

Getting Workaholics to Stop and Recharge

Wealth Matters

By PAUL SULLIVAN AUG. 21, 2015



Anthony Hitt, chief executive of Engel & Völkers North America, a luxury property company, spends at least one week each quarter at his home in Maui, Hawaii. At this point, three years into the top job, he said he talks to his top lieutenants only 15 minutes a day when he's there. The rest of the time he reads, practices yoga, rides his bicycle or otherwise tries to disconnect from the responsibilities of his job.

"My vacations are so low-key," he said. "I try not to think, 'What about this or what is the solution to that?'"

Judith Hellman, a dermatologist in private practice and an associate clinical professor of dermatology at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, has a mix of strategies to disconnect from the demands of her patients. Trained as a classical pianist, Dr. Hellman likes to play jazz on the piano in her apartment. She swims (in the shade, of course). She writes poetry, though she has no illusions about its quality.

And she takes off at least four weeks a year — next month it is scuba diving in Israel — and asks her patients to contact her only if it's a true emergency.



“Thank God most skin problems don’t kill people, so they can wait,” she said. “I need that time to stand up to their demands.”

While August is traditionally the time people get away, fewer are doing it and those who are leaving work aren’t detaching the way Dr. Hellman does, or even Mr. Hitt. People in the United States are taking less time off than at any point in the last 40 years, according to data cited this year in *The New York Times*. Responses to one online questionnaire indicated that a majority of Americans do not use all of their paid vacation.

Project: Time Off, a group supported by the travel industry, said in a survey it released this summer that American workers had hit a record low for days off, 16 days a year. (Fifteen years ago, workers averaged about 20 days off.) And it christened a new archetype: the work martyr, a person whose family understands that work will interfere with family life but is still unhappy about it in more than a third of the cases.

While it’s easy to criticize nonstop work, it is the reality not just for many high performers but also for people who fear for their jobs if they take time off. So what are people doing who choose to decompress? How do they look at the costs — both the actual cost and the psychological and physical cost of taking, or not taking, time to do something for themselves?

Jeanette Bronee, who said she left a high-stress career as a fashion executive 10 years ago to start a health consultancy, Path for Life, said she tried to get people to see that their always-connected lives were hurting their health and making them less productive than they thought they were.

She developed a nine-step system for executives to learn to decompress, which often translates to time away from the devices that connect them to work.

But Ms. Bronee said most people did not come to her until they received a diagnosis of some severe health problem. Her initial focus is on nutrition and exercise. But she also stresses mindfulness — a concept she says many type-A people shun at first.

“A lot of people have a hard time thinking about mindfulness because they think of sitting on a pillow for 30 minutes,” she said. “But mindfulness is something we can practice in daily ways. Mindfulness is a lot about catching all those thoughts that cause us stress.”



The health consequences of working around the clock can be severe. A report this week found that people who work more than 55 hours a week have a 33 percent greater chance of a stroke and 13 percent higher risk of heart disease.

Still, taking weeklong breaks isn't easy.

Mr. Hitt said that when he first became chief executive, he used to get up at 4 a.m. while on vacation to call people in Germany and New York, logging in hours before anyone else in Maui was awake. Now, he said, he has a great team and is comfortable relaxing.

“It's something that's taken me a long time to get to,” said Mr. Hitt, just back from Maui. “I'm someone who likes to be in charge.”

Finding ways to disconnect during nonvacation times may be more realistic, if no less difficult. Various forms of meditation and yoga, not surprisingly, are popular. But fitting those in with other activities can be tricky.

Dominick Gullo, a former criminal prosecutor in the Brooklyn district attorney's office who is now a civil litigator with Aidala Bertuna & Kamins, is broad-shouldered and square-jawed from decades of weight training, martial arts and boxing. Six years ago, Mr. Gullo, a Staten Island native, converted to Buddhism.

Now he meditates five to 30 minutes a day. “I used to get so upset in traffic, but no matter how upset you're going to get, you're not going anywhere,” he said. “It has helped me. Now if a situation comes up, if it's bad it's bad. You deal with it and move on.”

In civil litigation, where he says the deadlines are more rigid and the judges less forgiving than in a criminal case, meditation helps him accept the bad days better.



(As for the seeming contradiction of the Buddhist boxer, he said: “You can do a physical contest, even if it involves punching someone in the chops, and there is no anger or hatred behind it. I don’t have that edge of anger.”)

Boxing and meditation require total concentration for a prolonged period of time. People sometimes would settle for a quick jolt of calm. That was what Symrise, a fragrance company, tried to provide. When the company was building out its new headquarters on Park Avenue in Manhattan, Rhona Stokols, vice president of fine fragrances, pushed to have a sealed, scent-free space created for the noses that design the scents.

“It’s a place to refresh when you smell all day long,” she said. “The nose goes directly to the brain. How do you wipe it clean? You go in there and you calm down. We smell for a living.”

Most people aren’t in the room longer than 10 to 15 minutes to refresh. And she said it beat doing what people did at their old office: walk out into a smelly Manhattan street to escape the perfume.

While Anastasia Garvey, an actress and model, doesn’t have office pressure, she says she is constantly on edge wondering if she’ll get a certain job. She has developed a regimen of ways to disconnect: meditation, acupuncture, cupping therapy, monthly trips to a reservation-only spa and most recently cryotherapy — as in spending some time being blasted by air cooled to minus 260 degrees.

It only lasts three minutes, plus time to warm up again on a stationary bike, but it costs \$90 a session, she said. She goes three times a week.

“The first time I did it I couldn’t remember my name,” she said. “You’re in a freezer. You’re so cold you can’t think of anything.”

That may be an extreme way to forget your troubles. But what about the time spent doing it — or not doing something else?

Mr. Hitt said he was hesitant to admit it but his business runs fine when he’s not there. “There is no negative cost associated with me being gone, which is not what most C.E.O.s want to say,” he said, adding: “When I come back I have that 30,000-, 50,000-foot view that goes away in the few months between those visits.”

Mr. Gullo said the costs of meditation were no more than the books he buys to study, while boxing and gym memberships run him several thousand dollars a year. But for someone who is commuting between his home, law office and the city’s courts, he initially thought more about the time cost.

“Some would say it cuts into work time,” he said. “That’s true, but then it’s not. I’m much more productive because of it. I’m much happier in general. I’m the happiest I’ve ever been in my life.”