

Are we a work-obsessed culture?

By **Jennifer Swanberg**
Columnist: Work/life

Taking time away from work to spend with loved ones, relax or rejuvenate ourselves seems to be more difficult than ever before. By now, most have read or heard about the New York Times report on the "shrinking-vacation syndrome." It seems that working Americans are forfeiting their paid vacations due to heightened job demands, fear of job loss, or simply not knowing what to do without the structure that work provides. In preparing for this column, I asked a few Lexington professionals about their attitudes toward taking time off for vacation. Here are a few of their responses:

"It's been quite a long time since I have taken more than a four-day weekend. I barely remember if I have ever taken an entire week off. Oh yes, I took a week away from the office when I went to Europe on a business trip..."

"I have work pressures...if I do not produce, my raise or bonus may be in question."

"My husband and his father rented a beach house for a week in August. It was suppose to be a time for all of us to relax, enjoy the sounds of the ocean and read a few good books. I opted out of this seemingly blissful week away, because I had too much to do. I would not be able to relax knowing that I have so much to do. Instead, this year, I took my vacation in a weekend."

In the United States, workers receive on average of 10 paid vacation days per year. In comparison to other industrialized countries, U.S. employer vacation policies are abysmal. For instance, employers in Canada give an average of 26 days per year; Britain's workers receive an average of 28 paid vacation days per year; Brazilian employers provide an average of 34 days per year; and Italian employers give on average of at least 42 days per year. Critics may argue that the fast-paced, global 24/7 economy combined with the pressures of national and international competition may be the cause of such short U.S. vacation policies. Yet, other highly competitive and productive countries such as Japan and Korea have figured out how to give paid vacation time without negative repercussions on productivity. Employers in both countries give 25 days of paid vacation per year.

It is bad enough that the U.S. lags behind industrial countries in the average number of paid vacations, but why are workers failing to take the time they have accrued? Intuitively, many of us know that when we finally break free from work routines, we return energized and more productive. Yet, research by the Families and Work Institute in New York City implies that being overworked may prevent workers from taking vacation. Their national study found that 44 percent of workers in the U.S. reported feeling overworked, overwhelmed by the workloads or lacked the time to step back to reflect on the work they were doing in the last month. FWI's research further suggests that overworked employees make more mistakes, feel resentful toward their employer for expecting them to do too much, and are more likely to resent co-workers who work less hard. On the personal side, overwork leads to higher stress, more symptoms of clinical depression, poor health and neglected self-care.

To circumvent the negative ramifications of overwork and to promote a better balance between the traditional boundaries of work life and home life, Sherry Holley, A.G. Edwards vice president, investments, and manager of the Lexington branch, asks that all her employees consider their jobs within a broader life context. "Our industry is very stressful. The market is open every day, and it can fluctuate dramatically. I know from personal experience, if I drive hard to meet my business goals without considering how this drive may be impacting my personal life, I'm not at my best. It is a daily personal struggle. Yet, I know if I can maintain a more balanced life perspective, I'll be more productive, my customers and staff will be happier and I'll have time to pursue my life's dreams."

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Holley has incorporated this balanced life perspective into the management of the A.G. Edward's Lexington branch. As one component of this philosophy, nearly six months ago, Holley asked all 24 employees under her management to attend a workshop focused on meeting business goals by living a balanced life. The workshop provided evidence that employees can achieve business success while also striving toward personal goals. "The idea is to make time to step back from work to allow for time to consider personal goals. This is very hard to do, especially within today's business climate. But when people take the time to do it, you can watch them grow professionally and personally."

This particular workshop provided a range of tools to assist A.G. Edwards' employees in developing and articulating business and personal goals, including the task of revisiting these goals monthly. Upon completion of the workshop, Holley asked employees to give her their updated business goals, and their personal goals. "Yes, I asked for their personal goals, because I am committed to assisting my staff in achieving balance. I am a firm believer that balance promotes success. I now meet with the financial consultants quarterly to assess their success toward meeting their goals. To date, 90 percent of employees are on target for meeting their yearly business goals. This is much better than last year at this time. As for the personal goals, we still have some way to go. The good news is that people are cognizant of their personal goals."

Nationally, A.G. Edwards has been awarded "One of the 100 Best Places to Work" in the United States. It seems that one of their management strategies is to empower their local branch managers to develop creative ways to engage employees, and thereby cultivate customer loyalty. Holley's approach to employee engagement is both novel and refreshing. It gives me hope that innovative management can assist in reducing our culture's obsession with work.

Read more: A new study of this issue is available at www.bizlex.com.

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