

Nice Job! Now Take A Break

June 12, 2006

(Christian Science Monitor) *This article was written by Marilyn Gardner.*

As Darren Press and his family join the throngs at Disney World this week, touring the Magic Kingdom and perhaps shaking hands with Mickey Mouse, Mr. Press will be savoring a long-postponed pleasure, his first vacation in six years.

"We decided now might be a good time to do Disney," says Press, of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., the father of two young children. "Plus, I needed a break. Enough's enough. It's time to have some fun."

In an age when surveys show that many Americans routinely forgo some or all of their allotted vacation, either by choice or necessity, Press' "enough's enough" attitude offers a gleam of hope to employment specialists. Some see signs that a pervasive all-work-and-no-play mentality may be shifting.

"Major corporations are recognizing that vacation time is intrinsic to the mental and physical well-being of their employees," says Penny Morey, managing director of Human Capital Services at CBIZ, Inc., a recruiting firm in Boca Raton, Fla. "They are encouraging employees to take the allotted time. Some smaller companies are increasing their vacation allotment so they can attract the best talent."

In a new survey by TrueCareers, 80 percent of respondents say their employers encourage them to take time off. In 2004, less than half felt that way.

Workplace observers trace part of the shift to a stronger economy. As employees become less fearful of losing their jobs, they are more willing to take time off. Some also want more vacation.

"More and more recruiting ads are touting 'generous' vacation policies, a sign that companies are emphasizing time away from work to attract new workers," says John Challenger, CEO of Challenger, Gray and Christmas, a Chicago outplacement firm.

Younger employees are also changing the vacation culture. "Young people want to have more balanced lives," says Joanne Ciulla, a business professor at the University of Richmond in Virginia. "They see how their parents are living and other people are living, and they don't want that."

Unlike baby boomers, who tend to minimize the amount of time they take off, Ms. Morey says, Generation Xers are "looking for a company that offers them a quality of life, and that includes vacations and flexible time. Their voice is being heard. That's the talent of the future." She thinks Generation Y will have even greater expectations.

Press's many years with no time off began when the advertising agency where he previously worked announced a downsizing. Without a salary, he could not afford a vacation. Then when he started his own agency, May Sky Inc., he says, "I never had enough time."

Even when workers have time and feel comfortable about going away, they sometimes face another anxiety: coming back.

"I'm bracing myself for the onslaught when I return," Press says.

Small Signs Of Vacation Progress

Laura Stack, author of the new book, "Find More Time," hears similar comments. "People say, 'Oh, gosh, it's just not worth it to go away, because when I get back I've got 300 e-mails and papers all over my desk, and I can't catch up.'"

Even so, Ms. Stack is encouraged by small signs of progress. "I have seen people become more willing to close the proverbial office door and truly take a psychological break by getting away. It's pretty new."

E-mail and voice-mail messages echo that determination. When employees do go on vacation, Stack says, they are more willing to note that they can't be reached. "People come right out and say, 'I will not have access to e-mail during this time.'"

Not everyone is able to leave electronic connections behind, of course. Press, for one, made it a point to rent a house in Orlando this week with wireless Internet access. He says his wife hopes they won't face a moment where "the kids are ready to get on Pirates of the Caribbean and there's Daddy stepping out of line to answer a phone call."

Another convert to regular vacations is Rob Waite of Louisville, Ky. For many years he worried that if he took all of his vacation, it would give the impression that he wasn't dedicated to his job.

Then 15 years ago, his wife told him, "We give you 50 weeks, the least you can do is give us two weeks." That made an impression. Since then the family has spent two weeks every summer at the same beachfront resort.

So restorative are these breaks that Mr. Waite persuaded two previous bosses to take two weeks off as well. "They said it was the best thing they could have done for themselves and their families. They were disappointed at how many years they had wasted."

Now, as CEO of his own company, Metal Sales Manufacturing Corp., Waite instructs his human resources director to track vacation usage. As summer approaches, they contact people who have taken no time off and suggest they take it.

His staff cannot carry earned days over to the following year. "We encourage people to take all their vacation because they're going to be a better employee for it. We don't want any burnout."

Noting signs of change everywhere, he says, "Some people are starting to rebel against living to work rather than working to live."

Press, too, wants his employees to "have a life outside May Sky."

In some fields, that is hard to do. Anil Khosla, a partner in the Boston law firm of Eckert Seamans, finds that as the legal profession has become more competitive, taking time off is more difficult.

"It is almost now unacceptable for a lawyer to say to someone, 'I cannot be reached,' " he says. "You have to arrange your vacation so if a critical client wants to reach you, that client can reach you."

Mr. Khosla once lost two or three prospective clients because he was on vacation. But he has grown philosophical about such situations.

"The only way to deal with this is, OK, so you lose some opportunities, that's fine," he says. "Finally you say, I'm not going to compete on the same basis. I'll make my own priorities. My mental health is more important."

Surveys show that Americans typically use only five days of vacation at a time. Mr. Challenger suggests people take at least one two-week break every other year. Stack likes 10 days as a middle ground between one week — too short — and two weeks, which for her is too long.

"I want workers to have enough of a break that they forget what day it is," she says. "What's today, Tuesday or Wednesday? That's when you know you have completely separated."

The World's Worst Vacation-Taker?

At the other end of the vacation spectrum is Dan Smith, a managing partner at PrincetonOne, a search and recruiting firm in Tampa, Fla. He describes himself as "probably one of the worst vacation-takers in the world," with more vacation days than he can ever use. "It's a guilt thing," he says. "It's probably my upbringing in a blue-collar family. If you don't work, you don't eat."

But as a recruiter, he sees changes. Until 2000, when the economy was robust, many job candidates negotiated for more vacation time. Then the economy softened. "People weren't going to press issues like that in taking a job. They would take the position and worry about vacation later."

Today some companies are showing more flexibility with vacation plans when they hire, Mr. Smith finds. "If a person has 15 years of experience and gets five weeks of vacation time, the new organization might match that."

Morey also sees progress. Three years ago she worked with a number of businesses that required new employees to be on the payroll for a year before they could take any vacation. That has changed. "They cannot have these onerous policies. People don't want to work for a company that makes you wait a year or lets you only take a week."

Even if American workers took all of their allotted time off, they would still lag far behind their European counterparts. The average number of paid vacation days for someone in the U.S. who had worked for a year in 2005 was 8.9, says Carroll Lachnit, executive editor of Workforce Management magazine. The statutory minimum vacation in the European Union is 21.3 days a year. The U.S. has no statutory minimum.

Professor Ciulla observed firsthand the differences in attitudes between Europeans and Americans when she attended a recent conference in France hosted by an American company with overseas operations.

"The French refused to come that Friday because it was their bank holiday," she says. "When the French have a day off, they

have a day off, no matter what."

As American vacationgoers pack their bags and savor their time off, wherever it takes them, many might agree with Ms. Lachnit when she says, "There is probably never a good time for somebody to take a vacation. But astute businesses are ones that understand that and plan and plan to make it possible for everyone to take off time they have earned. Everybody needs time to recharge their batteries."

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