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The Big Idea / Personal Growth and Transformation

The Case for Sabbaticals — and How to Take a Successful One

A research-based primer on getting the most out of an extended leave from work. *by DJ DiDonna*

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Matt Carlson

In her early thirties, Bethany was at a crossroads. After working for the U.S. government in Washington, DC, she'd been accepted into a PhD program in law in Australia, which she'd chosen in order to be closer to her partner. But when the relationship abruptly ended just before she enrolled, she felt as if the floor had dropped out from beneath her. This was on top of an already hard year: Bethany's father had passed away several months earlier. Overwhelmed and disoriented, she worried

that she had “lost the ability to appreciate joy in life.” But instead of seeking a different PhD program or a new job, she did something radical for a high achiever. She saved up for a year and then allowed herself a six-month sabbatical from work.

During this time, she volunteered and trekked in Latin America, visited friends, and walked the Camino de Santiago, a historic pilgrimage in Spain that spans roughly 500 miles. She emerged with a renewed focus and vigor. “It opened up my eyes about what I can do as a professional by giving me more confidence to try new things,” she said. “I always thought that the main goal in life was to get your ducks in a row, and now I’ve realized that there are a lot of different types of ducks and they can be in any f—ing arrangement you want.” She went on to join a firm dedicated to something she’d been passionate about in law school: California Tribal and American Indian law.

The perspective shift Bethany experienced is common among sabbatical-takers. In my research with academic collaborators, interviews I’ve conducted with more than 250 people who have taken an extended leave from work, and my own personal sabbatical experience, I’ve found that their impact is nearly always transformative. People feel rejuvenated, with a sharper sense of their priorities, heightened awareness of their place in the world, and improved confidence, creativity, and physical and mental health. Sometimes they strike out in different directions, focused on new career goals and armed with the courage to tackle them. But just as often they pursue the same or similar paths with a fresh perspective and tweaked priorities. Whatever the specific result, sabbatical alumni universally describe their time off as a “peak life experience,” up there in importance with the birth of a child, marriage, or other life-defining event.

In an effort to encourage more people to pursue sabbaticals — and to reap the career and life rewards — I have spent the past seven years studying the ins and outs of successful sabbaticals. Here I'll answer the most common questions about them: What distinguishes a sabbatical from a long vacation? Who takes them and why? What challenges must be overcome to do so, and how do you ensure a meaningful experience? (To share your sabbatical experience and be included in my research, take [this survey](#).)

What Constitutes a Sabbatical?

There's no universally agreed-upon definition of sabbatical, even among academics, where the practice originated as a way to learn about new fields of studies and to rest and recover. For our purposes, the definition is simple: *an intentional extended leave from your job-related work*. Some employers offer a formal benefit of paid or unpaid sabbaticals. But many people choose to take one without the promise or security to return to their same job or organization — or even career.

Other defining attributes include:

Duration. Sabbaticals are measured in months, not days or weeks. Ideally, they run from three months to a year. Most folks I've interviewed said it took them up to eight weeks — much longer than they'd expected — to even *begin* to detach from work. As one operations manager who took a three-month stint abroad explained: "I had to be forcibly removed from access [to my work routines]. Only after enough time away from those patterns did the world suddenly feel so big again. And I thought 'Oh my God, there's life beyond work.'"

Disconnection. True sabbaticals require full disconnection from any work that is a part of — or even resembles — the taker's prior job. (I recommend setting your inbox to autorespond to and then delete

all messages during your entire time off.) That said, different types of work are allowed. For example, if you are a software engineer, you can remodel a kitchen, but tech consulting is a no-go. Further, sabbatical-takers should avoid actively searching for their next job. This is what makes the break *intentional*: Regardless of why you take one, it's vital that, once you're there, you commit to staying in the in-between. Ideally, a proper sabbatical also includes geographic disconnection: physically getting away — out of town or out of the country — for as long as is feasible. Distance makes it easier to break from old routines. “There’s something critical about...being in a new place where you don’t know the rules and the players anymore,” an attorney told me. “I felt like I was a different person living a different life.”

Who Takes Them and Why?

The sabbatical-takers I’ve studied are regular workers, managers, and executives who come from a wide range of industries and all over the world. They represent all age groups, from precollege gap-year-goers to those toeing up to retirement. The strongest predictor of whether a person will take a sabbatical is if they know someone who has taken one. However, around two-thirds of sabbatical-takers are also pushed into these breaks by sudden events in their professional or personal lives — often negative catalysts, such as a death in the family, a health issue, or a career crisis.

Of course, while anyone can benefit from a sabbatical, actually taking one remains a privilege. Few companies offer paid long-term leave, so the demographics of those who take them skew toward those who can more easily self-fund: college-educated, middle-to-upper-class individuals and their families.

When people decide to take a sabbatical, they typically have one of three goals in mind: to get things done, to answer big questions, or to recover from burnout.

The achiever. In 2018 Aarti, a community-organizer-turned-journalist, was at a career high point, working as a national correspondent for NPR. There was just one problem. She had a story that she felt she “needed to tell in order to keep living”: the tale of her immigrant father’s wrongful treatment and imprisonment by the U.S. government in the wake of 9/11. NPR had a sabbatical leave program, and so Aarti took a break from her career to write a book about her dad’s experience. Published in 2019, it became a bestseller.

Aarti is a classic achiever. From the start of her sabbatical, she worked hard, isolating herself at meditation retreats and in a small cabin in the woods to plan and write. At the end of her time, she transitioned back into work, exhausted and uncertain about her future but proud of what she’d accomplished. From the outside, a journalist writing a book might not seem like a true sabbatical. But for Aarti — like many achievers — the turn toward a new personal goal, rather than a career-related one, was the key to internal growth.

Achievers approach their time off with a productivity mindset, focusing on what they get done more than how it makes them feel. They look to benchmarks — such as fluency in a foreign language, launching a minimum viable product, opening a community garden, or completing a set hike such as the Appalachian Trail — to confirm progress. And they emerge having *accomplished* something beyond their normal harried work-to-do lists.

Their sabbaticals might not sound like fun, but I found that, from a well-being perspective, achievers come away feeling significantly

better. Indeed, high-effort activities can be extraordinarily restorative. As Aarti explained, “Writing that book was one of the most emotional experiences of my life — akin to when I first looked at my newborn son.” The only regret she had was not taking a beat or two to rest at the beginning of her sabbatical, a common reflection among achievers.

The explorer. From the outside, Paul seemed to be a typical consultant: whip-smart, comfortable in a host of business environments, overflowing with air miles. He’d worked for Bain & Company prior to business school and returned to the firm after graduating. At work, he didn’t come off as particularly adventurous or antsy to change careers, but he had a *lot* of questions about life’s possibilities. So every four years or so, in between projects, Paul would take extended breaks to test out potential paths for the future. During one sabbatical, he moved to his parents’ native Estonia for a few months to study the language and see how he’d fit in. On another, he tested out his long-held dream of running an eco-resort in retirement by working in the kitchen and shadowing the owners of lodges in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Big Sur, and Hawaii.

His endeavors made real what psychologists call “counterfactual thinking”: imagining an alternative to how things currently are. It’s one thing to wonder if you’d be happy as a teacher; it’s another to actually try teaching to find out. Explorers run counterfactual experiments. They enjoy the challenges of new experiences, learning more about themselves and confirming or dispelling notions about what they’d rather be doing. As a result, whether they make a big change or return to their routines, they feel more satisfied in their choices. Paul’s time as an explorer helped him hone his thinking and his skills in travel and hospitality, which led to a post-consulting career at Airbnb.

It's worth noting that you don't have to travel far to qualify as an explorer. Plenty of folks find ways to experiment with new futures closer to home by volunteering in their communities, trying new hobbies, or taking regional trips.

The burned-out. Mary spent her entire career at a sports-focused nonprofit. The work was stressful but meaningful, so no matter how difficult it got, she soldiered on. A decade in, a board member suggested that Mary might want to take a paid sabbatical, supported by a local funder who understood the pressures of serving others for a living. After six months of preparation — clearing out her inbox and ensuring that her colleagues could cover her absence — Mary took the time off. At first, she was paralyzed by the lack of responsibilities and found herself continuing to do some work from home during her first week off. But once she was en route to France — with her laptop left behind at home — she finally began to relax. Two months later, she returned to work feeling reenergized and confident. She also realized that things needed to change in order for her to re-up her tenure as leader. Mary lobbied the board for a new executive hire to handle the increased workload she'd taken on herself as the organization grew.



Matt Carlson

I talked to a number of people like Mary, who took sabbaticals to recover from or avoid burnout. My interviewees' ailments included ulcers, chronic pain, and insomnia, with doctors diagnosing work stress as the cause. Their breaks involved activities that, as one interviewee put it, made them "feel human again." For example, another employee suffering from burnout went camping to engage her "Neanderthal self: focusing on keeping warm, dry, and fed while enjoying the surroundings."

Of course, time off isn't the only answer to burnout — organizations have a role to play in fixing the underlying problems in their workplaces, too. That said, sabbatical-takers in this category agreed that the experiences provided a respite and helped them realize that they had been working in an unsustainable way.

If you recognize yourself in one of these archetypes, you can determine which sabbatical activities are right for you and what you truly need from your time off.

What Challenges Must Be Overcome?

If you work for a company that has a sabbatical program — particularly a paid one — taking time off is eminently manageable. What could be a risky career decision is instead part of company culture — and possibly lore. Unfortunately, this benefit remains rare. So most people believe taking an extended leave is out of their reach, no matter how alluring the idea might be. This belief comes down to two things: responsibilities and perception. Responsibilities are real and represent a tangible commitment. Your mortgage company doesn't care that you're on sabbatical, and family schedules can constrain possibilities. Perceptions can certainly feel real, but they are intangible and contextual: how you think about taking time off, as well as how you believe others will judge you.

Responsibilities. The decision to take a sabbatical should not be made lightly. Most of us have obligations — professional, personal, logistical, and financial — that must be navigated before a long break is feasible. But you can bridge the gap between your routine life and your sabbatical through thoughtful preparation.

To start, you may not need to quit your company. Many organizations without formal sabbatical policies are still willing to make exceptions for their most valued employees — if they're intrepid enough to ask. Less attractive options can also work for both parties, including taking unpaid leave, departing without a guaranteed position on return, or compromising on a later departure date to better fit business realities. If you're worried about retribution for appearing less serious about your job, ask colleagues if they know of anyone who has taken leave

before approaching your supervisors. And test the waters by identifying a proposed sabbatical date years in the future to give your team and company ample preparation time.

On the personal front, if you have kids, you'll want to investigate schools in your potential destinations; if you have pets who can't come along, long-term sitters. Subletting your home, putting large expenses on hold, and cutting off unnecessary recurring costs can help mitigate the financial burden. Even saving as little as 5% of your after-tax income over a decade, much like you would save for retirement, can result in a self-paid sabbatical of sorts, thanks to the magic of compound interest. (These are just a few strategies to consider; you can connect with sabbatical alums or others who are in the planning stages for more ideas and best practices at [The Sabbatical Project](#) and in [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#) groups.)

Some of my favorite sabbatical stories come from people of modest means who were determined to make it work. One couple, both teachers, saved up for a *decade* in order to travel with their children from Arizona to the tip of Argentina — four people crammed into a 50-year-old Land Rover — on the cheap. The trip had such a big impact on the father that he quit his teaching job to start a small business restoring old Land Rovers.

Of course, there are many legitimate reasons *not* to take a sabbatical at certain points in your life. If you lack sufficient time or financial resources to fully step away from your work and routine life for months, you'd be better off postponing until you can fully commit. In the meantime, you can identify ways to take [smaller breaks](#) to help you recover more regularly. But know that these comparatively brief moments are not shortcuts to the outsize benefits around purpose and happiness that I've observed among sabbatical alumni.

Perceptions. The psychological hurdles that sabbatical-takers must overcome fall into two categories: negative self-perception and fear of others' judgment.

For many people, self-worth is linked to performance at work. That's why our self-esteem takes a hit when we're unemployed — even when it's by choice. Even sabbatical alumni who enjoyed their experiences told me that they dreaded being asked “What do you do for a living?” during their time off, especially if they had left their jobs. One way to alleviate this feeling can be to adopt other work identities — for Aarti, being a writer, and for Paul, an employee at a resort. Others may choose to lean into the discomfort, understanding that difficult times disproportionately produce positive growth.

Another concern is how current or future employers (or even your in-laws) may view your sabbatical. This is not surprising when many organizational and national cultures reward a devotion to work. People are lauded for staying late at the office, being available on vacations, and generally prioritizing work over personal priorities. The pull to conform is strong, but there's growing evidence that more people, including hiring managers, are beginning to view time off as a healthy choice or a positive sign of a thriving inner life, curiosity, and desire for self-renewal. A survey I conducted among Harvard Business School graduates 10 years out found that more than one-third had already taken a sabbatical, and more than 90% of those who hadn't taken time off viewed extended leave-takers in a positive or neutral light.

One of the best ways to alleviate this worry is to find an exemplar: someone you admire who has taken a successful sabbatical. This makes it easier to envision yourself taking one. If no one immediately comes to mind, ask around, search your LinkedIn connections for those taking advantage of its “career break” designation, or post in dedicated forums

on Reddit and [Facebook](#). Once you find them, sabbatical alumni are almost universally helpful and passionate advocates for extended leave for others. This approach will help you to imagine your own career and life post-sabbatical, addressing — and potentially dispelling — your deepest fears.

What Makes a Sabbatical Successful?

A person will need different things from a sabbatical at different times in their lives, so it's difficult to make broad recommendations. That being said, I suggest keeping four things in mind as you plan and execute a sabbatical.

First, you must set impenetrable boundaries around your time off. There will always be opportunities to check in at work or peruse LinkedIn to see what jobs are out there. But you might never get another uninterrupted block of time to focus on what's important outside of your life at work.

Second, get out of your head and into your body. Consider the first portion of your sabbatical to be a space for healing and restoration. Instead of immediately striving to learn another language or work on a startup idea, allow yourself some time to move your body (a multiday trek or yoga retreat, for instance) and work with your hands (maybe a ceramics or art class) instead. Prioritize getting into nature for long stretches and otherwise putting yourself in a position [to be in awe of life again](#).

Next, prioritize spending your time on relationships. It's no secret that strong personal relationships lead to [happier, healthier lives](#) and [greater job fulfillment](#). Use your newfound flexibility to visit the people that matter to you on *their* timeline instead of waiting for your busy schedules to finally sync. And don't forget to prioritize your relationship

with yourself. Even if you're partnered, make time for at least a weekend solo retreat, and find [a therapist or coach](#) who understands the issues that often arise surrounding extended leave to help you synthesize learnings from your sabbatical.

Finally, don't stay out *too* long. Many sabbatical-takers, especially those between jobs, assume that they will have everything "figured out" by the end of their time off: a dream job identified or a big life change executed. While this is sometimes the case (remember Aarti?) more often a sabbatical is an essential first step to unlocking the next phase of your life. Don't let perfect be the enemy of good. It's OK to extend your sabbatical based on what you feel you need, but it's better to reenter the workforce wanting more than it is to resent yourself for not completely transforming over the course of a relatively short span of your life.

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

We don't talk enough about how important it is to have the time and space outside of work to do what's important to us. Despite all the talk about the Great Resignation, quiet-quitting, and work-life balance, many of our cultures loudly lionize — and reward — overwork: the CEOs who run multiple companies at once or the workers who sleep under their desks. Even when we're given paid time off, we fail to take it: Almost half of Americans [fail to take all their vacation days](#).^{*} Leisure time used to be something to aspire to — the hallmark of the wealthy — but now the richest among us are the [least likely](#) to invest free time in leisure. But that story is beginning to change.

Younger generations say they value [flexibility over compensation and purpose over prestige](#). And with the Covid-19 pandemic, the cat is out of the bag with the importance of [flexibility](#) for knowledge workers, as well as the reality that there are many different ways to get a job done, from many different places and time zones. We may be a long way

from sabbaticals becoming the norm for all workers, but current trends suggest that we should be moving in that direction.

We shouldn't have to wait for something to break to give ourselves permission to explore, for a little while, what makes life worth living. So allow yourself to briefly turn down the volume around boardroom logistics, quarterly goals, or team dynamics, and let your quieter voice emerge: What are things that light up your curiosity, either now or when you were younger? Thus far in life, what do you most regret not having done? Your answers can point you in a new direction. My research suggests that a sabbatical is more than just a long vacation; it's an investment for a better life.

*Editor's note (Feb. 20, 2025): *This sentence and source link have been updated to reflect more recent data.*

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The Big Idea / Health and Wellness

A Guide to Taking Better Breaks at Work

The science behind what makes a good one, and proven tips for making them a regular part of the day. *by Kira Schabram and Christopher M. Barnes*

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Matt Carlson

Sabbaticals can be life-changing opportunities. They offer the chance to explore the world, reconnect with family, or tackle that long-dreamed-of project. However, for many people, such extended departures aren't possible due to employers' policies or economic circumstances. In such cases strategic short breaks can help. While a longer sabbatical offers the promise of a transformative reset, short

breaks can also deliver substantial returns, boosting focus, energy, and ultimately performance.

In this article, we'll explore the hidden costs of chronic overwork, how to reclaim time for effective breaks, and the vital role leaders play in shaping recovery-friendly cultures. It's time that breaks of any length are both accepted and celebrated as a cornerstone of success in a competitive world.

Why We Need Breaks

The human body and brain are not designed for relentless, uninterrupted effort. Like any high-performance system, we need periodic downtime to recharge, recalibrate, and maintain peak functioning.

Physiologically, breaks are crucial to preventing and mitigating fatigue. Glucose, a fuel for brain activity, gets used up during heavy cognitive activity, and breaks allow for its restoration. They also calm the stress response systems, including those that regulate cortisol, helping to lower sympathetic nervous system ("fight or flight") activity. This not only mitigates immediate stress but also wards off chronic stress, which is linked to cardiovascular and immune system dysfunction. Finally, breaks enable a special pattern of brain activity known as the default mode network, which leads to introspection, creative ideation, and information integration.

Psychologically, breaks also address a common barrier to productivity: the mental load of unfinished personal tasks that distract us during the workday and can escalate into emergencies when neglected. Breaks to handle these responsibilities can help tidy up mental clutter and prevent crises, allowing employees to return to their tasks with clear heads.

Consider the results of a study on animal-shelter workers — a profession in which employees notoriously self-sacrifice to the point of burnout and annual turnover can exceed 100%. The only people who remained in the career for a decade and rose into organizational and national leadership roles were those who described taking breaks as a strength, not a weakness.

Because breaks allow people to reset, reduce stress, and regain perspective and focus, they also benefit teams and organizations. Social interactions during breaks can strengthen relationships and foster community, building trust and psychological safety and improving collaboration, morale, resilience, adaptability, engagement, motivation, and innovation across the group.

The Barriers to Breaks

Despite their clear benefits, most people struggle to take effective breaks from work due to cultural, organizational, and personal barriers. Some of these are well-known: Technology has afforded 24/7 availability, blurring the boundaries between people's work and home lives. "Hustle cultures" embraced in certain industries glorify overwork as a badge of honor. And, at the individual level, viewing work primarily as a ladder for personal success and accomplishment, or as a duty to make a positive difference in the world, can make breaks seem like a waste of time — or even a moral failing.

Our ongoing research shows that early-career professionals, under pressure to prove themselves, often resort to hiding their breaks. They scroll on social media in the restroom, pretend to work, or shop online during virtual meetings. But these "hidden breaks" (which should sound familiar regardless of your tenure) are usually ineffective for true recovery because they're accompanied by guilt over violating

organizational norms, fear of being caught, and general paranoia. They are essentially tainted fruit: necessary but not nourishing.

Getting Breaks Right

Knowing that there's tremendous value in breaks — and that people will find a way to take them in some form — how can you prioritize the most effective versions for yourself and your employees? Start by tapping into the following evidence-based attributes that make breaks successful:

Duration and timing. While people often assume that only drastic change — taking a sabbatical, using all that accumulated PTO, or hitting the gym every day at lunch — will do, that's not true. Even microbreaks lasting as little as a few minutes can significantly reduce fatigue and improve attention. Slightly longer breaks may yield even greater benefits. Overall, many short breaks or a few longer ones tend to have similar effects, and both are better than only a few short breaks. More important than length, however, is timing. For example, morning breaks improve resource recovery over the rest of the day. Those taken shortly after a cognitively demanding task can sustain energy and focus, while ones taken right after a meeting can help improve its outcomes. Tailor breaks to your workload rather than following a rigid schedule.

Physical activity. Breaks that involve physical activity, such as taking a short walk or using a stationary bicycle, give you the best chance of recovering and returning to an energetic, productive state. Employers can encourage such activities by providing walking paths, ergonomic stretching areas, or even encouraging team participation in short physical activities that are accessible to all.

Cognitive recovery. Cognitive relaxation is vital for resetting mental focus, clarity, and creativity. Progressive muscle relaxation (which involves systematically tensing and then relaxing muscle groups

throughout the body) or mindfulness exercises are particularly effective. Organizations might offer quiet spaces for reflection or access to guided relaxation tools to empower people to integrate these techniques into their daily routines.

Social interaction. Appropriate socialization (think bonding with someone over a shared interest, not interrupting lunch to ask for help with an urgent client request) can also play a vital role in recovery. For example, positive interactions during lunch breaks enhance mood and contribute to better afternoon performance, creating ripple effects that improve team cohesion and collaboration. Workplaces can incorporate communal spaces, such as inviting break rooms or outdoor seating areas that promote connection. For remote teams, consider hosting a Zoom room for anyone to pop in and out of or play a virtual round of a game. Depending on the size of the team and organization, one regular, all-purpose meetup or an infrastructure for members to self-organize around preferences will work best.

Creativity. Recovery does not require all cognitive efforts to cease — only those that are draining. Breaks can be leveraged as opportunities for reflection, brainstorming, or engaging in mentorship, creating value for both the individual and the organization. The most famous example of this may be Pixar colleagues who found that an informal 1994 lunch meeting yielded casual conversation that spawned four movies. Similarly, advising a peer or planning a corporate volunteer event can be restorative.

Autonomy. Research shows that when employees choose how to spend their breaks, the energizing potential of these pauses increases. For example, working parents may prefer to skip morning and midday breaks so that they can leave earlier or be fully off on the weekends. Pet owners are likely to build their work schedule around their animal's

needs, such as a walk at lunchtime. And an employee who opts to spend time alone outside over a mandatory group activity is more likely to return feeling refreshed. Employers should provide diverse recovery options and trust their people to self-direct — especially given early [evidence](#) that Gen Z workers increasingly value jobs that respect their off-time and prioritize work-life balance.

Time for personal tasks. Finally, this is a good place to reiterate the legitimacy of chore-related breaks, such as managing personal errands. Taking time off to attend to family, go to the doctor, or do the dishes alleviates mental load, allowing people to return to work more focused and productive.

How to Shape Social Norms Around Breaks

Leaders play a key role in creating a culture of sustainable break-taking. To them, we offer the following practical guidance.

Shift your mindset. First, ditch the myopic view of breaks as time when work is *not* getting done in favor of one where breaks are *time invested* into future work and the people who enable it. Instead of counting lost minutes, appreciate the broad returns: employees who perform better after short breaks and, longer term, are less likely to [burn out](#) or quit.

Such benefits may be less tangible and harder to account for than hours not billed, but good managers are not bound by what fits into a spreadsheet. Even leaders who do not fully buy into the benefits of breaks should at least appreciate that attempts to eliminate them are at best a waste of time. Anti-break cultures do not prevent breaks, but they do destroy much of the value that can be gained from them.

Normalize and support breaks. Explicitly encourage people to openly take breaks and to use their PTO without hesitation, fear, or guilt.

You might signal that taking time off is approved of at every level, including by offering or recognizing time off to care for pets or visit a new grandchild. Transparent policies and clear communication are important in an era when employees have become increasingly cynical about organizations' intentions, such as offering unlimited time off as a backdoor way to claw back benefits. So, say it and mean it. If you see the junior associates consistently eating lunch at their desks, invite them to join you for a meal or suggest that they leave early. Model taking breaks, too. Let others know when you are taking a breather or going home for the day. Out-of-office messages are becoming a subtle (but direct and effective) tool to set clear boundaries in a nice way.

Discourage “face time.” Protect employees from the pressure to always be on. This might necessitate a careful review (and possibly changes) to performance metrics that incentivize performative work habits. Ask: When, why, and how are employees required to attend meetings (and keep their cameras on), be in the office, or update their status on Slack? Take a critical look at whether well-intentioned policies are achieving their expected outcome or indirectly harming productivity by promoting break-taking subterfuge.

You may also need to assess customer expectations and interface with demanding clients, particularly in professions such as consulting or law, where deliverables are few and far between and productivity is measured in visibility. With strong team communication and collaboration that allows colleagues to cover for one another, evidence suggests that strategic break-taking is possible in most contexts.

Embrace trust. Of course, all this requires trust in your team members. We can offer reason for optimism here: In our research, when left to their own devices, workers seem perfectly capable of balancing their work obligations with necessary time off. Indeed, during crunch time,

we find that employees prioritize work, frontloading tasks and delaying breaks, but still come back more restored because they had agency. Trust them to know when to take a break and when not to, and most will do their jobs without burning out.

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The future of work demands a shift in mindset. Breaks are not obstacles to greatness. They are part of its foundation. When individuals get the downtime they need, they return sharper, more creative, and more engaged. When teams normalize breaks, they collaborate more effectively and sustain their performance. And when organizations embed recovery into their culture, they unlock long-term resilience, innovation, and retention.

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The Big Idea / Personal Growth and Transformation

Everyone Deserves a Season to Step Back

Easing up on your work duties for a limited time can give you the energy you'll need to flourish later. *by Christina Wallace*

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Matt Carlson

The generally accepted framework for working at a job is either you do it or you don't. The expectation is that, if you're working, you're fully committed. All in. Giving it 110%, as the saying goes. Or else you're taking a full leave of absence to manage an illness, for example, or to take a sabbatical.

Often this framework is sufficient. But there are plenty of times that it falls short: when a first-time parent returns from leave and is still adjusting to new family rhythms; when an adult child suddenly must assume eldercare responsibilities; when an individual faces a legal or health situation; or any number of other sources of acute stress. The catalyst could also be an opportunity rather than a crisis: starring in a play, for instance, or competing in an athletic tournament. In all these cases, a brief adjusted work schedule could be invaluable.

My work, inspired by my professor and mentor, the late Clayton Christensen, focuses on how to answer his question, “How will you measure your life?” It recognizes that our time and energy are always being allocated and adjusted across work, creative projects, family time, community, health, and spiritual commitments — a mix of purposefully chosen investments.

In my model, there are options beyond either pushing through a disruption in your life or, alternatively, taking a full leave of absence from work. And for good reason: Pushing through increases the likelihood of burnout and its long-term consequences on both employee and organizational health, while taking leave can also prove harmful, whether for the organization’s capabilities or for the employee’s engagement and career. Work is not just something we do; it contributes to identity, purpose, and community. And in a worst-case scenario, such a leave could harm future growth opportunities or become unintentionally permanent.

Enter the “season of stepping back.”

What a Season of Stepping Back Can Look Like

A season of stepping back can take many different forms. It could look like shifting from a manager role to an individual contributor, delaying

a promotion, moving to a role with less travel and more-predictable hours, or trimming back a workload to allow for flexibility or shorter days. What's true in all cases is this: It is time-limited; codesigned by the employee, their team and manager, and HR; has no negative ramifications for the person stepping back; and offers a seamless reentry when they are ready to reengage.

Unlike a formal switch to part-time or contract work, this is a temporary accommodation within an existing career trajectory, with no effect on future reviews, promotion opportunities, or tenure. Over the long term, such arrangements can benefit both workers and their organizations.

Take the example of Melissa, for instance, who was diagnosed with breast cancer (some identifying details have been changed). She contacted the head of human resources at the venture-backed company where she worked to discuss accommodations. She didn't want to follow the typical solution in the United States of going on short-term disability leave. Melissa was clear that she didn't want to stop working. She liked having something to think about other than her treatment; it offered some normalcy during a tumultuous period. So, she and HR crafted a set of parameters: She needed to start late on Mondays, end early on Fridays, and be off camera for meetings for a few months. While she was undergoing chemotherapy infusions, she would be available over email and on Slack but would decline or reschedule meetings.

The approach worked well. Melissa was able to take care of her health on her own terms and ramp back up at work when she was ready. Equally valuable, the company retained an ambitious, high-performing employee who had deep institutional knowledge and an even stronger sense of loyalty.

Consider, too, the case of Chas Carey (full disclosure: Chas is my husband). When serving as the deputy general counsel of the New York Office of Housing Recovery Operations in 2017, he was offered a role in an upcoming off-Broadway production. After talking to his boss and team about how he might make the opportunity work and still keep his job, Chas was able to shift his hours to a nontraditional schedule for the four weeks he was in daytime rehearsals and then, once performances began, cut back on hours by delegating and deprioritizing while tending to the most urgent and impactful work. After a four-week run, the production wrapped, and he returned to his “real life” with gratitude for the flexibility and a renewed energy for the work. Over the next three years, Chas continued to excel in his job and was promoted first to general counsel and then to acting director of the agency.

Are Seasons the Future?

Today, Melissa and Chas’s stories are the exception. But having a season of stepping back is both possible and beneficial for all parties, aiding in everything from burnout prevention to learning and development. My case studies and research also reveal that a wide range of individuals can benefit from a dynamic allocation of their time across work, relationships, personal growth, and community. In doing so, life becomes richer — and different areas of life can positively reinforce one another. For example, having a side hustle can boost job performance and you can gain an influx of innovative ideas from a diverse, second-degree network.

Will organizations get on board and recognize similar benefits, such as boosting retention? Corporate culture will be the deciding factor. If taking a step back for a limited time is seen as an option only for those with less ambition, or if it is held up as evidence against high-potential status or a demerit come promotion time, then the practice doesn’t stand a chance. Further, if it fails to address long-held assumptions

about business leaders — for example, that leaders are married men who have stay-at-home wives to manage the messiness of life without it impacting quarterly results — then stepping back may be seen as a weakness, not a strength.

But if the practice is adopted across the highest levels and communicated as such — “The head of product is in a season of stepping back for the next four months, and we are thrilled to offer stretch assignments to his deputies, allowing them to show their readiness to level up” — it can unlock transparency, flexibility, commitment, and retention throughout an organization.

I’m cautiously optimistic. But it will require reframing the larger conversation around how both individuals and companies view successful careers.

Last year, while on tour for my book, *The Portfolio Life*, an interviewer asked if an alternative title could have been *Lean Out*, referencing Sheryl Sandberg’s 2013 female empowerment manifesto, *Lean In*. The notion that designing and rebalancing our lives to reflect the seasons we are in would be considered giving up on our careers caught me off guard. I stammered out a flat rejoinder in the moment, but here’s what I wish I had said: “I am, and remain, incredibly ambitious, but my ambition is not reserved for my career. I am ambitious for my young family, for my marriage, my health, my community. I am ambitious for meeting the demands of my life and thriving because I can rebalance my portfolio as my priorities change. A season of stepping back is not leaning out.”

I believe this wholeheartedly, and I trust that organizations that adopt this mindset will have happier, more loyal workers. Everyone’s life has

seasons. Will you work with your employees when they need to step back so that they can flourish in the future?

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The Big Idea / Talent Management

When Employees Take Sabbaticals, Organizations Benefit

How to create an equitable extended-leave policy that improves performance, resilience, and innovation. *by DJ DiDonna*

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Matt Carlson

For the past seven years, I've studied the overwhelmingly positive impact sabbaticals have on people's mental and physical well-being, creativity, and confidence. Through hundreds of interviews with people who have taken [sabbaticals](#), I've learned that the benefits extend to the teams and organizations in which they work. And yet when I talk to organizational leaders about sabbaticals, many express skepticism about whether facilitating them is practical, or even possible: "We're

already at full capacity, so how would we cover the absence?” “How can our team function effectively without a key member?” “My company would go out of business if I allowed everyone to take extended breaks — especially if they’re paid!”

I understand why bosses might be hesitant to support sabbaticals. But I’ve come to believe that the benefits to organizations of offering them far outweigh the risks.

Some leading companies agree. Although corporate sabbatical policies in the United States remain relatively rare — only 5% of nonacademic employers offer them — they are a feature at dozens of successful and innovative organizations, including Adobe, construction software giant Autodesk, Automattic (the company behind web-publishing giant WordPress), Genentech, Deloitte, Bank of America, and a rotating cast of the Big Five tech companies (FAANG), depending on the economic winds. Salesforce, Impossible Foods, and Apple would not exist in their present forms without the sabbaticals — sometimes forced — undertaken by their founders.

The percentage of U.S. employers with formal policies supporting extended leave has doubled from 2019 to today. As these organizations transform what was once an opportunity for the privileged few into an equitable and important part of their cultures, they learn that offering sabbaticals can be a differentiator to attract talent, increase retention, and rejuvenate long-tenured employees.

In this article I’ll describe the benefits to performance, resilience, and innovation realized by companies with extended-leave policies, and I’ll identify the three pillars of a successful sabbatical program. (To share your sabbatical experience and be included in my research, take this survey.)

Improving Organizational Performance

My research highlights two ways that group performance improves when employees are able to take sabbaticals.

Clarifying responsibilities. In many organizations, it's not always clear who's doing what, and when. A job description rarely represents an employee's full contribution, particularly when they have long tenures and retain duties tied to previous roles. This lack of clarity can lead to inefficiency and redundancy, not to mention frustrated and burned-out workers.

A sabbatical can reveal the full breadth of someone's role and responsibilities in a way that regular, shorter vacations can't, because *all* the duties of the leave-taker must be transferred to other people while they're gone. The duration of the absence creates a revelation for both the employee and the employer. As they work together to outline, hand off, and adjust work before and after the sabbatical (and as colleagues adjust during the sabbatical), tasks that are unnecessary are often eliminated and tasks that were delegated often stay that way. In this way, work is streamlined and both individual and company performance is enhanced.

Retaining talent. People almost always return from a sabbatical with more energy and less stress — a clear win for organizations. Many also return with fonder feelings toward the organization that allowed them the break. It's true that some might have used their time off to reflect on areas of work where they are dissatisfied, which might prompt a conversation about responsibilities and compensation upon their return. But even that can be a *good* thing for companies and the long-tenured high performers they want to keep, especially those who are underpaid relative to their market value and are thus an unseen flight risk.

Consider Carson's experience. She had been working at a research center focused on emerging-market poverty, leading partnerships and innovation and seeing the center through a critical period of formalization and growth. After five years in the job, she was feeling undervalued in terms of her level of autonomy and pay. She and her fiancé had been fantasizing about taking a "monster" honeymoon. So, she asked her bosses for five months off. To her surprise, they granted the unpaid leave. She traveled through many of the countries her organization studied during her leave, and it reminded her why she'd gotten into the work in the first place. Her time away not only reaffirmed her belief in the center's mission but also gave her the confidence to consider taking her skills and experience elsewhere if necessary.

She came back reinvigorated, and she was pleased to learn that her absence had caused the team to recognize the magnitude of her contributions. Her bosses asked what they could do to keep her, and she went from "feeling like a cog in a wheel," in her words, to "feeling like a grown-up with power." She was promoted and, two years later, became the executive director. The organization has thrived since her return, doubling its budget and scope and quadrupling its number of staff members and research affiliates.

Building Organizational Resilience

Many company leaders I talk to fear that if they offer a sabbatical, they'll essentially give a "golden parachute" to an employee who intends to leave. Here's some good news: According to my research, 80% of extended-break-takers return to their companies. Of course, that means that 20% do not. While this number is far preferable to the 0% of employees who return when they are forced to quit to get an extended leave, it does suggest that turnover is a legitimate worry. Recruiting and training a new hire takes time, and the process is disruptive, creating extra work for those who remain.

But when a sabbatical reveals that your employee wants to move on from their role or your company, there are silver linings. First, you've parted ways with someone who wasn't committed to your organization anyway. As one Zappos director explains, "If upon the first sight of daylight they sprint for the exits, at that point I wouldn't want them on our team anymore. We have no shortage of folks who actually want to be here." And second, new employees bring with them high motivation, new ideas, fresh energy, and insights from their previous employment, whether at competitors or in other industries, that can lead to more creative solutions.

When an organization offers extended breaks as a routine part of its culture, it builds the capacity to handle turnover. It's a form of resilience training, as the company is forced to fill the gaps the absent person leaves behind — even if it's just for a little while — and the colleagues who fill them get stretch experiences and opportunities to prove themselves. Ironically, enacting a sabbatical policy can help a company both prevent *and* prepare for the departure of key people.

The African Leadership Academy (ALA), a pioneering boarding school in Johannesburg, experienced this firsthand. Ten years after ALA opened, its cofounder, Chris Bradford, decided to step back for an entire academic year to accompany his fiancée to Europe while she completed her master's degree. When he returned, Chris discovered that the school's operations had flourished in his absence, but its fundraising efforts had fallen off a cliff. In response, he promoted the person who'd been handling operations to be ALA's permanent COO. Then he turned his attention to soliciting donations for the school's upcoming gala and training others to better fill this role. He set a personal goal to transfer the role to a colleague within three years so that he could move to the United States, where his fiancée would soon start an academic job. Chris's sabbatical marked the beginning of the end of his time at ALA.

But from an organizational perspective, it also led to the identification of talented potential successors.

Fostering Innovation

Creativity is an essential workplace skill — it's a crucial component of innovation and boosts both productivity and adaptability.

Unfortunately, the workdays of many people, governed as they are by task lists and deadlines, aren't conducive to creative thinking. What's needed is exploration and play, which requires unstructured time — exactly what employees get when they take sabbaticals.

That was certainly the case for Cheryl P. Johnson, CEO of COTS (Coalition on Temporary Shelter). After running the Detroit-based organization for 17 years, she took a paid sabbatical that was funded by an area donor. She started her extended leave with a monthlong meditation retreat in upstate New York and followed that by taking a yearlong coaching certification program on the West Coast. She returned to work brimming with ideas about how to tackle the root cause of homelessness — multigenerational poverty — rather than simply providing temporary housing. Armed with a new outlook and coaching skills, she redesigned COTS's approach to family support, case management, individual mentoring, and self-sufficiency training. The new program design has since been adopted by dozens of nonprofits across the country.

Making Sabbaticals Equitable and Successful

Is your organization ready to start reaping the benefits of employee sabbaticals? Although there is no single playbook for designing a program, my research has found that all successful and equitable sabbatical programs rest on three pillars: eligibility, support, and disconnection.

Eligibility. Many employers make the mistake of offering sabbaticals only to people at certain levels — usually management. Adopting a managers-only approach exacerbates organizational hierarchy, provokes resentment, and limits benefits such as increased innovation and reduced burnout to a select few. Don't fall into that trap — make your program more widely accessible. Some companies, such as Adobe and Autodesk, allow employees to bypass their managers — requesting permission for a sabbatical is as simple as checking a box in an HR tool. Practices like these send the message that everyone who has devoted significant time to the company, not just the executive class, deserves time to recover and explore interests outside of work — and that they don't have to jump through hoops to do so.

Another way to expand eligibility is by offering new hires a chunk of paid time off before starting: a “pre-battical.” Typically, only the wealthiest among us are able to take unpaid leave, and they often do so between jobs. However, tech hospitality company [SevenRooms](#) began [offering two weeks off with pay to new hires](#) after it noticed higher rates of burnout among job switchers during the [Great Resignation](#) of 2021. The idea is to ensure that people leave behind old stress and exhaustion and enter their new role with excitement and sustainable energy, not just the short-term adrenaline boost that comes from starting any new job.

Support. An organization offering sabbaticals should provide support on two fronts: finances and benefits.

The best possible scenario is giving employees full pay and benefits during their time off. That's what McDonald's, widely considered to be the first U.S. company to [provide a paid sabbatical](#) to its salaried employees, has done since 1977. If that's not feasible, partial pay — or even a stipend — can give leave-takers enough cushion, especially if

they have sufficient time to plan and save. Or companies could offer full pay for a shorter period of time — say three months — and allow employees to use unpaid leave or accrued vacation days for the rest. Obviously, the less financial help you offer, the more likely it is that only privileged employees will be able to take advantage of the policy.

In countries where healthcare is linked to employment, such as the United States, retaining insurance for your employees is also nonnegotiable. Although it's possible for people to buy supplemental policies for work breaks, having to navigate that system even once can trigger enough stress to reduce the positive benefits of time off.

To differentiate themselves from competitors, companies might also consider offering coaching to sabbatical-takers. A trained, independent third party can help them figure out the details of transferring work responsibilities and putting the learnings from their time off into practice upon return. For example, McKinsey offers coaching to employees during breaks, and [HubSpot](#) gives bonuses that employees may spend on any kind of career development.

Disconnection. The final pillar for a successful sabbatical program is perhaps the most important: ensuring that those who take time off do so for long enough and truly disconnect. You'll need to establish a minimum time-off policy and actually *prevent* them from working. This is because habituated patterns can lead to what I call “functional workaholism,” which requires time and space to recover from.

Most of the people I interviewed said it took them six to eight weeks to fully disengage from their professional identities and become open to new experiences and thinking. That's why three months is the baseline length for a proper sabbatical, and my team's survey results indicate it also the most common.

Managers should ensure that leave-takers have no access to email or other work communications during their time away. Best practice is to have them set clear out-of-office messages, auto-delete their emails, and designate one colleague they can contact or who can contact them only if absolutely necessary. For example, financial services firm Brighton Jones requires employees who take advantage of its paid sabbatical program to fully transfer responsibilities, uninstall its email program, and provide only an emergency phone number.

Another way to help people disconnect is to give them ample time to prepare for leaving. I suggest 18 months to sort out finances and personal matters, delegate professional responsibilities, and plan the time off. You'll also need to give them enough runway to readjust to work before they launch back into mission-critical business.

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We've all seen companies try to engender loyalty by piling on perks like Ping-Pong tables and free snacks. Offering sabbaticals would be far more meaningful: They generate goodwill, boost employee engagement, and improve team and organizational performance. That's because the gift of time is a rare and valuable one.

Although extended-leave policies are more of an exception than the norm, organizations would be wise to accelerate their adoption. Doing so would help people fulfill their personal dreams and aspirations, build in recovery time, and live their lives without regret — all while retaining the many psychological, social, and financial benefits that work provides. And that's a win-win for employees *and* employers.

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