² Another study found that women who took two or more vacations a year were less likely to become tense, depressed or tired, and were more satisfied with their marriages, when compared with women who took fewer vacations. ³

What does this have to do with workplace productivity? Plenty. When we are refreshed, we work better. We have more energy, greater focus and concentration. We tend to call in sick less and have better attitudes about our jobs. It's not only good for us to use all our vacation time, it's also beneficial for employers. When France reduced its official workweek to 35 hours a few years ago, studies showed that there was *no loss in productivity*.¹ So, happier workers, no loss to the company – now that's a win-win!

So get out and enjoy some time off before the summer's over. To maximize your time away:

- Unplug! Leave the laptop at home and concentrate on getting away from it all. For those of you with the ever-present smart phone, give yourself permission to turn it off, or at least check in less frequently.
- Leave work at work; it will be there when you return. Don't let work anxiety interfere with your time away. Live in the moment where you are, and give it your full attention.
- Plan ahead and take time to organize your trip to avoid last-minute rushing around and sleep deprivation.
- Build in some downtime. Don't over schedule yourself by planning constant activities. There is great value in just sitting and being quiet.

Now, get out there and play!

- 1 Joe Kissell-<http://itotd.com>
- 2 Brooks Gump/Karen Mathews; Framingham studies
- 3 "Mayo Clinic Health Solutions"