

The Land of the Free?

It's a mystery to others how Americans get by with so little vacation time

By Joe Robinson

How do Americans do it?" asked a stunned Australian I met on a remote Fijian shore. He had zinc oxide and a twisted-up look of absolute bafflement on his face. I'd seen that expression before, on German, Swiss and British travelers. It was the kind of amazement that might greet someone who had survived six months at sea in a rowboat.

The feat he was referring to is how Americans manage to live with the stingiest vacation allotment in the industrialized world—8.1 days after a year on the job, 10.2 days after three years, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The Aussie, who took every minute of his annual five weeks off—four of them guaranteed by law—just couldn't fathom a ration of only one or two weeks of freedom a year. "I'd have to check myself into the loony bin," he declared.

Well, welcome to the cuckoo's nest, mate—otherwise known as the United States. In this country, vacations are not only microscopic, they're shrinking faster than revenues on a corporate restatement. Although it's the height of summer, I'm betting you're not reading this while lolling on the beach. A survey by the Internet travel company Expedia.com has found that Americans will be taking 10 percent less vacation time this year than last—too much work to get away, said respondents. This continues a trend that has seen the average American vacation trip buzzsawed down to a long weekend, according to the travel industry. Some 13 percent of American companies now provide no paid leave, up from 5 percent five years ago, according to the Society for Human Resource Management, based in Alexandria, Va. In Washington state, a whopping 17 percent of workers get no paid leave.

Vacations are going the way of real bakeries and drive-in-theaters, fast becoming a quaint remnant of those pre-downsized days when so many of us weren't doing the jobs of three people. The result is unrelied stress, burnout, absenteeism, rising medical costs, diminished productivity and the loss of time for life and family.

In the course of doing my own survey for a book on how we can be productive and have a life at the same time, I've heard all about the vanishing vacation from Americans who say they hardly have a chance to catch their breath or enjoy the fruits of their labor. These are people like Nancy Jones, a nurse in Southern California, who last year put in a vacation request in January to attend her son's wedding in July. "They kept giving me the runaround," she recalls. "They tell you they don't know if you can have the time, because they expect to be busy. It happens all the time." After her manager ignored numerous requests, she wound up having to corner the director of the company, just days before the wedding, to get the time off.

An aerospace worker from Seattle sent me an e-mail that sums up the growing dilemma of vacations that are only on paper: "If you try to take a couple of your vacation days, you get told no, so your only recourse is to call in sick . . . and risk getting management mad and becoming a potential candidate for termination. What happened to families and the reason we go to work to begin with?"

As someone raised on summer vacation road trips in my family's intrepid station wagon, I believe that's a question we've lost sight of. After writing about our vacation deficit disorder as a journalist, I decided three years ago to start a grass-roots campaign to lobby for a law mandating a minimum of three weeks of paid leave. Since then, thousands of Americans have signed a supporting petition, and many have volunteered poignant tales from the overworked-place, such as the 35-year-old victim of a heart attack whose doctor attributed 100 percent of his ailment to unrelied job stress, or the 50-year-old engineer who was downsized to a job that offered zero paid leave.

In the early '90s, Juliet Schor called attention to skyrocketing workweeks and declining free time in her book, "The Overworked American." In the decade since that groundbreaking work appeared, things not only haven't gotten any better—they've gotten worse. We're now logging more hours on the job than we have since the 1920s. Almost 40 percent of us work more than 50 hours a week. And just a couple of weeks ago, before members of the House of Representatives took off on their month-plus vacations, they opted to pile more work onto American employees by approving the White House's rewrite of wage and hour regulations, which would turn anyone who holds a "position of responsibility" into a salaried employee who can be required to work unlimited overtime for no extra pay.

Vacations are being downsized by the same forces that

brought us soaring workweeks: labor cutbacks, a sense of false urgency created by tech tools, fear and, most of all, guilt. Managers use the climate of job insecurity to stall, cancel and abbreviate paid leave, while piling on guilt. "The message, overt or implied, is that it would be a burden on the company to take all your vacation days—or any. Employees get the hint: One out of five employees say they feel guilty taking their vacation, reports Expedia's survey. In a new poll of 700 companies by ComPsych Corp., a Chicago-based employee assistance provider, 56 percent of workers said they would be postponing vacations until business improved.

GUILT WORKS, BECAUSE WE ARE PROGRAMMED TO believe that only productivity and tasks have value in life, that free time is worthless, although it produces such trifles as family, friends, passions—and actual living. But before the work ethic was hijacked by the overwork ethic, there was a consensus in this country that work was a means, not an end, to more important goals. In 1910, President William Howard Taft proposed a two- to three-month vacation for American workers. In 1932, both the Democratic and Republican platforms called for shorter working hours, which averaged 49 a week in the 1920s. The Department of Labor issued a report in 1936 that found the lack of a national law on vacations shameful when 30 other nations had one, and recommended legislation. But it never happened. This was the fork in the road where the United States and Europe, which then had a similar amount of vacation time, parted ways.

Europe chose the route of legal, protected vacations, while we went the other way—no statutory protection and voluntary paid leave. Now we are the only industrialized nation with no minimum paid-leave law.

Europeans get four or five weeks by law and can get another couple of weeks by agreement with employers. The Japanese have two legally mandated weeks, and even the Chinese get three. Our vacations are solely at the discretion of employers. The lack of legal standing is what makes vacations here feel so illegitimate—and us so guilty when we try to take one.

Evidence shows that time off is not the enemy of productivity; to the contrary, it's the engine. U.S. companies that have implemented a three-week vacation policy have seen their profits and productivity soar. Profits have doubled at the H Group, a financial services firm in Salem, Ore., since an across-the-board three-week vacation became the rule nine years ago. They have risen 15 percent at Jancoo, a Cincinnati-based janitorial services firm with 468 employees that also went to a three-week policy a few years ago. The owners of both these companies tell me they believe the switch in vacation policy is directly responsible for the improvement. Before the change, says the owner of Jancoo, the company had a high employee turnover rate and chronic overtime; after the new vacation policy went into effect, morale went sky-high, and so did productivity, which solved both the turnover and overtime problems. This is not surprising—rested employees perform better than zombies, as fatigue studies have demonstrated since the 1920s. One study showed that if you work seven 50-hour weeks in a row, you'll get no more done than if you worked seven 40-hour weeks in a row. Yet we have made work style—how long, how tortuously—more important than how well we do the job.

Overwork doesn't just cost employees. The tab paid by business for job stress is \$150 billion a year, according to one study. Yet vacations can cure even the worst form of stress—burnout—by re-gathering crashed emotional resources, say researchers. But it takes two weeks for this process to occur, says one study, which is why long weekends aren't vacations.

An annual vacation can also cut the risk of heart attack by 30 percent in men and 50 percent in women.

Walter Perkins, a finance VP for a large American engineering firm, told me how he became a believer after running a Dutch firm acquired by his employer. He presided over six-week holidays for his staff and says he saw no loss of productivity. "The Dutch work just as hard as their American counterparts," Perkins says, "but they have that knowledge that they're going to get that one month or more where they can really recharge the batteries. Guess what? Things don't come to a halt." The stats back him up. Contrary to the American myth, a number of European countries have caught up with the United States in productivity. In fact, Europe had a higher productivity growth rate in 14 of the 19 years between 1981 and 2000, according to the U.S. Federal Reserve Board.

I find it strange that the land of the free should be so deficient in vacation time, which is as free as you can get all year. In fact,



BY ROBERT MEDAVACK FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

We're now logging more hours on the job than we have since the 1920s. Almost 40 percent of us work more than 50 hours a week.

the word vacation comes from the Latin root *vacatio*, which means "freedom." A vacation is our chance to get out there and discover and travel, to connect with family and friends, to put one over on the survival game. But fear is a specialist in strangling liberty. We're told that, with real vacations, companies would fall apart and the U.S. economy would suddenly turn into Paraguay's.

THIS IS WHY WE NEED A LAW THAT WILL PUT AN END to the bait and switch of vacation time, as well as leave that's being yanked completely. Legalized paid leave also would end the loss of accrued vacation time for downsized workers in their thirties, forties and fifties, who have to start their paid leave banks over again, as if they were at their very first job.

I agree that time is money, just not in the way we think it is. Time itself is the truly precious currency, because our supply of it is very limited. We need to pump our fists when we get vacation time and not feel guilty. This was brought home to me while I was on, yes, vacation in the medieval city of Evora, Portugal. There, I visited a bizarre little church whose walls, columns and ceiling are plastered with the femurs, tibias and skulls of hundreds of 16th-century monks and nuns. The Chapel of Bones was designed by a creative sort to aid in the contemplation of mortality. I must admit it provided a very good reality check, particularly the parting words inscribed over the doorway: "We the bones already in here are just waiting for the arrival of yours." Words to remember the next time someone wants to downsize your downtime into a long weekend.

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