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Take a Real Vacation

Unplug yourself from the office

By Dr. Nancy D. O'Reilly

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Terri worked for a busy corporate office, often putting in 80-hour weeks to please her supervisors and clients. She was constantly on her laptop or checking her messages via her Blackberry. When it came time for a vacation, Terri's husband finally convinced her to take a weeklong cruise-without her Blackberry.

Unfortunately for Terri's husband, the cruise ship provided access to the Internet and soon Terri was skipping breakfast to check a few e-mails or would cut dinner short to review the last messages from the office. She couldn't relax while on vacation-in fact, she began to feel anxious about missing an important call or meeting.

Terri was so used to being connected to the office, that she couldn't enjoy her first "real" vacation with her husband. She came back to the office cranky, tired and anxious to catch up, instead of feeling rested and energized.

Sadly, Terri's story isn't unusual. According to a recent Associated Press survey, one of five respondents pack a laptop when going on vacation, presumably so they can work. Instead of taking time off to enjoy a break from work, it seems Americans are spending more time in front of the computer, Blackberry or cell phone, desperately trying to stay in the loop with their office.

The sad reality is that while technology makes it easier for us to connect, it also makes it harder for us to unplug when away from work, creating stress and leading to burnout. So how can you train your brain to relax? What can you do to stay away from those addictive Blackberries and laptops?

Here are a few tips to practice the next time you plan your escape from the office:

1. Realize that technology is partly to blame. Technology makes it easier for us to keep in touch, so make it harder to check your office e-mails or voice-mails by leaving the technology at home. Avoid taking your Blackberry with you on vacation, or if you feel like having a panic attack just thinking about it, at least turn it off during meals and outings.

2. Plan ahead.

One of the reasons you might be checking in so often is because you feel insecure about your position at work. However, with a little extra planning, you can make yourself feel less anxious and more ready to relax. Have a meeting with your assistant, or if you don't have one, talk with your supervisor and colleagues to discuss what might happen when you leave. Are you expecting any phone calls? Are there any client issues to resolve? Does something need to be mailed out? Get it taken care of ahead of time, so you won't spend your vacation worrying.

3. Learn to delegate.

If you're not lucky enough to have an assistant or secretary, ask someone you trust to help you with specific tasks while you're out of the office. The tasks may be as small as checking your e-mails once a day, or it might be a request to put out any potential fires. It will help you sleep better at night if you know a trustworthy "someone" is looking out for your interests at work.

4. Notify the VIPs.

Let your clients know at least a week in advance that you will be out of the office and likely unreachable. This way, you can clarify any of their issues before you leave, or set up a time to discuss them when you get back. Provide your clients with any contacts who might be able to help them or answer questions while you are gone, such as your secretary or a co-worker.

5. Make your vacation plans ahead of time, with you in mind. If you're one of those people who can't stand the thought of being away from the office, book your vacation months ahead of time, or even a year ahead. For example, an advertising executive in New York books her vacation a year and a half ahead of time - buys the plane tickets and hotel reservations-just so she won't back out of it. Also, consider vacationing somewhere remote, like the mountains, where there isn't immediate access to radio, TV or the Internet. It will force you to

unplug.

6. Determine the timing that works best. Depending on your industry, it can be an advantage or a disadvantage to take a vacation during the high travel season. Most of the time, everyone vacations during the holidays between Thanksgiving and Christmas, Hanukkah and New Years. If you think about it, missing work at the same time as everyone else might work in your favor. However, this also might be your busy period, if you work in retail, customer service or other industries, so you might feel even more stressed. It boils down to this: Consider your industry and the timing of your next vacation.

7. Let the computer do your work.

Before you leave for vacation, set up an auto-response message that lets people know you'll be out of the office, for how long and who to contact in case they need help. Do the same for your office voice-mail and cell phone.

8. Set a limit of once a day.

If you absolutely must work while you are on vacation, limit yourself to one hour each day, just to check your voice-mails and e-mails.

When you check in every hour or can't seem to disconnect from the office, you're allowing stress to build up, instead of releasing it. Vacations are likened to "recharging one's batteries," but the re-energizing process can't happen if you feel like you're still part of the daily grind.

In addition, working on your vacation means you miss out on the long-term benefits of rest and relaxation, which can lead to increased productivity and profits when you return to the office.

And if nothing else, remember no one likes working with cranky, tired, worn out people.

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