



Work Smart Live Smart

Corporate Wellness Programs – Vacation Benefits

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Holidays are essential to healthy workers, yet three in ten put holiday on standby.

The 6th annual Expedia.ca and Ipsos Reid survey reports that 29% of employed Canadians are not taking all of their yearly-allotted vacation days. This figure is up from the 21% found in 2007 and if your company has similar rates to the national average, your company could be in trouble.

"Canadians are hard working by nature, and more hours spent on the job can often mean less quality time with friends and loved ones and can negatively impact one's mental and physical health," says stress and wellness expert Beverly Beuermann-King.

Canadians who do take a vacation report major positive effects including: Feeling rejuvenated and connected to their personal life (50 per cent) and feeling better about their job and feeling more productive (39 per cent). "Vacations are important because they encourage play, allowing individuals to reconnect away from the stresses associated with everyday life," adds Beuermann-King.

Residents of Quebec (19%) are the least vacation-deprived, while residents from British Columbia are the most likely to describe themselves as vacation deprived (42%). Residents of Saskatchewan and Manitoba are the most likely not to have used all of their vacation days (42%), while residents of Quebec are the most likely to use their all of their vacation days (18%).

It may be easy to fall into the trap of thinking that employees who don't use up their allotted time are actually costing the company less. In fact, the Expedia.ca survey calculates that approximately \$6.3 billion is being handed back to employers in unused holidays each year. However, employees who do not access all of their allotted vacation are probably costing the company in the long run through increased sick time, accident rates, burnout and prescription benefits.

Employees who don't take their allotted time may experience more stress related symptoms such as mood swings, frustration, irritability, pessimism, feelings of being rushed, pushed or tired, more headaches, sleep difficulties and gastrointestinal disorders. Overworked and vacation deprived employees tend not to communicate as effectively, problem solve as efficiently and are not as creative or energized as those who do take their allotted vacation time.

"Many of us are working under the false belief that more in always equals more out," says Beuermann-King. "Unfortunately our bodies and minds can only work at peak efficiency for so long before they start to break-down and shut-down."

As Canadian employees, we believe that vacations are important for keeping healthy. A previous Expedia.ca and Ipsos Reid survey found that 94% of us think that accessing all of one's vacation days is important to managing stress.

"To truly benefit from vacation time, it is important that employees use all of their allotted time. For most individuals, taking a day here or there isn't enough to fully relieve built-up stress. Workers need to set up specific periods devoted to relaxation, to release accumulated tension and return to work recharged and ready to go," reports Beuermann-King.

However, it may not be the employee that is not valuing the benefits of vacation time. There are some leaders who see vacation time as a nuisance and a disruption to the productivity of the group. Some leaders make it difficult to take time off even when the employee is entitled. Canadians believe that employers can minimize vacation deprivation by lightening their workload (17 per cent) and by encouraging them to take time off (17 per cent).

Human resource personnel need to evaluate the vacation usage within their corporate teams to see if there are some individuals who may be on the verge of burnout. They also need to look for patterns that may indicate that some leaders are hindering the use of this recognized health benefit.

In this day, when dollars are tight and new wellness programs difficult to initiate, we need to look at the wellness programs that we currently have in place to see if they are effective and efficient. Vacation usage is one of the most common corporate wellness programs. Vacation usage needs to be evaluated, as it can be an early indicator of individual and team difficulties, which may negatively impact the corporate bottom line.

When asked if technological advances such as Blackberries, PDAs, Pocket PCs, webmail or cell phones make it easier to take vacations, 48 per cent of Canadian workers felt that technological advances have made it more difficult to get away from work, up from 41 per cent last year. 16% of survey respondents to the Expedia.ca survey reported that they still check their messages and emails while they are on vacation. "It is becoming increasingly difficult for Canadians to break away and enjoy a real vacation, given the popularity of electronic devices like Blackberries," says Beuermann-King.

"Technology and on-line vacation planning tools should be used to help us find the right vacation but we need to leave work at work while we are away and turn off our Blackberries and avoid the urge to check our email messages", recommends Beuermann-King.

Stress and wellness specialist, **Beverly Beuermann-King** translates current research and best practices information into a realistic, accessible and practical approach through her dynamic stress and wellness workshops, on-line articles, e-newsletters and media interviews and through a collaboration called *Awakening The Workplace*. Visit www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com for more on Beverly and her wellness work.

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