

Taking your work with you on vacation

Vacations are a precious opportunity to relieve stress, spend quality time with family and friends, and experience different cultures and lifestyles. The benefits of vacations are considerably diminished, however, when work follows you from the office to the airplane or campsite. The reality is that many vacations can quickly become an extension of work: the guided tour becomes a conference call, the beach day gets swallowed up by answering emails, and dinner is postponed to complete a proposal. While you might not be able to completely leave work at home, there are ways to reduce its presence so that you can better enjoy your vacation.

Vacation preparation

Coordinating a vacation requires some due diligence. Make sure that everyone knows when you will be taking your vacation and how long you plan to be away. If you do not communicate your time off clearly to your manager and colleagues, they may assume that you will be in the workplace and assign you work accordingly.

- **Send an email within the department one month before leaving.** Although you probably have already confirmed with your manager and HR that it is okay to take those days off, send an email to notify your co-workers and remind any other necessary staff members that you will be on vacation. This gives your co-workers enough time to make the necessary adjustments to project timelines, especially if you are part of an on-going project. It also reduces the risk of a managerial oversight during a time that you will be away.
- **Last-minute checks.** In the week prior to leaving, check again with your co-workers to see what is needed from you. Is there anything that you would need to complete before leaving, or can it be postponed until after you get back? Confirm if there are any conference calls that you need to attend or if you can either get the notes from a colleague, or if the call can be rescheduled for when you return.

Emails on the beach

Work, like life, is unpredictable, and in spite of your best efforts to enjoy a work-free vacation, something may come up that requires your attention. In that case, use your time effectively so that work does not take over your entire vacation. Here are some helpful tips to consider:

- **Alleviate smartphone anxiety.** We are all familiar with the experience of an engaging conversation getting interrupted by the buzz of a new email. Even if you resist the impulse to check your phone, knowing that there is a new email waiting for you may cause anxiety and ultimately be a source of distraction. If you feel guilty about checking your email when you are with your family or friends, then leave your phone in the hotel room, and only use it during down-times, like waiting for a dinner reservation.
- **Mitigate media multi-tasking.** Understandably, you might try to accomplish as much as you can within a short amount of time while on vacation. As a result, you might try to listen to voicemail while sending an email, or edit a draft while listening in on a conference call. Ultimately, media multi-tasking is an ineffective use of your time. Completing tasks one by one will provide you with a sense of accomplishment, while having several partially finished tasks has been proven to raise stress levels.
- **Prioritize your vacation.** According to a [national survey](#), 93 per cent of Canadians said they feel relaxed and rejuvenated when they get home from a vacation, and 78 per cent reported being more focused at work after a vacation. Therefore, if you get blindsided by work when you are sitting on the beach, remember that you have earned your vacation, and place your vacation as the higher priority. You – and your organization – will be better off for it!

“We really feel the physical and mental benefits of even a brief getaway. Vacations can lower blood pressure and ease stress and tension in the body. They give us the time to reconnect with spouses, partners, family members and friends, and we return to work rejuvenated and better able to focus – and all of that translates into stronger feelings of well-being. Vacations are a prescription for health, stress relief, more energy, improved productivity and overall happiness.”

- Stress specialist, Dr. David Posen

You might think that to always put your work before your personal well-being is the responsible thing to do. In reality, it is *not*. If you need to work during your vacation, manage it so that it takes a backseat to your much needed and well-deserved relaxation. Many of us love our jobs, and will gladly work during vacation, but a healthy life requires balance. It is important to recognize your limits and prevent burnout, so returning to work with your batteries recharged is actually the best thing you can do as an individual – *and* as an employee!

Making the most of summer: getting involved in activities with colleagues

There is something about the summer that is conducive to building relationships. It might be the warmer weather, increased daylight, or snowless driveways. Whatever the reason, people have more energy to engage with one another. There also happens to be an abundance of accessible activities to do in the summer. Not everyone can go skiing for the weekend, but everyone can get together for a picnic. This is equally true in the workplace, where fun activities with your colleagues are a great way of building relationships and increasing teamwork.

Morning exercise

Physical activity is an excellent way to start the day because exercise is a mood enhancer. However, it is often a challenge to summon the motivation to exercise on your own. It is all up to you. You can lighten the burden on yourself by inviting your co-workers to join you:

- **On the commute.** Some people are fortunate to live close enough to their office to be able to ride their bike or walk to work during the summer. Ask around the workplace to see if anyone else lives nearby you, and if so, ride or run along with them.
- **At the gym.** Some gyms offer group memberships, so if you join with your co-workers it could also be more affordable. Ask your local gym or community center about offers available.
- **In fitness groups.** If your office is not near a gym and commuting to work might be out of the question, find an open area where you can do weightless exercises and stretches. Someone in your workplace might know yoga or Pilates, and could lead a class – the best way to find out is to ask! You can also plan a morning walk with a group of colleagues before it gets too hot in the afternoon, and before too many meetings get scheduled throughout the working day.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help through a variety of resources. Call your EAP at 1.866.468.9461 or visit shepell.com.

During work hours

Some colleagues may have obligations before and after work, such as dropping their kids off at school or continuing education. There are many summer activities for you and your colleagues to do during office hours:

- **Potluck picnic.** An outdoor potluck is a wonderful way to enjoy the weather while sharing a meal. It allows you to taste a diversity of foods, learn about your co-workers' cultures, and give everyone the chance to partake in a team event. Shared contributions are invaluable to bonding and team building.
- **Outdoor meetings.** If you have a meeting scheduled with your co-workers and the weather is nice, conduct it outside. Fresh air is a boon for clear thinking and stress-relief. If you don't need any papers, pens or other utensils, step it up a notch and transform the meeting into a walking-meeting – you will get the dual benefit for your mental *and* physical health!
- **Playing catch.** Rather than take a coffee break, take a 'catch-break' with your colleagues. Skill is irrelevant when it comes to throwing around a ball or Frisbee. It is about getting some light exercise, enjoying the fresh air, great weather, and having fun with others.

Post-work activities

Activities outside of the workplace remain a substantial part of team-building. Although it takes greater coordination, it is definitely worth it. The bond tends to be long-lasting because colleagues get the chance to interact with one another on a more personal level.

- **Team sports.** There might not be anything more cliché than the intra-office baseball game, yet it remains a fantastic tool to get everyone involved, support one another, and perhaps enjoy a celebratory meal afterwards. Baseball requires a minimum of 18 players though, so if you do not have the personnel for that, paintball or volleyball might be a good alternative. Regardless of which sport you choose, be sure to take the heat into account and always stay hydrated.
- **Group buying websites.** Some websites offer cheaper admission to events and summer activities, such as concerts, amusement parks, and festivals by selling at group rates. Going with your co-workers is not only a fun way to build relationships and work on team building; it is also more affordable.
- **Government parks.** Check government websites to see if there are any parks within driving distance of your workplace. As a rule, access to government parks only require people to pay a nominal entrance fee (if any at all), making them an inexpensive way to simultaneously experience beautiful natural scenery, spend time with others, and enjoy some physical exercise.

Visibility and inclusivity

In order to get your co-workers together, you need to let them know where and when the summer activity is going to take place. Make the notification visible. You would not want anyone to feel left out because he or she did not know. Remember, the purpose of these activities is to create an inclusive environment for the office.

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BALANCE

A wellness update for your work, health, life

Some ideas to consider include:

- **Email.** Send an internal email to the people in your department, letting them know the details of the event.
- **Bulletin board.** If there is a bulletin board or communal white board in your office, make use of it. Try to make your notification 'pop' by using brightly-colored paper or a funny picture that grabs attention.
- **Ask around.** The most effective way to gather participation is to ask in-person. You may be surprised how many of your colleagues have been waiting for this opportunity and appreciate your offer to include them!

Whatever combination of summer activities you choose to participate in with your co-workers, you are already on the right path to improving your engagement at work and assisting in team building. Happier colleagues are more productive colleagues and make for an even better workplace to come to every day!

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