

vacation skipping— an occupational health hazard

Barbara A. Gunn

"Extension is a seven-day-a-week job."

"I haven't had a real vacation in three years."

"If I don't use Annual Leave this month, I'll lose it."

There are no slack seasons, no quarter or semester breaks, or summer vacation periods in Extension. Programs continue year round—many of them on evenings and weekends, when most people are free to attend them. Summer comes—the traditional vacation period for many—and the Extension pace quickens with events, fairs, and achievement days coming one after another. For the Extension professional, the result can be an occupational hazard: vacation skipping.

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Vacation time comes automatically for those in public school or university teaching. Most businesses schedule employee vacations far in advance and those with seniority get first choice. An Extension professional, on the other hand, has freedom to schedule his or her own vacation—to use any time, for weekends, a week at a time, or a long vacation. With all this freedom to plan and no one pressing for a vacation schedule, vacation planning often receives the lowest priority—something to be sandwiched inbetween Extension commitments or, worse yet, postponed until the work load eases. It seldom does.

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The justification for paid vacation time is that it's good for both the individual and the organization, leading to increased worker productivity and creativity. That's why vacation time is written into most employment contracts. Even the Extension professional who doesn't get around to taking vacations would probably agree philosophically that vacations are good, but no doubt about it, they are hard to schedule. Many of us still have ties to rural living, to farms and ranches where there wasn't the tradition of vacations that city folk have. Then, too, Extension work is fun and it's sometimes difficult to separate work from play when we're enjoying ourselves.

I was a vacation skipper until one night the fellow next to me on a plane returning to Reno asked, "And what do you do for fun?" I had no answer. Some days later, I participated in a values clarification exercise that began with listing "Ten Things I Like to Do . . ." I made my list and then asked myself why I wasn't doing these things. Too busy, I decided—I'd get to that later. Then I thought of my father, an Oregon rancher who through the years had dreamed of a vacation in Hawaii. He finally got there—but not until after he had a stroke and was confined to a wheelchair.

I took the bold (for me) step of scheduling a two-week canoe trip six months in advance. I blocked off that time on the calendar and considered it as committed as I would have any important Extension event scheduled that far in advance. I took the trip and on my return I was so enthusiastic about the benefits of a vacation that I immediately wanted to write an article for all the vacation skippers in Extension.

My research, if you can call it that, consisted of consulting *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* to see what had been written in the last 10 years on the desirability of vacations. To my surprise, I found only one article—that one written in 1969 and titled, "Why You Need a Vacation."¹ (All the other vacation articles assumed there'd be a vacation and offered advice: where to go, what to wear, how to entertain the children on a long trip and how to avoid some of the pitfalls of overscheduling, too much togetherness, etc.)

In the article on why you need a vacation, there were quotes from various medical authorities:

Vacations are necessities, not luxuries; persons who claim they don't need one are either extremely single-minded or fear job competition. *Peter J. Steincrohn, M.D.*

Many businessmen are married to their work to the extent that it is not only their job but also their hobby

and civic interest. They feel indispensable, and this only indicates that they are neurotic and insecure. *Ralph T. Collins, M.D., consultant for psychiatry and neurology at Eastman Kodak Company*

The physician often must be prepared to *prescribe* a vacation for the executive who displays such danger signs as mental fatigue, mounting blood pressure, dyspepsia, constipation, and diarrhea. *William P. Shepard, former medical director of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company*²

If you're a vacation skipper, you may want to consider some of these reasons to take a vacation:

You'll probably live longer and be in better health. It may be job tensions that make men more susceptible to ulcers, heart disease, and suicide than women. "He was working too hard" becomes the final tribute to many a man cut off before his time. How much better the man who "knows how to pace himself," (and the woman too—for, indeed, *employed* women are also showing increased rates of stress diseases), who knows when to retreat from work and give tense muscles and irritated nerves a chance to settle down.

Enjoy. Take some time to enjoy a sunset, the feel of sand on the beach, the pleasure of a leisurely chat with new friends, some time for contemplation and spiritual renewal. These are the good years, not next year when the house is paid for, or later, when the kids are through college, or that extra staff member is hired. Some people fall into a trap of putting off the good times—the tragedy is that some of these people reach the end of life never having lived at all.

Try a change of pace. If your job requires mental activity, try something physical; if you work with people, some solitude is called for; if the work is usually in isolation, the stimulation of other people. For the country dweller, some big city living; for the city dweller, the delights of the country or the mountains. For those who usually live by the clock and calendar, living without them for awhile.

You'll probably do a better job on return. "The good executive is a well-rested one," says W. Clement Stone, chairman of Combined Insurance Company of America. "Most of our men take at least two vacations a year; they do a much better job when they return."³

The vacation skipper is more likely to make errors, feel put out, and feel self-righteous. He/she may become irritable with co-workers and resentful of those who do take vacations—

not likely to let others forget that while they were off enjoying themselves, he/she was hard at work. Sometimes he/she forgets that productivity isn't measured by hours on the job.

Give others a chance. One test of a good organizer is the ability to delegate responsibility. Sometimes your promotion may depend on whether you've groomed a successor to step into your shoes. A chance to be "acting" administrator in your absence may be just the opportunity that capable young man or woman has been looking for.

Vacations renew the closeness among family members. Some vacation time spent with the whole family can strengthen family unity, and equally important is the opportunity for husband and wife to have some time alone together. During the busy child-rearing years, your time together is often spent in details of living with children and managing a household. Yet, if you're typical, you can expect to spend 20 years together after the last child leaves home. A "just-the-two-of-you" vacation is an ideal time for you to get to know each other again as individuals in anticipation of that 20-year period.

Help prepare yourself for leisure time to come. Nowadays, a man who reaches 65 can expect to live an additional 13 years and a woman even longer. Many live into their 80s and 90s. For the "work addict," the idea of retirement brings panic and the question: "What will I do with my time?" For those whose vacations have been rich experiences, who know how to live a full life outside the world of work, those retirement years will be good years, perhaps the best.

And so to all you vacation skippers in Extension, take a bold step—eliminate vacation skipping. It's an occupational health hazard. Plan vacation time with as much forethought as you'd give any Extension Plan of Work project. And, if you're a supervisor, approve those plans—and don't forget to make your own.

Footnotes

1. Ted J. Rakstis, "Why You Need a Vacation," *Today's Health*, XLIV (August, 1969), 25-27+.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 26.