

Sabbaticals Are A Power Move In Burnout Era

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FULL TEXT

Late in 2020 Joanna Miller was overworked, grappling with pandemic-induced feelings of isolation, and had just finished moving after listening to construction near her home office for eight months straight.

She took two weeks off from her job in human resources at the cloud software company Asana Inc. It didn't help. "When it was time to go back to work, I realized that I was still so exhausted," said Ms. Miller, who lives in Oakland, Calif.

Instead of joining the millions of people who have left their jobs recently, Ms. Miller, 35 years old, took a paid six-week sabbatical.

Workers are putting in more hours than ever nearly two years into the pandemic. They are in many cases burned out and believe a prolonged break is the best respite. Surprisingly, some companies agree. Employees who take sabbaticals say they return to work energized and more productive. Managers who are worried about retaining top talent and how the Covid era is wearing on employees' well-being find sabbaticals engender loyalty and greater creativity.

Sabbaticals still aren't mainstream: 5% of companies offered them in 2019, according to the Society for Human Resource Management. The organization doesn't have data on what's happened to the perk during the pandemic or whether people remain at their jobs long term after taking a sabbatical. But several high-profile banks have recently started to offer them and smaller companies are trying them out as well. Late last year, Goldman Sachs Group Inc. started offering six-week unpaid sabbaticals to people who have been with the bank for at least 15 years, following an early 2021 move by Citigroup Inc. to give employees with at least five years' service up to 12 weeks off. Citigroup said 200 employees have been approved to take sabbaticals under the program.

Juraj Pal, former head of product at the polling-software startup Slido, was living in New York City last winter and had spent six years with his company from its early days. Over time, work had become his entire identity.

"If you invited me for dinner and asked me who I am, I would talk about the company and if you asked me if I had hobbies, I'd say, 'I don't have hobbies' and I'd even feel good about it," said Mr. Pal, 28.

As the startup went through a reorganization and a subsequent acquisition by Cisco Systems Inc., Mr. Pal started to feel he was no longer a good match for the culture. He ended up in a conversation with the startup's CEO at the time, Peter Komornik, who suggested a real break.

"My first response was I didn't want to hear about it," said Mr. Pal. "Any extended time off was somehow a sign of failure, a sign of weakness even."

He worked through that resistance with his executive coach as well as his wife and best friend, both of whom worked at the company. He agreed to take several months off last spring. It took weeks for him to turn off his brain from work. A month in, he and his wife rented a place in Lake Tahoe, where he spent time hiking with his dog and participating in career development groups.

Mr. Pal's boss proposed he come back to a different role, which he did. Six months later he decided to leave Cisco to join a company whose program he had participated in while on his break.

"It's important mostly for mental health, at least it was for me, to think not about myself just through the lens of work," he said of his sabbatical.

Mr. Komornik, now the general manager of Slido under Cisco, said he thinks of sabbaticals as medicine that should be dispensed judiciously. One hard worker might benefit from a break after three years of incredible work, he said, while someone else may not need one after six years. When it came to Mr. Pal, Mr. Komornik felt he was long overdue a break and didn't want him to feel guilty about considering other opportunities.

"We were actually both very open when he went to the sabbatical that he might be leaving," Mr. Komornik said. "It's very important for people to do this because only if they do, then they can be certain if they stay for the right reasons or if they leave, they leave for the right reasons."

One study of 50 people who took extended time off from work found that most of the interview subjects suffered from "functional workaholism," according to the Sabbatical Project, which conducted the research. Many reported a negative event, such as the end of a long relationship or death of a family member, prompted them to take a break.

Catherine Merritt, CEO of Spool Marketing in Chicago, said she started offering her employees sabbaticals this past fall after seeing pandemic-induced burnout take a toll on her workforce. Employees who have been with the company for three years can take three paid weeks off in addition to their vacation time.

Offering longer breaks as a perk to work toward is another way to attract and hang on to top talent, Ms. Merritt said.

Anna Binder, head of people for Asana, says the key to making sure one person's sabbatical doesn't become a burden for others is distributing the work among team members and identifying what projects can be put on hold. Steve Dakin, a director of engineering with Adobe Inc., has taken three sabbaticals across nearly two decades of working for the software maker, where taking them is ingrained in the culture.

"If you don't take it, people look at you strangely," said Mr. Dakin, 54.

For his first two sabbaticals, in 2011 and 2015, Mr. Dakin took multiweek road trips through national parks. He said he believes the financial costs of paying people to not work for a stretch are outweighed by the benefits to morale and spread of knowledge and skills around the company.

"When you're gone, all the work that you're doing needs to get picked up by somebody," he said. "Your manager gets to see, wow, this person is really important."

During his most recent six-week break last fall, Mr. Dakin redid his home office in San Jose, Calif., and traveled to Oregon, Yosemite National Park and Hawaii. All of his sabbaticals, he said, have helped him gain a broader perspective that's harder to have when he is in the thick of work.

Credit: By Katherine Bindley

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