

DRI For Life

“Vacation All I Ever Wanted...”

By Audra J. Ferguson-Allen

When was the last time you took a vacation? I mean *really* took a vacation. This does not include a “long weekend” or a vacation where you spend half the time in your hotel room working while your family and loved ones enjoy the beach. And it certainly does not include emailing while at Disney (guilty!). In fact, during your last vacation, did you feel relaxed and refreshed, or did you feel overwhelmed by the workflow and office obligations? In my unofficial survey, I found that many associates have no plans to take more than a “few days” off throughout the year. The reasoning ranged from having too few billable hours to having too many billable hours to feeling guilty about taking time away from work. This is not an aberration in the legal field. In fact, according to a new study released by the U.S. Travel Association’s Project Time Off, more than half of Americans did not take all their vacation days. <http://www.projecttimeoff.com/research/state-american-vacation-2016>. While this may not seem surprising, this truly is a recent trend. Americans take a full week less of vacation time than they did in 1978. *Id.* You may be saying, “But I just can’t take vacation right now.” For your health and happiness, you can—and you should.

Why is it so prevalent and even a “badge of honor” when people either do not take vacation time or work throughout their vacation? Vacation time should be taken and vacations should be used to unplug and to reconnect with the people and world around us, but many attorneys (young attorneys, I am talking to you, too) either do not take their vacation time or spend precious vacation time working remotely.



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In Sheryl Sandberg’s book “Lean In,” Sandberg recounts the numerous conversations she has had with employees who quit, stating that they are “burnt out” or “tired” of working long hours. When Sandberg looked into this further, she discovered that these employees had unused vacation time. Why is it that we do not use our vacation time? Is it the drive to succeed? Is it fear of going on vacation being “frowned upon?” For each person, the reason may be different. *National Geographic* published an article that noted the pervasive problem in America of not taking vacation time. *National Geographic*, “How to Get More Vacation Time.” As noted in the *National Geographic* article, when compared to other countries, part of the problem may be due to the lack of legally sanctioned vacations. Unlike 137 other countries, the United States has no annual leave statute. The *National Geographic* article also noted that companies have downsized to the point that employees feel that it is harder to step away from the office. The result is that we end up feeling resentful of the life that is passing us by.

The benefits of vacation not only come while we are vacation, but are felt pre-vacation and post-vacation. Gretchen Rubin, author of “The Happiness Project,” who also maintains a Happiness Project blog, claims that the anticipation and excitement building up to vacation provides a source of enjoyment. Further, after the trip is over, reflecting on the trip and the memories created also provide a source of happiness.

The importance of encouraging employees and ourselves to use vacation time cannot be overemphasized.



While long weekends are nice, it is equally important to try to schedule at least one week long vacation where you can unwind and unplug as much as possible. “Scheduling leisure” time is essential not only to overall well-being, but also productivity and retention. As noted in the *National Geographic* article, leisure activities can reduce depression, anxiety, and increase positive mood. And the word “leisure” really means “leisure.” It means taking time to connect with your loved ones or even connect with yourself. It does not mean checking email repeatedly while on a beach. Yes, client coverage must be accounted for when you are away. But do just that—find coverage for your busy caseload for one week and really allow yourself to take a break. Take it from someone who just returned from maternity leave—you can find coverage, and your cases and clients will be fine.

In fact, after you read this column, if you have not already scheduled your vacation, go ahead and put it on the calendar. (Remember, that preplanning your vacation and the anticipation of taking the trip is a source of happiness and enjoyment.) Block the time off and let your colleagues know that you will be out of the office. Remind your clients that you will be on vacation and set your out-of-office away message on your email. Your mind, body, and spirit (and probably the people you are vacationing with) will thank you for the time away. And you may even find that you are more productive when you return refreshed with a renewed spirit.