

Making holidays work

With the holiday season in full swing, work and organisational psychologist Jessica de Bloom takes a tour of the world of vacation research

'How long should a man's vacation be?' was the title of an article in the *New York Times* in 1910, in which businessmen, academics and politicians discussed whether vacations for the working classes were necessary and why. Today, European workers enjoy a minimum of 20 days paid annual leave (plus statutory days) and the tourism industry employs more than 260 million people worldwide. Does that mean we have the answers to the intriguing questions raised in a newspaper more than 100 years ago?

Not quite.

Our journey will pass major theories and milestones of research on recovery from work, and get an overview of findings on vacation effects. As a souvenir of your trip, you'll be given some practical tips to make the most of your next holiday.

Vacations are considered a source of happiness and an essential ingredient for quality of life (Filep, 2012; Richards, 1999). As the longest chunk of leisure time that relieves people from job stress and leaves them free to do as they please, holidays are viewed as a means to preserve and to restore full working capacity.

But holidays also come at a price. In the UK, a legal minimum of 5.6 weeks of annual vacation adds up to roughly 840 million unproductive days. In addition, each British family spends about two months' salary on their holidays. Are vacations worth this investment of time and money? What benefits can employees expect during their time off and after returning to their work? Is there anything people can do to increase or prolong the benefits of their vacation? And do holidays render employers a recovered, productive and better-performing work force?

Pre-vacation perils

The next holiday is booked. In the coming weeks, you can lean back and dream about relaxing under a palm tree, drinking cocktails and quality time with

your family, right? Unfortunately, research suggests otherwise.

A longitudinal study following 96 Dutch workers in the two weeks before their vacation found that health and wellbeing decrease in the last week before departure. This decline was related to rising levels of workload and was even more pronounced in women, who additionally experienced a rise in home load (Nawijn et al., 2013). And more danger lurks in the transition phase between busy working weeks and a holiday period.

Physical complaints within the first days off seem to be a widespread problem with different names, such as transitory stress, environment shock or leisure sickness (see also tinyurl.com/pvngj7t). Several studies suggest that the start of a holiday period is for many people spoiled by high blood pressure, poor sleep quality, bad mood and lack of initiative, as well as more serious bodily symptoms such as

fever, migraine or an upset stomach (Blasche et al., 2012; Pearce, 1981; Vingerhoets & Van Huijgenvoort, 2002).

The etiology of these phenomena is not yet well understood, but many symptoms show a striking resemblance to immune reconstitution inflammatory syndrome, which originates in sudden deprivation of corticosteroids, major stress hormones (Nehls, 2012; Van Heck, & Vingerhoets, 2007).

Imagine the reaction of your car engine if you changed from fifth gear directly to first gear. In the same manner, a stressed human body working on full-speed in the weeks preceding a holiday has trouble with downshifting in a flash.

Let's say you are able to smoothen the transition period and master the start of the holiday without any complaints. Which benefits are still to come? Is a



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Are vacations worth the time and money?

resources

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vacation worth the extra effort and preparation stress at work and at home?

Holiday resort as last resort?

On the positive side, two long-term epidemiological studies have suggested that you may actually lower your risk of cardiovascular disease, heart attacks and even premature coronary death (Eaker et al., 1992; Gump & Matthews, 2000). One study was part of the famous, still ongoing 'Framingham Heart Study', a study of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute and Boston University that has been medically examining healthy adults annually since 1948 in order to investigate the relation between cardiac health, lifestyle, environmental factors and inheritance. They identified infrequent holidays as an important risk factor for heart diseases.

However, these two studies and a third study by a team of Japanese researchers (Tarumi et al., 1998) also found that people who go on vacation regularly tend to have a healthier lifestyle in general, for instance regarding smoking, exercising, sleep and nutrition. This shows that in order to fully understand the potential benefits of vacations, longitudinal, individual-level studies that investigate people's health and wellbeing before, during and after vacation are needed.

In 2009 we meta-analysed the available evidence about vacation effects on employee health and wellbeing (De Bloom, 2009). Until then, only seven studies had systematically examined these effects. They revealed small decreases in exhaustion and health complaints as well as small increases in life satisfaction after vacation that had vanished within two to four weeks after resuming work.

In order to gain more detailed information on the development of wellbeing, our research team from the Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands set up a series of longitudinal studies in about 250 Dutch employees (De Bloom et al., 2010, 2012, 2013). We

When workaholics take a break

What happens when perfectionists and workaholics – employees who are cognitively preoccupied with their work – go on a holiday? Two studies, two possible scenarios.

Study 1:

In a study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 2012, Paul Flaxman and his team followed a group of 77 academics before, during and after Easter holiday. They compared self-reported changes in wellbeing between people scoring high or low on perfectionism.

Study 2:

In a study on three-week summer holidays, published in *Stress and Health* in 2014, De Bloom, Radstaak et al. tracked wellbeing in 54 Dutch employees categorised as high or low on workaholism.

Scenario 1:

The dutiful workers miss their work, feel bad or even guilty whenever they leave their office. Consequently, free time comprises a deprivation of their 'drug' and it may be extremely difficult for them not to work



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or at least think about their work, resembling a state of withdrawal. Accordingly, wellbeing will go down.

Scenario 2:

For persons who are preoccupied with their work, a vacation may constitute one of the very rare chances to psychologically disengage from work, relieving the workers from their usually high levels of job stress. The physical distance from the office may translate into psychological distance from work and weaken the workers' tendency to worry about their job. Accordingly, wellbeing will go up.

Results and conclusion:

Both studies arrive at strikingly comparable

conclusions. In line with Scenario 2, perfectionists and workaholics enjoy highly comparable levels of wellbeing to the non-preoccupied workers during the vacation period, while their wellbeing was lower before the start of the holiday. However, right after returning to work, the preoccupied workers experience a sudden drop in wellbeing. Vacationing seems to offset characteristic differences in wellbeing between workers with and without the tendency to worry about their work. Perfectionist and workaholic workers seem to gain more in terms of wellbeing by going on a trip, but they also lose more upon returning.

found that self-reported employee health and wellbeing, measured with one-item indicators via telephone interviews, increased during vacation. The magnitude

of this improvement was medium-sized in terms of effect sizes. Within the first week of resuming work, workers' wellbeing lapsed to pre-vacation levels, regardless of

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the type or length of their holiday. Subjective vacation experiences, such as relaxation, pleasure in and control over one's daily activities, turned out to affect wellbeing changes more than the type of activity people engaged in during their trip.

These individual-level findings have recently been supported by Terry Hartig and his team's study of national level drug consumption and vacationing. By combining data from the Swedish pharmacy corporation, the national health care system and governmental data on vacation taking in the period between 1993 and 2005, they laid bare a significant relationship between the number of people on vacation and a decline in antidepressant consumption (Hartig et al., 2013).

Summing up, vacations from work seem to have positive, though short-lived effects on wellbeing. This is particularly so for vacationers who are able to relax, have fun and enjoy high levels of autonomy during their trip. But happy workers are not necessarily productive, high-performing workers. So, what can bosses expect when granting their staff time off?

A ticket to high job performance?

Surprisingly, systematic research on the relation between vacationing and job performance is scarce. Let's first look at the evidence generated by a team of researchers from the University of Missouri-Columbia and Tennessee State University, who reviewed 39 studies about school performance after summer holidays (Cooper et al., 1996). Compared with spring achievement test scores, pupils performed worse after summer holidays, especially in maths and spelling. This decline was even greater in pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The researchers hypothesise that the

decrease in school performance is related to a lack of practice and differential availability of learning materials, meaning that well-off parents practise maths and reading with their kids during holidays while poorer parents don't.

So much for schoolchildren. But how about working adults, who have considerably shorter holidays than school kids and different tasks awaiting them on return? Fascinatingly, a study (discussed on National Public Radio:

tinyurl.com/l2qmt3v) has described rather similar declines in performance for surgeons. Jason Hockenberry and Lorens Helmchen (2014) compared mortality rates for patients whose surgeon has operated the previous day and

patients whose surgeon had not. They found a small increase in mortality rates in the latter group. Even though the effect was very small and there are possible alternative explanations such as scheduling the sickest patients first after the surgeons' return, this study suggests that time off work may result in skill depreciation in highly specialised professions. Please note that this study was conducted in the United States, where employees are entitled to a meagre 10 days of annual leave. How would the results look in Europe, where each worker enjoys a more lavish allowance?

Actually, several international studies have reported spikes of hospital fatalities due to medical errors and complications in summer time, a phenomenon referred to as the 'July effect' or, more dramatically, the 'killing season'. It is speculated that this effect is mainly related to the influx of newly qualified doctors during this time of the year and seasonal variations in complaints (due, for example, to heat waves). But according to Michael Englesbe and his research team in their 2007 paper, the absence of experienced senior staff due to vacation schedules may exacerbate the problem.

Does this mean employers should rather try to prevent their staff from taking holidays? Better not!

In line with the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001), recovery researchers have speculated that long periods of free time would enable workers to restore lost resources, which they could use after starting to work again. Correspondingly, a series of diary studies in Swiss and German samples have indeed proved that workers who feel mentally and physically refreshed in the morning experience their work as effortless, are willing to help colleagues and display other forms of organisational citizenship behaviours as well as high self-rated task performance (Binnewies et al., 2009, 2010).

What might the size of such an effect be? In a CNBC interview, audit firm executive Maryella Gockel claimed that 'for each 10 vacation hours a person took, we found on average that performance reviews were 8 per cent higher'. Findings from the few existing scientific studies on this topic seem to match this claim. Using samples of German and US workers and repeated measurements before and after the respite, Fritz and Sonnentag (2006) and Lounsbury and Hoopes (1986) found that employees rated their job performance higher after taking a holiday. In addition, a study by Mina Westman and Dahlia Etzion (2001), involving a sample of 87 Israeli blue-collars workers before and after a factory shutdown, found that rates for short absenteeism for unclear reasons (i.e. without medical attest), decreased from 63 per cent before to 44 per cent after the company holiday. It appears that holidays can actually work for employers.

Recover to discover

According to a press release of the US Travel Association, two out of three American executives believe that vacationing improves creativity at work. The ability to 'think outside the box', to produce novel, original and useful problem solutions, is vital to drive civilisations forward and adapt to change (Hennessy & Amabile, 2010).

"...holidays can actually work for employers"

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In recent years, several studies have demonstrated that people who have lived abroad show higher levels of creativity (for an overview, see Leung et al., 2008). For instance, William Maddux and Adam Galinsky (2009) conducted several experiments in their lab during which students had to work on creativity tasks such as the Dunker candle problem, negotiation and drawing tasks or the Remote Associates Test. They found that students who had lived abroad and adapted to a foreign culture solved the tasks more creatively than students who lacked this international experience. But can considerably shorter periods abroad also improve creativity?

To answer this question and to also address the problem of reversed causality in earlier studies (that is: it's the creative students who go abroad rather than a stay abroad making them more creative), we set up a longitudinal field study (De Bloom, Ritter et al., 2014). In this study, we examined creativity with the help of an idea-generation task in 46 Dutch workers before and after a three-week summer holiday. Each generated idea was blindly rated by three trained raters independently. Not surprisingly, we found that the ideas after the holiday were as original as before. A trip to Cuba does not make you a

Holiday boosters

Exercise at the end of your last work day

Job stress activates your body for action by releasing stress hormones into your blood stream. Smooth the transition to lazy life by heading to the gym after your last day at the office. This will help you to mentally disengage from your work, get rid of the stress hormones and prevent physical complaints during your first days off work (Vingerhoets & Van Huijgenvoort, 2002). If you're a couch potato, try gradually reducing work hours during your last work week and take a firm walk home on your last work day.

Set an out of office reply for your work e-mail...

...and make sure that it's on until a day after your return. This way, you can sneak back into your office, prioritise your work and possibly even surprise colleagues with an earlier-than-expected reply.

Detach and take control

Leave your work phone at home, refrain from checking your e-mails and make clear arrangements concerning your availability during your absence. Also remember: getting in touch with the office at a time that suits you is much better than an unexpected call during family dinner. You determine if and when you are available for work!

Start slowly

Resume work on Wednesdays instead of Mondays or gradually build up working times during your first week back at the office. In any case, prevent overtime after work resumption. A stress-free return to work and relaxing activities during the evening after work help to preserve positive vacation effects and savour your 'holiday afterglow' (Kühnel & Sonntag, 2002; Strauss-Blasche et al., 2004).

Create and cherish happy holiday memories

The more senses an experience engages, the more intensive and memorable it will be (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). So try to mindfully attend to holiday

Hemingway. However, it also turned out that the range of ideas produced by each person was more diverse after vacation,



experiences: listen, watch, touch, smell, taste. According to the peak-end rule (Fredrickson, 2000), we remember particularly well the worst, the best and the last moments of an experience. For sweet memories, end your holiday on a high note instead of spending your last day off cleaning the apartment and packing. Back at home, use a holiday photo as a screensaver on your work computer, meet your new holiday pals again and cook your favourite vacation dish for them.

Spread your annual leave

Avoid 'binge vacationing' – taking only one long holiday per year. Vacation benefits wash out fast, irrespective of the holiday duration. Moreover, it may be risky to put all eggs in one basket and hope for the perfect holiday. By planning regular long weekends and short vacations, you can achieve a healthy work-life balance in order to feel vital all year round.

Make every day a holiday

Make optimal use of shorter respites such as lunch breaks, evening hours and weekends. Integrate your personal 'holiday happiness' ingredients into everyday life and celebrate mini-holidays at home. Have a swim in the morning, a nap or a picnic in the park during your lunch break. Play board games instead of watching TV for one evening per week, or join a guided tour through your home town. You'll be surprised how much there is still to discover.

indicating higher levels of mental flexibility. This means, after returning home from a vacation, workers are

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slightly more likely to consider different aspects of a problem and avoid reliance on conventional ideas and routine solutions. Travel may actually broaden the mind!

It is not yet clear what the underlying mechanisms for this type of change are. A prime suspect is removal from work strain. Job stressors such as time pressure and cognitive or emotional demands deplete people's psychophysiological resources by demanding constant attention. Stressed people are more likely to display routine, well-rehearsed behaviour patterns, because their attention and effort is focused on salient job stressors. In this situation, creative ideas are less likely to come to awareness (Fredrickson, 2001; Martindale, 1999).

This suggests that moments free of job stress are important for human functioning. But how often can we experience these moments nowadays? Boundaries between work and private life vanish and many people can work everywhere and at any time. Laptops, tablets and smartphones ensure that we can stay connected to our work around the clock. For many people, vacationing means spending a lot of money to stare at their phone in exotic locations.

Always on, never done

'I am on vacation. Your message is being deleted. Please resend your email after I'm back in the office.' You may receive this reply if you e-mail Daimler employees during holiday season. They follow the trend set by another German vehicle-maker, which shuts down the e-mail servers after office hours. Are such drastic measures useful in counteracting the prevailing 24/7 work mentality? Is mental disengagement after work really at stake?

Two diary studies across several work days published by a team of researchers from the Erasmus University Rotterdam



provide some insights (Derks & Bakker, 2012; Derks et al., 2012). The authors found that intensive smartphone use during evening hours can hamper work-life balance by reducing the possibility of engaging in beneficial leisure activities that provide a sense of mental disengagement from work and help to restore working capacities.

Numerous other diary studies, many led by German professor Sabine Sonnentag, have also shown that mental disengagement from work during leisure time acts as a buffer between job demands and psychological ill-being (e.g. Sonnentag, 2012; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2014).

While we have generally replicated the findings regarding the importance of mental detachment in our vacation studies, we did not find strong and consistent relations between engagement in work-related activities during vacation – pretty much the opposite of mental detachment – and changes in health and wellbeing. How come? Whilst around a third of vacationers worked during their holiday at some point, it appeared that working time during holidays remained limited to less than 30 minutes per day for most working vacationers. Moreover, the majority of employees had complete control over whether to engage in work-related activities as well as the type of tasks they pursued, and the starting and ending time

of these tasks. Accordingly, it seems crucial whether employees have the feeling that they can freely decide which activity to pursue during free time and how much pleasure they experience while performing this activity. This is also in line with Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory and other studies that found that control over one's free-time activities is key to recovery from work (Blasche et al., 2014; De Bloom et al., 2013; Pressman et al., 2009).

No silver bullet

In conclusion, a vacation is definitely not a silver bullet that can compensate for a constant imbalance between work and private life. It may even cause some troubles, as most nations like to enjoy their holidays at the same time of the year, resulting in staffing problems for companies.

Still, there is a lot of scientific evidence demonstrating that a holiday boosts health and wellbeing and positively affects work performance, at least temporarily. The challenge is to make holidays work, that is, making optimal use of leisure time. Instead of pondering where to go, how long and what to do there, focus on the things that really matter: a smooth start of the vacation period, mental disengagement from everyday worries, pleasure and autonomy during the holiday, a memorable end of the vacation period and a gradual return to work. Have a happy holiday!



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