





My first real vacation — the kind that did not involve either A) attending a wedding or B) visiting parents and sleeping in a room decorated with a yellowing “Steelers: One for the Thumb” poster — occurred during the dot-com boom. I was working 70-hour weeks for a company that managed the simultaneous feats of growing rapidly and losing money. Worse, the company had set up offices in an old converted warehouse, whose combination of exposed bricks, hardwood floors, and a 30-foot ceiling rained punishing noise upon us. The long hours and the bad balance sheet were too much. I went looking for something I couldn’t get at work: quiet.

Suddenly, I’m in New Mexico. Ancient American Indian cliff dwellings. Birds cackling, people chatting nearby, and a thin, icy layer of snow crunching underfoot. I keep walking from them, the noise spoiling the moment. Then, miraculously, silence. For 10 seconds, no more. A perfect, calming silence.

OK, so, sure, some scientist could probably offer a rational explanation for what caused the sound-out

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THE WORKPLACE

"I think many people are afraid of unstructured leisure time because they have allowed themselves to become defined by their work."

— the rotation of the earth, the wax in my ears. Whatever. Me. I say it was magic. Vacation magic. It was the weird peacefulness that I needed, the kind of little something we all need to get through the next set of stressful days.

So if my example speaks to the universal good vacation can bring, then time off is *important*, right? But here's the thing: Americans don't get a lot of vacation time compared with the rest of the industrialized world, and we don't even take all the time off we do get. U.S. workers, according to one reliable study, get an average of just fewer than 12 paid vacation days per year, not counting paid holidays. We take slightly fewer than eight of those. That's three full days a year left unused, up from just two days unused in 2003. Harris Interactive, which conducted the study, estimates that's about a \$54 billion giveback from workers to employers this year.

This makes no sense. For an explanation, I checked in with Benjamin Hunnicutt, an expert at time off, a professor of leisure studies at the University of Iowa. Hunnicutt says U.S. workers haven't seen a real increase in time away from work since the Great Depression. For that, he blames you. "I think many people are afraid of unstructured leisure time because they have allowed themselves to become defined by their work," Hunnicutt says. "Work is where people find meaning and identity now — it's like a new religion."

Still, religious groups take retreats and sabbaticals at the urging of their churches, right? So why aren't U.S. workers taking all the time their companies are offering them?

It's not because companies don't preach that workers should get away from the office. Plenty do. PricewaterhouseCoopers,

for instance, recently devoted an entire issue of its bimonthly employee newsletter to a screed on how and why employees can and should take vacation. And 1-800-GOT-JUNK?, a booming, private trash-removal firm based in Vancouver, Canada, that has franchises throughout the United States, recently changed its vacation policy to try and get workers to take extended time off. The company offers five weeks' paid vacation and wants workers to take two of them consecutively. If not, workers lose whatever time they haven't taken. "We want people to enjoy their careers, but we also want people to enjoy life," says Brian Scudamore, the company's founder. "You've got to have a balance."

I'm not going to argue with that logic, because I'd like to go back to New Mexico someday. But some people, maybe the same people who are leaving three-plus vacation days on the table every year, suggest that time away from the office and a happier life don't necessarily go hand in hand. I've interviewed a few workaholic executives who told me in confidence that they love life simply because they love their jobs. "I get all the satisfaction I need right here at my desk," one said.

Still, maybe that Type A type is the exception. Because there is evidence that tipping the work-vacation balance more toward vacation can make life better. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development tracked European workers from 1972 to 1995 and found that most felt an increased satisfaction with their lives as they worked less, even if that also meant they made less money. This year, researchers at Harvard looked at similar studies conducted in the United States. Many of those studies concluded that there seems to be a link between increased happiness and increasing vacation time.

Funny, though, the Harvard team wasn't convinced. They argued that "these results are difficult to interpret because of omitted variables and reverse causality." (Reverse causality will get you every time.) In nongEEK-speak, what the Harvard researchers determined was that it's not clear whether people are happier *because* they take more vacation time or whether happier people tend to take more vacations.

Scudamore believes that vacations do make you happier. He also thinks a generous vacation policy gives his company a happier bottom line. "Our policy is not only a benefit and a perk to the employee, it is also a pen-

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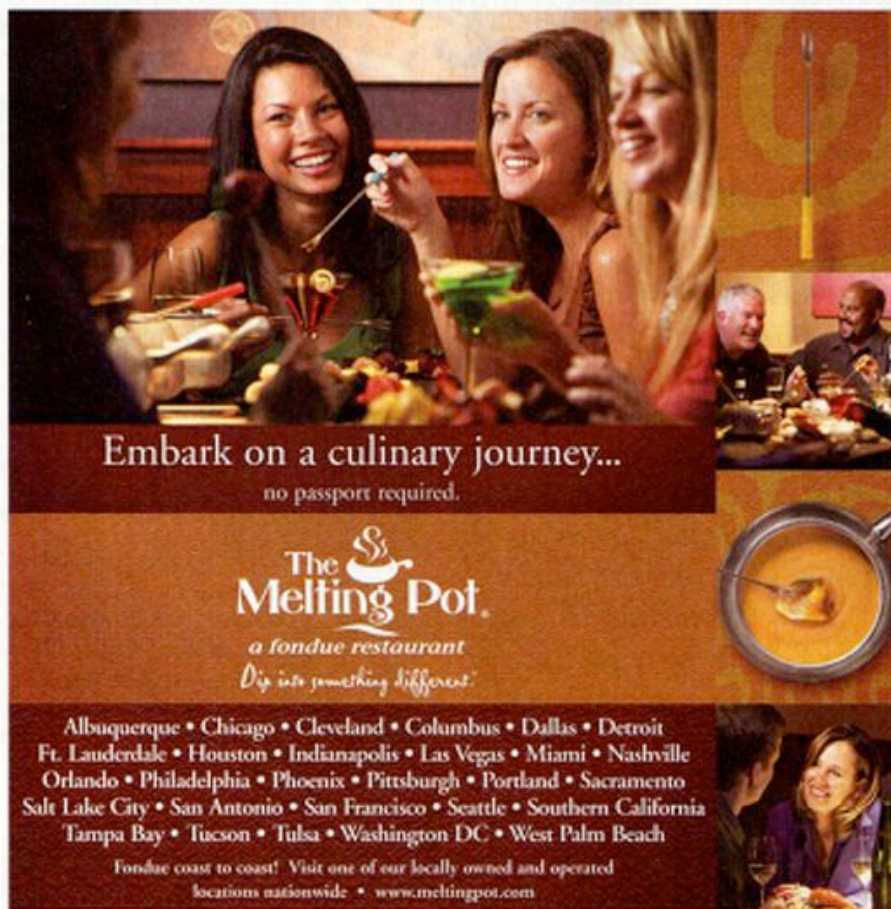
efit to the company," he says. "Our workers come back from vacations refreshed and ready to go, and we need them to feel that way to grow the company."

There are executives who don't see that kind of connection between time off and the bottom line at their companies. None of them offered that opinion for the record. But Liz Ryan, a human resources expert who founded WorldWIT, an online community for professional women, says some employers offer vacation time and then openly or covertly discourage employees from using it. "If you actually use all your time, you're looked at as something less than fully engaged in the job," Ryan says. A Management Recruiters International survey from 2003 backs her up. MRI found that 17 percent of U.S. workers believe their boss does not want them to take all their allotted vacation days.

Numbers are hard. So let's recap. At the moment, we've decided that you either like your job too much to take all your vacation time or that your employer keeps you from doing so. Possibly both. Whichever, maybe you should consider yourselves lucky to have the time at all. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says that just 77 percent of all U.S. companies now grant paid vacation time to workers. That's down from 80 percent in 2000. Maybe 77 percent seems like a lot, but think of it this way: More than 20 million U.S. workers have no paid days off. None. At all. Not even Labor Day.

Why? Capitalism, baby. Many industrialized countries, including most European nations, have laws mandating minimum vacation allotments — usually about 20 days — to workers. The United States does not. If your employer wants to, he or she or it can work you like Joe Simpson works Jessica and Ashlee.

So why are you getting vacation at all? Capitalism, baby. A recent Federal Reserve study found that of those companies that do offer vacation time to workers, most offer essentially the same allotment of days. Less experienced workers get just fewer than 10 days on average. Workers with 25 years of experience get more, just fewer than 20 days, on average. But people of similar seniority in similar industries get about the same number of days because competition for workers pressures companies into giving time off, whether they want to or not. If Bob's Banana Bungalow gives its workers two weeks off, Pete's Plantain Palace will, too, if Pete ever wants to hire away Bob's top salespeople.



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"Our workers
come back from
vacations refreshed
and ready to go,
and we need them
to feel that way to
grow the company."

But if market forces are primarily responsible for giving us the vacation time we're getting, they also could be the reason we're not taking all our time off.

Certainly there are simple reasons why vacation time goes unclaimed. Liz Ryan notes that workers sometimes fully intend to use all their vacation time but just never get around to doing so before the year ends. Forgetfulness happens. Nastiness happens, too, and some bosses certainly pressure workers into not taking the time they're allotted. But, I'm inclined to think that Hunnicutt is onto the root cause. Maybe "a new religion" is overstatement, but there is certainly something to the idea that work is pre-eminent, that time on the job is more important to some people than time off. That something is — to oversimplify it a little — capitalism.

Think of it this way. In Europe, since the 1970s, governments have made vacation a right of workers. In the United States, time off, despite the efforts of some lawmakers, is not a right. It's only an economic incentive. If all workers prized 20 days of vacation a year in the United States, we might all get 20 days off. But some people simply prefer 10 percent more in pay to 10 seconds of silence in the mountains of New Mexico. Maybe not you, and certainly not me, but someone. And competition for workers being what it is, as long as that someone, or those thousands of someones, doesn't want 20 days off, the rest of us are not going to get 20 days off. Which makes me angry at someone.

Ah, but suppose there was evidence we could present to our companies that proved taking time off and getting ahead in business were related? Remember, Scudamore thinks there is. He believes vacation time refreshes his workforce and that allows his company to get bigger, faster. Paul Orfalea, the founder and former head of Kinko's, is down with that concept as well. Orfalea

says it was a long vacation he took in 1972 that convinced him to expand his single copy shop to multiple locations. "Vacations give you a chance to get a fresh perspective on your priorities in business," Orfalea says. "My parents were self-employed entrepreneurs who never took a vacation. So they could never get the big things done. That was an important lesson to me. You need the vacation time to plan, to reappraise your work — otherwise, you can't see the forest for the trees."

Right. Trees. Ancient cliff dwellings. All that. Great. Unfortunately, despite Orfalea's and Scudamore's experiences, economists — probably the same scientific types who'd want me to get the wax in my ears checked out — have yet to find that extended vacations make most workers in most industries more efficient at their jobs.

Economists tell us that when hours worked decline, productivity goes up. For instance, companies that lay off hundreds of workers usually realize a big boost in productivity because fewer workers end up producing the same amount of stuff in fewer total hours.

Does that mean that if Americans took three more vacation days, on average, each year — if we worked less — then we'd also be more productive? Not really. Even though European workers have about double the number of paid vacation days that American workers do, they aren't, on the whole, more productive. Hour per hour, the American worker produces more goods or services than most European workers. There are exceptions, but not many. And the upside to all this productivity and all the extra hours we work (about six weeks more annually than, say, the French) is that the United States has one of the highest per capita standards of living in the world.

I would like to argue that we'd be happier with a few more days off and a little less per capita, except that the boss is reading this and, as such, my capita might get cut. Plus, much as I'd like to mount that argument, I can't. If U.S. workers aren't even taking their full slate of days as it is, who am I to suggest that we, as a whole, prize more days off? I'm no scientist, that's for sure. But have I told you about this one time when I was on vacation in New Mexico? You should really go visit. ☺

Joseph Guinto is a senior editor for *Spirit*. He has written extensively about economic issues and once interviewed Jessica Biel, *Esquire's* Sexiest Woman Alive. So there.