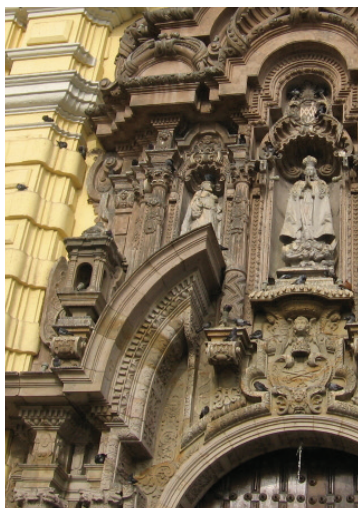# Work smarter, take a vacation

WRITTEN BY MADISON SCHULTZ

Research-backed advice
on how to keep employees
happy, healthy and engaged.

Relaxation during vacations
is important, according to
professor Charlotte Fritz's
research, but mastering a new
skill can also leave employees
even more refreshed.

IT'S SPRING BREAK, and the CEO of Vacasa—a Portland-based vacation rental management company with more than 3,000 employees worldwide—is in Mexico.

"I haven't heard from him since Friday, and I probably won't hear from him until next Monday," says Stephanie Bastin-Wells, Vacasa's head of employee experience.

He isn't missing, though—he's just on vacation.

Americans work longer hours and take fewer vacations days when compared to employees in other Western nations, according to the *Business Insider* article "11 American Work Habits Other Countries Avoid at All Costs." Americans are also notorious for working long after they've left the office, responding to work emails late in the evening or even on the weekend. Although some might praise this work ethic as being indicative of hyper-dedicated employees, the refusal to disengage from work—even for the evening—can lead to burnout, lower life satisfaction and other negative outcomes.

Just ask Charlotte Fritz, industrial and organizational psychology faculty at PSU. Starting when she was a doctoral student in Germany, Fritz has been studying how work breaks influence employee well-being and productivity, looking at everything from vacations to the typical two-day weekend.

According to Fritz, the CEO of Vacasa is doing the smart thing by putting work aside while he's on vacation—not only for himself, but for the whole company. Changing how American employees approach their vacation days starts with leadership.

"It's important to be a role model in terms of setting boundaries and going on vacation yourself," Fritz says. "Encourage employees to take time off. Don't reach out to them while they're gone, and don't expect them to respond to calls or emails."

Time off is key to reducing burnout

Burnout is the emotional and physical exhaustion that employees experience as a result of prolonged stress and frustration at work. In an ideal world, vacations give burned-out employees an opportunity to recharge and return to work feeling refreshed.

Research conducted by Fritz and collaborators suggests that when employees are able to recover well from work demands during nonwork time, they experience improved well-being, which allows them to return to work focused, energized, and motivated.

Despite the clear benefits of spending time away from work and mentally disengaging from work stressors, employees sometimes worry that if they take too much time off, their managers may conclude that their job is unimportant, Fritz says.

So how can companies encourage their employees to make the most of their vacation days?

"Make it clear that vacation days have nothing to do with job security and promotions," Fritz says.

Also important is what form vacation days take. Some companies allow employees to cash out their unused vacation time, converting paid time off to a larger paycheck.

"If you allow people to translate vacation days into monetary rewards, there's a good chance they will, especially in lower-paying jobs," Fritz says. Companies that want their employees to take advantage of their vacation days should not allow days to be cashed out. Vacation days should also expire rather than stacking or rolling over from year to year, encouraging employees to use them or lose them.

"Vacation days are supposed to be vacation days," Fritz says.

For a company like Vacasa, vacations are built into the corporate culture, says Bastin-Wells. Every Vacasa employee receives a $250 credit on their birthday and another on their work anniversary, which can be used at any of the thousands of vacation rental properties that Vacasa manages. Employees also receive a discount on property rentals, and salaried full-time employees get unlimited paid time off.

"We encourage people to take time off when they need it and when they want it," Bastin-Wells says. "We challenge our leadership with making sure we're staying close to our direct reports," and employees who are close to the point of burnout are encouraged to take time for themselves to step away and recharge.

Katie Wojciechowski, a copywriter at Vacasa, recently took two vacations with her husband: a two-week trip to Morocco and a shorter, three-day trip to Hawaii. Wojciechowski says that Vacasa's vacation policies make it easy for her to take time off—her supervisor frequently urges the team to take personal time, and unlimited paid time off means less hassle when it comes to planning vacations.

Any experience that puts a person outside of their comfort zone can be enough to give someone a new perspective, refresh their worldview, and recharge their emotional batteries.

Vacasa employees have plenty of other options when it comes to reducing work fatigue. Vacasa's new Pearl District office building features ping-pong tables and dedicated unwinding areas where employees can step away from work obligations, says Bastin-Wells. The office kitchens feature fresh fruit, bagels, yogurt and other convenience snacks, plus an in-house barista for gourmet coffee breaks.

Fritz cautions that some kinds of breaks taken during the work day—browsing Facebook for a few minutes, for example—don't measurably boost employees' energy or productivity levels. Employees looking to step away from work for a midday energy boost would do better to create "positive work moments," Fritz says. That could mean thanking a colleague for help they provided, creating a to-do list of upcoming projects, or thinking about the meaningful contributions one is making. Next time the post-lunch doldrums hit, grab a co-worker for a walk around the block and chat about an upcoming project rather than dwelling on a negative experience.

Getting the most out of vacations

Time off is integral for employees' success, but Fritz stresses that how a vacation is spent can affect whether someone returns to work feeling refreshed or if they come back feeling more stressed than before they left. In other words, there is such a thing as a bad vacation. In addition to the importance of leaving work at work, Fritz says that the best vacations involve relaxation and experiences that help develop a sense of mastery.

When it comes to relaxation and mastery during vacations, "it's not so much about, 'Do I play tennis or do I play soccer or do I read a book'—it's more about the experience you have while doing that," Fritz says.

Relaxation is about calming experiences, while mastery includes experiences that are stimulating but not too demanding or all-consuming.

"This could be a new hobby or really anything that broadens your horizons," says Fritz. "While it may take some effort, it still creates positive emotions."

Employees don't necessarily have to take up rock climbing or go deep-sea diving in order to gain a sense of mastery. Any experience that puts a person outside of their comfort zone can be enough to give someone a new perspective, refresh their worldview, and recharge their emotional batteries. For that reason, Fritz suggests that anyone planning a vacation should reconsider the temptation to book an all-inclusive, English-speaking resort.

"You don't have to try that hard," Fritz says. "Just being in a location that is very different from your everyday context provides opportunities for mastery experiences."

Wojciechowski incorporated both of these strategies into her Hawaii trip. In addition to spending time stretched out on the beach, Wojciechowski and her husband learned to surf. Wojciechowski is adamant about not checking work messages or email while on vacation.

Fritz's research also found employees do better taking several shorter vacations throughout the year as Wojciechowski did, as opposed to one long vacation. Shorter vacations every couple of

months, according to Fritz, allow employees to experience the positive effects throughout the year, and work is less likely to pile up during shorter sojourns.

Having worked hard before she left for Morocco, Wojciechowski faced a manageable workload when she returned and was still feeling the vacation afterglow when she left for Hawaii a few weeks later.

Preventing burnout without leaving home

Not everyone has unlimited paid time off, and twice-yearly vacations can only go so far in improving employees' well-being and productivity. So how can employees reduce burnout and exhaustion between vacations?

Fritz says that one of her own biggest takeaways from her research is the importance of daily psychological detachment from work—in other words, leaving work at work. Fritz, like Wojciechowski, tries not to answer work-related messages after hours, and her colleagues know to only call or text her in an emergency.

She also says that she and her spouse have become more careful with how they talk to each other about work.

"We aren't coming home and venting about the not-so-good experiences, we're just letting them be," she says. "We're trying to focus more on the positives."

Weekends are also important in the fight against burnout. The same principles that apply to a good vacation also apply to a refreshing weekend. Employees should pursue low-effort relaxation as well as look for opportunities to learn something new and challenge themselves.

Even if employees can't make it to Mexico for a two-week getaway, it's possible for them to improve work outcomes and prevent burnout by bringing a little bit of a vacation mindset into their everyday lives. At the end of the work day, they should be mindful of leaving work obligations behind and spend a few minutes during their commute home reflecting on the positive aspects of their job. And perhaps after engaging in a quick mastery experience, employees should find a place to sit in the sun with a magazine and a margarita, knowing that somewhere halfway across the world, their CEO is doing the same. ∎

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Employees at Vacasa have many choices for work and break spaces in their Portland offices, including a rooftop deck.

Tips for Managers

1. **Lead by example:** If a manager works long hours, answers emails at 10 p.m., and never takes a day off, employees might think they need to do the same in order to advance in the company. Managers should model good psychological detachment behaviors for their employees to emulate instead.

2. **Make vacations company policy:** Insist vacation days be used as vacation days rather than allowing employees to cash them out. Vacation days should expire instead of indefinitely rolling over to encourage employees to use them.

3. **Put employees at ease:** Employees should understand that vacations are part of a healthy work life, and that taking time off will not negatively affect their chances for a promotion or their job security.

4. **Don't expect employees to be available 24/7:** If round-the-clock availability or periods of being on-call aren't part of an employee's job description, managers shouldn't expect them to be checking work messages outside of normal work hours.

5. **Allow flexible scheduling:** Flexible scheduling, such as allowing employees to work four 10-hour days or work remotely, makes it easier for employees to engage in recovery behaviors.

Tips for Employees

1. **Don't ruminate on the negatives:** Rather than coming home and venting to your partner, roommate or pet about the bad parts of your day, let go of negative work experiences and choose to focus on the positive experiences.

2. **Leave work at work:** If possible, turn off email and messaging notifications for work-related accounts, and don't be tempted to check messages during non-work hours.

3. **Relax:** Engaging in low-stress activities is key to feeling recharged and refreshed the next day. Read a book, take the dog for a walk, or spend some time with friends.

4. **Challenge yourself:** Participate in activities that contribute to a sense of mastery. This could be as simple as engaging in challenging exercise or learning a new hobby—anything works, as long as it still evokes positive feelings.

5. **Use your vacation days:** Don't let vacation days go to waste! Rather than taking one big vacation, Fritz recommends taking a few smaller vacations throughout the year to experience its positive effects more frequently. Fritz suggests a combination of long weekends (for example, taking off Friday and Monday) and at least one longer trip. "Seven to 10 days is a really nice chunk of time," Fritz says.