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Stressed-out workers may hesitate to take vacations, but time away is essential, experts say

By **Ann Piccininni**
STAFF WRITER

Put down that timecard and back away from those work responsibilities. Put on a funny hat, kick back and revel in not working. Do it now, without responding to one more phone call or e-mail, and nobody gets hurt.

And someone, maybe you, may find that relaxation and enjoyment will ensue.

That's the premise behind a new book titled "Time Off! The Upside to Downtime," by Kristine Enea and Dean LaTourrette, two recent refugees from the workaday world, according to their public relations people.

Both authors dumped their jobs in the technology sector and started Leisure Team Productions, a media production company dedicated to the promotion of leisure.

The authors claim that many American workers don't take all the vacation time they've earned.

And, they say, forgoing paid time off is not only unnecessary but may be detrimental to physical and mental health.

To which Jeannette Swist responds, "Baloney."

"It's a stressor being at work," Swist said. "It's more of a stressor not being at work."

Swist owns and runs a Naperville-based human resources and organizational development consulting firm, Applied Resource Management.

The wrenching downturn in the economy that began about five years ago and precipitated layoffs, outsourcing and belt-tightening is still being felt, Swist said.

"People are afraid if they take more than a week or two of vacation people will say, 'We don't need them,'" she said.

Workers feel they need to promote themselves and their careers by being visible, she said.

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"It's the whole thing about being in front of people," she said.

When people feel insecure about their jobs and worry that their positions may be eliminated, time off can inspire more anxiety than relaxation, Swist said.

"People aren't unwinding," she said.

Employees who work for some of Swist's clients sometimes relinquish earned time off because of financial considerations, she said.

"There are monetary issues: Can I afford a vacation?" she said. "People are really stretching (their financial resources) too, when you look at the housing market."

At some companies, Swist said, employees who don't want to take all the time off they've earned don't have to simply give it up.

"You can donate it to another employee," she said.

Swist said the practice of requiring employees to take accrued vacation days within a set time frame, such as during the calendar year, is becoming more common. Fewer employers allow employees to roll over unused time, she said.

That's because allowing employees to delay vacations can be an expensive proposition for employers, she said.

One employer that does allow employees to roll over their vacation days is Edward Hospital.

"We do have a maximum number of days you can accrue," said Betsy Roche, Edward's director of staffing.

Roche said she disagrees with Swist's assertion that employees balk at taking their time off for fear of losing their jobs.

"Health care remains growing. We have a nationwide nursing shortage. Health care is a good place to be right now," she said.

And she said Edward management encourages employees to take whatever time they've earned.

"We certainly recognize the benefit of people taking time off," she said.

Some do take their allotted time, she said, and some don't.

"I think that varies. There are people for whom it's very important to take time off. There may be others who can maintain a healthy lifestyle without taking that time," she said.

Roche explained that Edward has a paid-time-off program that allows employees to accrue time off and bank it for use as vacation, personal days, holidays or sick days.

A vertical advertisement for a SpongeBob SquarePants screensaver. At the top, the word "FREE" is written in large, bold, white letters with a black outline, set against a bright orange starburst background. Below this, the text "SpongeBob SquarePants Screensaver" is written in a playful, bubbly font. The central image shows SpongeBob SquarePants smiling and waving, with a yellow pencil pointing to a "Click to Download" button. Below the button, the website "screensavers.com" is mentioned. At the bottom of the ad, the text "SpongeBob SquarePants Screensaver" is repeated, with a small image of Patrick Star.

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If the personal bank of time exceeds an employee's needs, she said, the worker may choose to donate the extra time off to other employees through Edward's Bennie Bank program.

"We have a formal program in place to support that," she said.

Mary Ellen Pavlik, an administrative assistant who works in Edward's marketing department, said she has been an Edward employee for six years.

Though she loves her job, she also cherishes her time off.

"I'm very careful with my paid time off," she said.

Sometimes she'll work Memorial Day or Labor Day so she can take another day off instead. "If, let's say, you don't have anything going on at home, you can work those days," she said.

She often spends vacation time at Disney World with her husband, David, and their daughters, Anne-Marie, 20, and 11-year-old Sarah-Jane.

The Pavlik family just returned in June from two weeks in Florida.

"Every year we go down there," she said.

For some workers, time off can be an expensive prospect for them, not their employers. Those who work on a commission or freelance basis lose potential income during downtime.

"You don't make any money when you're on vacation," said Gail Niermeyer, a Naperville real estate agent with Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage.

Niermeyer has been in the real estate business 16 years.

As busy as her work life can be, she said she usually takes about six family vacations a year.

But that doesn't mean she deserts her work responsibilities. She takes them with her.

Having reliable Internet access is essential when she travels, she said.

Phone service is also a high priority. "You have to figure out all about international phoning," she said.

Niermeyer said she's rarely totally incommunicado for more than a couple of hours. Though it's demanding to always be available to answer client questions and concerns, she finds the challenge rewarding.

"You can manage your business if you have good relationships with your clients," she said.

And there is something nice about digging your toes into the sand while you close

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the deal on a sale, she said.

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