

Take a vacation: Sharpen your integration skills

When's the last time you took a vacation where you fully or significantly turned off work? Not only does taking a vacation lead to fresh perspectives and increased enjoyment and effectiveness at work, did you know it can also build important integration skills that will help you manage your workload long past your vacation?

Yes, vacations are fun and good for our physical and mental health, but it turns out vacations can also build a variety of skills that increase you and your co-workers effectiveness at work.

Vacations in a 24/7 world

Today, turning off work for a week may seem impossible. You worry that doing so may create problems for your clients or peers. Or maybe it raises fears that you aren't 'indispensable.' Or maybe you are trying to plan a vacation in a workplace where "no-work" vacations are actually discouraged.

Let's say you are successful in getting away, is it possible to push back at the assumption you will stay fully accessible while away? How will you handle the the transition back to work, where you return to a significant load of 'catch up' work, and the pressure of gearing back up to the fast-paced world all over again?

While all this may seem daunting, these issues can be planned around, and when managed successfully, can in fact build skills that increase work effectiveness. With careful planning, taking a vacation could even be seen as a badge of competence, and an opportunity to develop skills that have benefits that will span your entire career. (See blue box.)

Vacations sharpen the saw

Why are vacations so important? Vacations help us 'sharpen the saw'ⁱ – over using a saw dulls the blade – vacations provide time away from work to enrich ourselves and gain new perspectives. According to research, here are some other benefits from vacations:

- Taking a vacation reduces burnout and prevents build up of stress.
- Vacations can mitigate loss of focus and diminished concentration.
- Taking a break improves our ability to do complex thinking. When we temporarily step away from a work problem it fosters creativity.
- People who take vacations are physically and mentally healthier.ⁱⁱ
- Supporting employees to take vacations helps retain good employees.

Tell me how!

Some organizations encourage taking vacations. Everyone from new employees to senior executives models turning off work as they explore the world and recharge from spending time with family and friends. Other organizations

discourage turning off work. Instead, they approach “vacations” as an opportunity to continue working, just in a nicer place. No matter your situation, taking a vacation offers you valuable opportunities to strengthen important skills. To take a vacation, you need to:

1) *Plan ahead.* Think through what needs to be done while you’re away. What decisions and inputs will be required from the people you work with? What can be front loaded? What can be postponed until your return? What can be delegated up? Down? By planning well in advance, everything can be put in place.

2) *Pro-actively manage communication.* Decide the best way to manage on-going communication while you’re away.

- Set up an out-of-office reminder with instructions of who to contact in case of an emergency.
- Have an assistant check mail and email with instructions as to whom to forward urgent emails.
- If required, or preferred, check emails for a short period of time in the morning or end of day. Only respond to critical emails by forwarding to appropriate parties. Consider fully disengaging at least for a few days.
- Set up a system where someone can contact you in case of emergency.

3) *Clarify expectations.* Agree on the best process for making time sensitive decisions and managing unexpected work responsibilities.

- Let everyone involved in your matters know your plan, the person responsible

while you’re gone, the importance you place on this time away, and how it’s going to benefit them (e.g. that you will reciprocate when they are on vacation).

- Let an assistant or peer be aware of your ‘true’ availability such as how you could be reached by phone, or when you are checking emails.

4) *Anticipate emergencies.* Realize that emergencies can happen, be flexible. Think ahead about challenges that could arise and plan out different scenarios for effectively addressing them. Set clear boundaries by defining what an emergency is so that all work doesn’t become an emergency.

5) *Schedule in “quiet days.”* Avoid scheduling a lot of meetings and phone calls a few days before you leave and when you first return. By blocking out “quiet work time” you create time for last minute tasks, as well as time to catch up on important emails and other work upon re-entry.

Benefits that don’t fade with the tan

How does successful vacation planning develop 21st century skills? And how can you plan a vacation even in a workplace that is less supportive of fully disengaging from work? Let’s look at this in action.

Andrew, an associate at a big law firm, wanted to plan a beach vacation with his significant other. He has been working at a break-neck pace for Miranda, a partner in his firm, and he is concerned about taking a vacation in a responsible way. Here is what Andrew did.

Before booking his vacation, Andrew reached out to Miranda and other partners in his practice group letting them know when he was planning on taking a vacation and whether they saw any significant roadblocks. Miranda expressed a concern about a deadline that fell on the first day of Andrew's vacation, and they agreed that Andrew would start and end his vacation one day later.

A few weeks before going on his vacation, Andrew tried to determine what would need to be completed for the matters on which he was working before he left for his vacation. Andrew formulated a list of tasks and asked Miranda for her input. Miranda removed a few items from the list that could wait until after Andrew's vacation and added a few items.

A week before Andrew's vacation, Andrew reached out to other attorneys in his firm with whom he works as well as certain clients (after first discussing with Miranda) to let them know of his plans. He let them know he would be checking emails once every morning and he would be reachable in emergencies through his secretary. Andrew also delegated to junior associates or completed all of the items on the list he created with Miranda.

During this time Andrew scheduled time to discuss his absence with his secretary, including to whom certain items should be forwarded, how to reach him in case of an emergency, and at which times he would be unreachable as a result of a planned mini-cruise during his vacation.

The night before leaving, Andrew created an out-of-office reminder that explained when he would be back and how to reach his secretary in case of emergencies.

21st Century Skills: the building blocks to an integrating life

There are leaders today who are expanding the lessons that can be learned from taking vacations.

These leaders are forging a new model of career success that supports both personal and work goals. We call them "Whole Life Leaders."

Whole Life Leaders harness their desire to live a full life as a way to master 21st century skills that benefit themselves, their families, and their workplaces.

To maximize efficiency Whole Life Leaders learn to:

- 1. Master self-discipline.*
- 2. Plan and prioritize.*
- 3. Anticipate the future. Both for work and life events.*
- 4. Create quiet focused work time.*
- 5. Use technology strategically. Including knowing when to turn it off.*
- 6. Set personal boundaries. Remembering to say yes, no, and go slow.*

Whole Life Leaders also learn their work/life goals are dependent on others. To create an environment that fosters cooperation and interdependence, they learn to:

- 7. Build strong relationships.*
- 8. Create a sense of reciprocity.*
- 9. Develop win-win delegation, including advancing others through delegation.*
- 10. Manage expectations – communicating goals right from the start.*
- 11. Be flexible – knowing flex is a two way street.*
- 12. Set collective boundaries. Determining as a team what is essential.*

Whole Life Leaders are developing more effective workplaces, and it is their commitment to both work and life that helps them succeed at this.

During vacation, Andrew checked email for a few minutes every morning. Most emails he could ignore, but some required prompt forwarding. In one instance, a client and supervising attorney both emailed him about setting meeting to discuss a new matter. Andrew responded suggesting times for meetings the week of his return. At another point during his trip, Miranda was in urgent need of a document she knew Andrew had. She called Andrew on his cell phone and together they resolved the issue.

Andrew also planned his vacation to end a day before his scheduled return to the office. When he arrived home, he had time to unpack, decompress from the trip and catch up on the emails he had set aside during vacation.

When Andrew got into the office the next day, he had a clear sense of what was most important to attend to and he was refreshed and ready to get back to work.

Andrew may have only been hoping for a little R&R when planning his vacation, but by doing this he was also sharpening his ability to manage in our new 24/7 world. By committing to taking time away from work, Andrew was reinforcing his ability to plan and prioritize his work, use relationship building and delegation to get out the door, make strategic use of technology to stay connected, and schedule quiet time as a way to stay focused on his highest priority work before and after his return. These are great skills for succeeding in a world that has a constant stream of new demands,

and they are great skills for taking time to recharge.

Skills for a life time

Andrew's management of his vacation demonstrated 21st century skills that enabled him to take time away from work without negatively impacting the work he does.

What would it feel like to experiment with these 21st century skills yourself? What looks challenging? What looks easy? Which skills could improve your work/life balance long after vacation?

Taking vacations helps us explore how workload can be managed in more creative ways. Planning for vacations can also help us examine the effectiveness of existing work processes for ourself and everyone on our team.

So get started planning your next vacation. As you can see, it's an opportunity to develop 21st century skills, strengthen relationships with the people you work with, and take some much needed time to recharge yourself.

i. See Stephen Covey, [7 Habits of Highly Successful People](#).

ii. Pfeffer, Jeffrey. All Work, No Play? Maybe Long Hours Don't Pay. HBS 2007