



Rested: After receiving encouragement from his employer, Chuck Casto took his first vacation in seven years.
ANN HERMES



TAKE A VACATION. REALLY.

Some companies set policies to encourage reluctant workers to take time off.

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Among all the people relaxing on the beach at Marco Island, Fla., earlier this month, Chuck Casto might have ranked as one of the happiest. And why not? His five-day trip with his wife and 7-year-old daughter marked his first major vacation in nearly seven years.



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Reporter Marilyn Gardner discusses a new effort to make sure employees use their vacation time.

"It was a great opportunity for us to recharge and spend time together as a family," says Mr. Casto, a vice president at CSN Stores in Boston, a Web-based business selling home goods. "The weather was good. It was just what we needed."

Casto's vacationless years began when he worked for advertising agencies. "There's no break in the action," he says. "You just keep going." He continued the pattern when he ran his own consulting firm for nearly four years. "When you're your own boss, it's very difficult to carve out time to take a break."

Now he revels in working for a company that actively encourages people to use their allotted three weeks of time off. "It's one of the strong benefits that everyone takes advantage of," he says.

Other businesses are sending similar messages. This month PricewaterhouseCoopers, a professional-services firm, kicked off a 10th-anniversary celebration with a day called "Take Your 10," urging employees to take their 10 paid holidays, as well as vacation. To emphasize the importance of time away, the firm distributed a booklet, "Rest and Relaxation: The Value of Time Off," to all 30,000 employees. The company's website also offers suggestions about how to use that time. Vacation has even become an issue on performance reviews.

"Managers would receive reports about members of their team who had stopped earning vacation because they had reached their cap," says Michael Fenlon, managing director of people strategy. "We wanted to change that and build a culture in which uninterrupted work-free vacations were more the norm than the exception."

For several years, Scott Stevenson, director of advisory practice at PricewaterhouseCoopers, did not take all of his vacation days. "There was almost a feeling of guilt when you took time off," he says.

Now Mr. Stevenson uses almost all of his allotted four weeks, some of it in half-day increments. Although he concedes that he still has "a twinge of guilt sometimes," he says, "I do credit the firm for having us talk about it more, and the need for it, and the value of it to the work we do."

Although staffing is tight at TripAdvisor, a website in Newton, Mass., the company encourages all employees to take their vacation. It even added four summer Fridays to everyone's holiday schedule. "The bosses are leading by example, promising to take them all," says spokesman Brian Payea. "Everyone gets a minimum of three weeks' vacation at the start, plus the new summer Fridays."

The decision by some worker to endure years of vacation deprivation may be extreme, but they symbolize a pattern common to many American workers – a reluctance to take all the vacation days they have earned. A new poll estimates that 47 million employees will forgo some vacation time in 2008. That adds up to 460 million unused days, an average of three "wasted" days per worker, according to Expedia, a travel website. More than half of respondents to a Yahoo! HotJobs survey plan to skip their vacation this year to save money.

During a bad economy, in particular, workers may be concerned that going away will make them expendable in the boss's eyes.

"I don't think most employers alter vacation policy in light of economic times," says Kevin Oakes, CEO of the Institute for Corporate Productivity in Seattle. "But many employees alter how they take vacations ... because of concern about how their vacation may be viewed by senior management."

Vacation policies are governed by state laws, not federal. "Problems come up where the right to the vacation is not well defined in the policy," says Bruce Clarke, president of Capital Associated Industries, a nonprofit employers' association. "Sometimes the language in these policies is ambiguous. Did they earn it? Do they get to keep it when they quit?"

Some companies adopt a strict use-it-or-lose-it policy, setting a maximum amount of vacation workers can carry over. In California, that is illegal.

"Workers accrue time pro rata by law," says Kenneth Sulzer, an attorney at Seyfarth Shaw in Los Angeles. "People end up with substantial banks of vacation pay. When they leave, they are entitled to all unused vacation at their current pay rate. Some of our clients are making people take time off as a way of reducing this big collective vacation bank. That's one way the recession is impacting employees' vacations."

Whatever a company's policies or practices, Casto, rested and relaxed after his Florida vacation, remains an enthusiastic convert to the idea that all employees should take their vacation. He says, "Even those of us who are big workaholics still need that time to regroup and recharge, to get back to being very productive."