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Little Playtime for CEOs

Cube-dwellers might resent CEOs for their generous salaries, bonuses and stock options. But rank-and-file employees seize one perk that many top execs don't: vacation.

Busy seasons, pending deals, new projects and a sense of duty keep CEOs working while most everyone else is playing. Even packing a BlackBerry doesn't enable some executives to leave the office for anything more than a quick getaway.

"If I'm taking time off when everyone else is running around, they get the wrong idea," says Maureen Beal, CEO of Broadview-based National Van Lines Inc., where May to September is the busiest time of year.

Ms. Beal, 63, takes no more than a week's vacation at a time during those months, and only to her summer house on Lake Winneconne, Wis. "If anything goes wrong, I can be back in three hours."

Many executives keep vacations on the back burner, says Gaye van den Hombergh, regional president for Vistage International Inc., a San Diego-based CEO support group with 500 members in the Chicago area.

A constant presence at the office "is like a treadmill you can't get off," she says. "You're more susceptible to burnout. We're not clearheaded when we're always at the office."

Ms. van den Hombergh, 46, was CEO at the Johnsson Group, a Chicago-based financial consulting firm, before starting the Vistage job in June. During her three years as CEO, she not only skipped vacations, she didn't even take advantage of the company's shorter summer hours. "I was just too busy," she says.

Leaving vacation time on the table "is what heart attacks are made of," says Edward M. Hallowell, an Arlington, Mass.-based physician and author of "CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overworked and About to Snap!" The book takes a look at what Dr. Hallowell, 56, calls a national epidemic of "culturally induced" attention deficit disorder.

Executives who skip vacation "aren't putting in the time to think or read or do quality work," Dr. Hallowell says. "It's a frenzy of quantity."

A boss's work ethic can also set a grueling tone for the rest of the office, to a greater or lesser degree.

'TRICKLE-UP EFFECT'

Steve Sarowitz, president and founder of Paylocity, an Elk Grove Village-based payroll service, has yet to take a two-week vacation since starting the company in 1997: "That's my goal one day," says Mr. Sarowitz, 40, who acknowledges he becomes "a bit more short-tempered" when he hasn't had a vacation.

During the busy years after the startup, no one in the office took vacations — but eventually, employees quit waiting for him to call a timeout. Jenifer Page, Paylocity's vice-president of operations, recently took a week-and-a-half trip to Italy, Spain and France.

"There might be a trickle-up effect," Mr. Sarowitz says. "People close to me just started taking longer vacations — they didn't want to wait for me."

In April, H. Lee Scott, CEO of Bentonville, Ark.-based Wal-Mart Stores Inc., made headlines when he announced plans for a monthlong vacation, during which he'd leave two vice-chairmen in charge of the company. Even executives whose business is travel looked on in awe.

"He's my hero," says Rob Apatoff, CEO of Skokie-based Rand McNally & Co., the mapmaking firm. His own vacation plans this summer will be limited to long weekends within driving distance, including Door County, Wis. Mr. Apatoff, 47, usually takes only a week or 10 days of his allotted annual four weeks off.

"If (Mr. Scott) can pull it off, that's very impressive," says Mitch Truwit, 37, president and CEO of Chicago-based Orbitz Worldwide. He's worked his way up to taking a week at a time, but says, "A month — that's pretty foreign to me."

Mr. Truwit plans a two-week trip to London and France this summer with his family. He'll spend the week in London working, then devote the entire week in France to sightseeing and relaxing.

He typically takes three to four weeks' vacation a year. "It gives me time away from the business to think strategically," he says.

However, he remains "a hopeless BlackBerry addict" even while off. "If there's something I need to do, it's unplug," Mr. Truwit says. "So far I've failed at that."

Many CEO vacation plans include technology — PDAs, cell phones, laptops — and a trusted second-in-command back at the office.

NO GOOD TIME

Jim Martell, CEO of Ridge Property Trust, a Chicago-based real estate investment trust, relies on Sharyl Stein, his assistant for the past seven years. "She becomes a focal point for everything," says Mr. Martell, 54.

Because Mr. Martell's wife is a schoolteacher, he must schedule family vacations in the summer. Still, "you never leave at the right time," he says. "There's always a buildup of activity."

Mr. Martell and his business partner once closed a big deal in California, then took off to Puerto Rico for some downtime. But the company for which they did the deal reorganized, and the new CEO called Mr. Martell in Puerto Rico with some news: "He hated the deal." The vacation went on as planned.

Excitement this summer at several companies around town — for instance, Irene Rosenfeld replacing Roger Deromedi as CEO of Northfield-based Kraft Foods Inc. and boardroom turmoil at Tribune Co. — may or may not have employees canceling flights and hotel rooms. The companies really aren't saying.

A spokesman for Chicago-based Tribune declines to comment; a spokeswoman for Kraft says the company "takes work-life balance seriously," and that Ms. Rosenfeld's arrival most likely would not upset vacation plans "unless something specific changed and became a business priority."

CHECKING IN

A huge leave-behind for vacationing CEOs: instructions on when they should be summoned and when they shouldn't. A downside of the never-vacationing CEO is employees who don't feel trusted and never learn to call the shots on their own.

"I like the option that if you need to reach me, leave a voice-mail, and I'll call in," says Jim Brady, CEO of Earthcomber, a River Forest provider of customized maps and travel guides.

Mr. Brady, 49, says it's not his style to check in constantly. "It's the whole leadership thing — you want people to be responsible for what they're charged with," he says. "You probably shouldn't check in unless there's something to check on."

Mr. Brady plans two getaways this summer: a week in Biloxi, Miss., to help restore hurricane-ravaged homes, and a 10- to 14-day solo motorcycle journey from Chicago to the Pacific Ocean, chartered (using Earthcomber technology) along abandoned rail, farm, logging and mine roads.

"It's a milestone event," Mr. Brady says of the motorcycle trip, adding that his date of departure will be planned around "a couple of moving pieces," including a new product rollout currently in the works.

By taking two vacations this year, Mr. Brady may be making up for lost time. He founded Earthcomber in 2001 but didn't take a vacation until 2004, the year he hired Dana Sohr, senior vice-president of sales and operations.

Julie Smolyansky, CEO of Lifeway Foods Inc., a Morton Grove-based food manufacturer, is traveling with her staff this summer to distribute samples of new products at music festivals and other outdoor events. Those events — about five in total — will comprise her summer vacation.

"It's a vacation to me because I'm outside, it's summer, and I'm not in my office," says Ms. Smolyansky, 30. "To me that's fun in its own way."

Traveling with a BlackBerry, which she checks "all the time" when she's on the road, allows Ms. Smolyansky to return from her working vacations in a fairly carefree state of mind. "I don't have to worry about catching up," she says. "I'm caught up."

That caught-up feeling, however, disappears as soon as Ms. Smolyansky digs into her snail mail: "It's two boxes."