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MAKING A CLEAN BREAK

Taking a holiday from work is good for both you and your employer, but don't forget the idea is to come back refreshed, not drained. Elaine Larkin reports

Whether it's a fortnight clubbing in Ibiza, a stag night in Riga, 10 days in Thailand or a long weekend in Courtown, hearing that certain members of staff have booked some time off work 'for a break' must have line managers and employers quaking in their boots.

People may wonder what mishap will befall their co-workers on this year's break. Last year Jan 'slipped in the shower' and broke a rib; the year before, ah yes, Helen's flight was delayed and, instead of arriving in at midnight on Sunday, she got in at 5am and was too jet lagged to make it in for the 8 o'clock shift. And as for Bob, didn't he come back from Ballybunion after one August bank holiday weekend as red as a lobster asking the girls in the office to dab on a bit of calamine lotion now and again.

And remember young Jenny who arrived back to work with shadows under her eyes as dark as the bruises on her arms, boasting of all-night booze ups and all-day binges. Not every professional comes back to work from a few days or weeks of annual leave in a tired state, but some have done so in the past and will do so again this summer, whether intentionally or not. The general consensus on the subject is that it's not a good idea.

"Getting wasted every day on holiday is in effect a wasted holiday for everybody, not only for the individuals themselves but also for the employer," says Adrienne O'Hare, managing director, To Be Training and Development. With 10 years' human resources experience, O'Hare is herself taking off to a spa resort in Spain for her summer holiday to wind down from work and return relaxed.

The benefits of a positive holiday experience, O'Hare says, are that employees come back relaxed, better able to focus, less likely to stress about small things and better able to effectively apply themselves to their jobs in a positive way. **"If people are heading off on holiday and taking it to the extreme in every way — extreme sun, extreme alcohol, extreme sleeping patterns — it won't put their bodies and minds in a state where they can hit the ground running when they come back."**

Emer Waters, managing director, Occupational Health Alliance, suggests people allocate sufficient time when travelling to ensure they return home at least one day before going back to work. Also, those travelling long haul should allow sufficient holiday time to accommodate jet lag, flight delays and so on, she adds.

There are of course plenty of people who have no interest in partying, travelling to far-flung destinations or climbing the Macgillycuddy's Reeks on their holidays and who may even consider not taking their full annual leave at all.

O'Hare says that even machinery is given down time for maintenance and workers need down time too. **"We need time to get our energy levels up. Employers do see the benefits of time out. It allows [employees] to step back and relax and a lot of people evaluate their jobs and the direction in which they are going. People coming back in that relaxed, refreshed, re-energised state with everything sorted out in their heads is very beneficial."**

Ellen O'Mahony, manager of recruitment company Financial Directions' Munster office and qualified occupational psychologist, endorses taking a break from the office for even a day or two to recharge batteries for the betterment of the company and individual. While some may not get a chance to recharge their batteries because they've been partying hard, others have

been working hard on holiday. According to O'Mahony, in this case, taking time out is of more benefit to a company and an individual than constantly being on call. "Businesspeople who are terminally on call face higher rates of burn-out and depression than those who take time off. Executives who take even a few days off can be a lot more beneficial to a company than someone who does not take any, as the creativity and freshness generated can make the person a lot more productive."

People may experience the holiday blues on their return to work, particularly if they have been to an exotic location or had a very long break away from the office. Routine can be difficult to adhere to on their return and employees may be caught staring out the window at a mirage of holiday memories. To help with getting back into the routine of early morning starts, hitting the traffic at 7am and leaving the office at six instead of sleeping in all day and staying up all night, it is a good idea to get back into a more normal routine towards the end of a holiday. "It is very important for anybody going on holiday, particularly if it is a longer break, to start to get into a routine again in the last few days," says O'Mahony. Try to get up earlier and get your body back into the routine it's used to so you will be better able to tackle work when you get back to the office.

"To help prevent the post-holiday blues, take the Monday as annual leave if possible," says Waters. "It provides you with a psychological advantage, as a shorter working week can help ease you back into the work ethic. Three basic rules apply — never overstay, never overspend and never overindulge. This way, you can return to work with no time, debt or health worries."

And no matter where you are on holidays, as the Baz Luhrmann song, *Everybody's Free (To Wear Sunscreen)*, advises: 'If I could offer you only one tip for the future, sunscreen would be it'.

Working holidays

When packing their suitcases for holidays it seems that many executives just cannot resist including a few bits and pieces apart from a mobile phone to help them keep in contact with the office. In a recent survey, 68pc of respondents said they brought either a laptop, memory stick, handheld computer or Blackberry with them on their holidays, while an additional 85pc said they used their phone for work purposes while on holiday.

According to the survey by Financial Directions, holidaying professionals spend an average of 20 minutes per working day in week one communicating with the office and 10 minutes in week two. The majority (83pc) of executives surveyed said they check work-related email while on holiday using their own equipment (65pc), hotel computer (12pc) or internet cafe (23pc). One fifth did this every working day and 65pc said they checked work-related email more than twice a week, but not every day. These figures fell in the second week of the holiday.

One of the more surprising findings was that three quarters of those surveyed were not under pressure from colleagues or managers to keep in touch with work while on a work-free break. Only 10pc said they kept in touch with the office because projects needed their input; 15pc said it was because they were asked to by other management; and a whopping 75pc said it was because they couldn't resist. Ellen O'Mahony, manager of Financial Directions' Munster office, says the reasoning behind this is that "many executives choose to stay connected on holiday because, by spending a couple of minutes each day checking emails, it gives them the peace of mind that business isn't grinding to a standstill, while eliminating a huge backlog on their first day back at work".

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