

Many taking work with them on vacation

By Elwin Green
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Not only are American workers taking less time away from work, when they do get away, they are taking more of their work with them.

In a survey of advertising executives by the Creative Group, only 13 percent said they "never" check in with their offices while on vacation, while nearly half — 47 percent — said they check in at least once daily.

A separate poll by American Express showed that small-business owners do an even poorer job of truly vacationing, with 75 percent of them checking in at least once a day. And one out of five respondents to an Associated Press poll said they pack a laptop when going on vacation, raising at least the possibility that they expect to work while away from work.

What is going on here? Why do so many people feel the need to take their work with them?

John Challenger, chief executive officer of outplacement firm Challenger Gray and Christmas, said technology is partly to blame because it "creates expectations" that workers will keep in touch because it's easy to do.

But there are other factors at work as well, he said.

"We're more insecure about our jobs," he said, fearing that "we might miss something crucial and our fate might hinge on that."

Challenger said that fear is not fully justified.

"It's a hot job market and companies are focused on retaining people. ... You're not going to go away for two weeks and be 'out of sight, out of mind.'"

Nancy O'Reilly, a clinical psychologist who has specialized in helping corporations with employee mental health issues, said while some employees may fear losing favor, others "basically think they're irreplaceable."

"Many professionals don't ever want to be completely out of touch," agreed Thomas Wassel, a partner with New York law firm Cullen and Dykman LLP, partly because their clients may not feel as comfortable working with someone else.

O'Reilly sees the working-through-vacation syndrome as a cultural issue. "In Europe, they're gone for three or four months and the world does not fall apart."

So what are the effects of the nonvacation?

"That valve that lets off steam doesn't get fully opened up," said Challenger, so one of the primary purposes of vacations, "recharging batteries," doesn't happen.

While working during vacation may provide an employee with a temporary satisfaction, "there's no positive long-term effect whatsoever," said Anne Houlihan, president of Golden Key Leadership, a Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., executive training firm.

O'Reilly agreed, saying the practice can ultimately lead to burnout and make a person irritable. "There's nothing worse than working with grumpy tired people," she said.

At some point, the employer needs to say, "I want you to put the computer down. I want you to put the Blackberry down," she said.

"The key point is really learning how to delegate," said Houlihan. "I'm president of my company, and when I go to Hawaii, I don't have e-mail."

Ideally, Challenger said, one's vacation will take them to "a place that's remote enough where you can't use" your laptop and your cell phone.

But even without venturing to such remote locations, there are steps employees can take to get away from it all:

- Schedule vacations for periods when workloads are light.
- Prepare clients or customers for your absence and provide them with the names of colleagues to contact.
- Hire temporary staff if needed to keep your office running at optimum.
- Use technology to set up auto-reply messages on your voicemail and your e-mail systems to let people know that you are away and to refer them to a co-worker.
- Leave your laptop and PDA behind; if you do take them, use them only for fun.
- If you must work while away, establish specific times when you will do so, totaling no more than a half-hour each day. Answer only the most essential e-mails or calls.