

BUSINESS

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More Than Half of U.S. Employees Are Wasting Their Vacation Days

BY NICOLE AUDREY

[New research](#) by the travel industry initiative and non-profit Project: Time Off found that, in 2015, Americans wasted 658 million vacation days, with 55 percent of Americans forfeiting at least some of their paid time off.

Americans must really love their jobs. Or, as the report indicates, they've got some legitimate anxieties about taking time off.

The study found that 37 percent of workers cite returning to a mountain of work as the issue holding them back from vacation, while 35 percent say they feel they can't leave because they're the only ones who can get the job done, and 33 percent say they can't afford a vacation.

This "all work and no play" behavior is harmful to the economy because it results in a decline in consumer activity, particularly in the travel and leisure categories, they say. According to the PTO report, the unused vacation days of 2015 cost the U.S. \$223 billion and 1.6 million jobs.

How can Americans end this bad habit and start enjoying the time they've earned? First, they will have to take time to actually prioritize and thoroughly plan their vacation in advance.

“Planning is essential,” said Katie Denis, senior director, Project: Time Off. “We looked at people who are planners versus non planners, and found that they are happier in nine out of nine categories including [the categories of] financial situation and professional success.”

But the problem runs even deeper than planning or lack thereof. Working hard, maybe even too hard, has always been valued in American culture.

“Our nation is a no vacation nation,” said Dr. Ken Dychtwald, founder and CEO of the research and consulting firm Age Wave, which, in partnership with Merrill Lynch, conducted the study [Leisure in Retirement: Beyond the Bucket List](#).

“America was formed on the idea of the Puritan work ethic where leisure was one day a week and [implemented] so that you could be better at work the next day,” said Dychtwald.

“Leisure in Retirement” surveyed a total of 3,712 respondents over 25, and found that 56 percent of Americans feel guilty if they don't use their vacation time productively; 80 percent of respondents said they check their work emails regularly while on vacation, and 83 percent of employed Americans said they do some type of work-related activities when on vacation.

“We've not made relaxing a priority, and we're the only developed nation that does not have a federal law [enforcing] time off from work,” said Dychtwald. “What we've got is a state of mind problem. We're driven by FOMO. The younger we are, the more we are driven by FOMO. [Millennials] especially are worried about being away from their text messages for two hours and getting off the grid.”

Merrill Lynch and Age Wave's report found that 89 percent of millennials say that they work while on vacation, compared to 81 percent of Gen Xers and 76 percent of baby boomers.

Vacation planning on behalf of the employees themselves is essential, but bigger change has to come from the top. This means that employers need to implement vacation policies that feel reasonable and secure.

“All vacation policies can work, but you have to provide culture and context for them to succeed,” said Denis.

"Unlimited vacation is the greatest example of this because if you aren't providing that culture and context, it can backfire. Kickstarter had an unlimited vacation policy and actually went back to structured days because employees weren't taking time off. Companies [implement] unlimited policies with the objective of [communicating to employees] that they trust and treat them like adults, but if that's not expressed, employees feel like they're driving on a road without a speed limit, so they play it safe and don't take time off."

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employees feel like they're driving on a road without a speed limit, so they play it safe and don't take time off."

Not only should companies set policies that encourage employees to successfully take time off, they should also encourage employees to completely unplug — even if that means unplugging for them.

"The Huffington Post does an email detox program for employees on vacation," said Denis. "If an employee there gets an email while on vacation, [the company] shoots back a reply that says [something like], 'Thank you for your email, it's been deleted. Contact me when I'm back in the office.' It's like out of office on steroids and people gasp at that idea, but it's brilliant because it actually cuts back on what people have to do when they get back by making the cream rise to the top."

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