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Guides to a changing workplace

*Flex*Bulletin #101:   Happy July 4 - Holiday or Workcation?

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Here's to a Happy and Restful 4th of July!

And we hope you are one of those Americans who will get to truly enjoy the holiday. The fact that it's on a Saturday this year should help shield you from the relentless intrusion of electron-borne work that is turning some time off into a 24/7 excess of access.

It wasn't so long ago that July 4 marked the beginning of the "slow season." Summer consisted roughly of four 2-week blocks stretching from the Fourth through Labor Day. Many workplaces emptied out and people often assumed that serious work should not be scheduled in August.

Today, not so much. Vacations are taken a week at a time - if that. The weeks with holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Labor Day, Thanksgiving) have become "vacation weeks" either to pocket a bonus day and preserve precious time off, or to seem to be taking less than a full week off. And of course every year accounts grow of people sadly or heroically "staying connected" wirelessly from boat, beach and hotel bed while vacationing.

And now comes "workcationing." An awkward word, and an unusual blend of time on and off. Is this the wave of the future or an idea whose time shouldn't come?

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"This Summer, How About a Workcation?

Rare is the modern professional who can fully disconnect from the office during time off, so a small but growing number of workers are instead petitioning the boss to combine work and vacation: time away from the office that includes a few days working from an exotic locale."   --Rachel Emma Silverman, *Wall Street Journal*

Hurtling toward urgency while seeking solace

Like many new practices, no one knows how widespread they are or if they're trending beyond Twitter. Leaving aside the obvious constraints - this is a form of "remote work" in which the role, processes and deliverables have to be doable offsite - the workcation either allows production by day and tripping the light fantastic by night, or it is a slippery slope toward some combination of whiplash and burnout.

Like any good Rorschach rendering, each of us will interpret this development through our own filters. Is it a way of adding a mini-break in a long-hours position or one more concession to the 24/7 demands of today's workplace? I'll let you be the judge. Perhaps this image from the Journal piece will help:

"For Bill Raymond, Disney World proved an ideal workcation destination. In February, Mr. Raymond and his wife flew from their suburban Boston home to Orlando, where they spent a couple of days touring the theme park.

"For the next two days, Mr. Raymond, a solutions architect at enterprise search firm Voyager Search, clocked full workdays from the Orlando resort, hunkering down with his laptop and taking sales calls by the pool.

*"Mr. Raymond even wrote a **post** on his personal blog with tips on how to be a productive "workcationer" at Disney, pinpointing locations at the resort that offer fewer distractions. (Among his top picks were the pool at the Disney Port Orleans French Quarter resort, which he says wasn't "overrun with kids being kids.' ")*

Maybe it's time to take a hard look at time off

Whether you are at the beach, taking a staycation or mingling with the kids at Disney World/Land, hopefully your July 4 break will indeed be just that - a break from work and its connections. In my view Independence Day is a great tradition, a national moment when we both celebrate and honor "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Which brings me back to "vacation." I don't really have a great problem with workcations - or even with taking your iPhone to the beach, if need be. I tend to be a fan of all things in moderation. What these issues raise for me is the more serious attack on time that seems to be a central impulse of too many organizations these days. I regularly conduct focus groups, many with millennials. These are the newer hires, accumulating the least PTO. They are not as long-suffering as their Boomer predecessors. Their concerns about time are varied (and of course, practices vary among companies):

- With limited sick time, any significant personal or child's illness eats up most or all vacation
- The opportunity for National Guard training or global volunteer work becomes unpaid
- Paternity leave is unpaid, or in some cases, paid "the rest of the week the baby is born"

A great deal of attention has been paid of late to the relentless growth of the income gap. Far less has been paid to the worsening "time drought." We don't have to aspire to European practices, and none of us expects to see dramatic increases in paid time off. But does it make sense to be standing still or moving toward less time off, fewer moments of disconnection or intrusions on personal and family time that seem almost unconscious?

Rested, Rejuvenated and Ready

There is ample documentation that significant breaks from work - especially two weeks or so - have very beneficial effects on productivity, creativity and satisfaction. Two factors seem to be combining to make such time away rare: employers and employees. We've covered above some of the organizational pressures underway. They seem to be relentless.

But they are enabled in part by a set of disturbing behaviors on the part of large numbers of employees. We seem to have turned the corner from needing to check our devices or text back instantly to - depending on sleep needs - being accessible 18/24 and 7/7. I can't help but feel that an odd sort of social narcissism has set in: Many of us have become so important and indispensable, that somehow if we were to be unavailable for a week or two or even a few days, the entire Internet would crash or the polar ice caps would melt.

Our sense of proportion about time and its uses seems a bit out of whack. I hope we might look back at some old time away habits and consider resurrecting them, or at least rethink whether our tools are taking over the workshop. I am reminded of a great clarion call to this coming dilemma called **Turn It Off** by my good friend and colleague **Gil Gordon**. Gil was a colleague and pioneer advocating telecommuting in the 1980s. By 2000 he began to see the risk of hyper-connection and warned that all electronic tools came with off switches - and they should be used.

It is not too late to heed his warning.

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We welcome your comments on this Bulletin. When you write, please email me at:
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