

## Take the Stress out of Vacation

Susan Pinker

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Dear Susan:

I realize that I have done nothing about planning my family's two week summer holiday and feel stressed just thinking about it. As an owner of a business with a moderate-sized staff, I put in 12 to 15 hour days and the idea of being away from work for two weeks is causing more pressure than anything else. I have no time to plan a vacation and wonder if holidays do any good or just stress you out more than you would be at work.

Going Buggy

Dear Buggy:

Holidays do shower all sorts of benefits but there is a catch. If you agonize or think negatively about work while you're away, you might as well be there doing it. That's what German researchers found when they canvassed 220 university employees and 87 emergency medical workers about the effects of vacations on their morale and work performance. Charlotte Fritz and Sabine Sonnentag, both at the Technical University of Braunschweig, discovered that holidays decrease health problems and exhaustion but don't affect how well you do your job. After a vacation work takes less effort but task performance is actually the same. Translation? Being relaxed makes your work seem easier but it's actually the same slog as before. When that realization hits the positive effects of your holiday evaporate.

That's one reason to take shorter, frequent holidays instead of taking time off all at once. After two weeks on the job that holiday glow begins to fade so you're better off repeating the exercise rather than waiting 11 months for another round. "What I found is that there's a higher workload when you come home after a long holiday. If you go more frequently there's always just a small pile facing you when you get back," said Ms. Fritz in an interview from Germany. Plus, when comparing the impact of one week versus longer breaks, there were no obvious benefits to a longer holiday, she added. "You can't say that the longer the vacation the better."

One solution to pre-holiday stress is to delegate the planning. A travel agent will arrange your whole trip as long as you're taking trains, planes, and not just automobiles. "You're not paying for the planning, just for the ticket processing," says Christine Latremoille, an agent at Uniglobe Dorval, near Montreal. That, plus a travel agent's

protections against airlines that go bust and other disasters, make plan-it-yourself vacations pale in comparison. Those hassles reduce the salutary effects of your holiday (well, duh), so along with incantations to ward off screaming children and flat tires, consider a concierge service for last minute snafus. For between \$35 and \$50 an hour, a concierge will research your holiday ideas, print out a spread sheet and arrange the whole shebang, from an RV trip to a sail boat for a week at a cottage. They'll even drive to your in-laws to pick up the passport you forgot there or take your daughter to the orthodontist before you leave, all of which Paula Quinn, a Montreal concierge has done before. She estimates that, if you have a vague idea of what you want, planning a summer holiday might take her about three hours. "We help people commit," she says.

Pretending to go on holiday but just staying home with a bottle of spray-on tan is a trend in Italy, according to a survey published in Rome's *Il Messagero*. Trend maybe, but it's hardly new. That's how my grandparents spent many of their summer holidays. They announced they were going to the mountains but in fact just stayed home with a week's worth of newspapers and their window air conditioning unit. Then they ignored the phone. That doesn't sound half bad, come to think of it.

Dear Susan:

Like everyone else, I am having trouble managing the volume of e-mail I get. One problem is solicitations that co-workers send on the company intranet for community or charitable events. Even if some are good causes, like hospital benefits and cancer runs, I'm starting to think using our intranet for non-work activities is an abuse. Should I say something?

Yes, but say it very softly to just the right person. Otherwise you'll look like The Grinch who Stole Christmas. Some people think a bulging in-box is a sign of importance. But a cluster of unread messages look like dust bunnies to me, just waiting to be swatted down before they proliferate. OK, I admit I have a compulsive streak. But I'm with you: anything that reduces the time I spend grooming my in-box is a gift. So, how do you get this message across? Obviously, don't use e-mail to broadcast it. And try not to complain right after a colleague's bid for Run for the Cure sponsors – that would be like pointing the finger after a few paper clips are used to promote world peace. Mark Ellwood, a productivity consultant whose book *Cut the Glut of E-Mail* is one of the self-help books on my shelf (I only read short ones), says that occasional personal use of company e-mail is OK but mass mailings are like stealing company resources. I like to think I'm not as moralistic but my message is similar. People who sweep cyber houses shouldn't press Send.

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