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Give Me a Break

Remember when we were kids in school and got nice long summer vacations? We had lots of time to work on our own projects or get a summer job or go to school or just hang out. Bring up the topic with just about any software industry professional and you'll see their eyes glaze over and a wistful smile begin to form. If you push the topic a little further, you might start hearing about their retirement dreams, or their semi-retirement plans to teach or work at the local hardware store.

After a certain point in their careers, people get significantly drained of energy. They may truly love their job and profession, but two weeks' vacation per year plus holidays is not enough time for contemporary software professionals to adequately refresh their energies and recharge their batteries.

Gone is the era when people stayed a long time with a single company, thereby enhancing pension benefits and gaining more weeks off per year. Gone are the days (at least in Silicon Valley) when a prospective employer looked dubiously at a person leaving a company after three years or less—now you'll be challenged about why you stayed put for so long. A downside of this "migratory" work force pattern is that when we move to our next job, we frequently revert back to two weeks' vacation per year!

VACATION IS ESSENTIAL TO WORK

Most software development work is extremely demanding. Developers face many ongoing challenges, such as balancing creativity with formality, working within a "lean" budget, carving out adequate time for critical reviews and tests, and meeting aggressively scheduled release dates. Developers get caught in the tug between technology innovation and market need, and are pushed to produce more, faster, cheaper, better, sooner. A

single project can build in intensity and drive like a theater production, the ship date arriving with all the stomach butterflies of opening night.

However, unlike a theater production, we don't get to keep doing the same show over and over again, perfecting it and basking in the audience's applause. If we do one project well, we get to do another one—a new one, perhaps with different challenges. Frequently we're on such a high from the last success that we don't realize how tired we've gotten. Sooner or later, we'll need a significant break. Two weeks' vacation is just not enough.

While I was working in academia, I left one university position for another. I had worked diligently at the first position and was totally exhausted. So between jobs, I spent the summer in Cape Cod determined to get some serious rest and relaxation. I had begun to have nagging reservations about whether I still wanted to work in software. About six weeks into the summer, however, I found myself happily bringing my technical books to the beach, my former joy in the topic returning. By summer's end I was eager to get back to work.

Some innovative companies offer a sabbatical leave after several years. Intel offers an eight-week sabbatical after each seven-year period on the job. I could live with that. But in my brief experience in a company with such a perquisite, I saw a real reluctance to let individuals schedule their sabbaticals, with standard delays of one to four years. I could still live with that.

The Wall Street Journal reported (23 Nov. 1998) that SAS Institute in Raleigh, North Carolina promotes a 35-hour workweek and has rewarded its employees with an extra week of paid vacation for the last eight years. Some companies have also begun to allow employees to "buy" an extra week of vacation. It's a step in the right direction, even if only a small one.



WORK CULTURE STARTS WITH NATIONAL CULTURE

Europe has a vastly different work culture. A friend who works in an international company described with envy a colleague's departure to return to Europe, where a 50- to 60-hour workweek is *not* the norm, the average annual vacation allotment is six weeks, and just about everyone takes August off. Come to think of it, that may explain my friend's recent interest in learning a foreign language.

I don't understand why we drive ourselves so relentlessly here in the US. I've asked several managers and HR people to consider developing new policies that would give employees more vacation or the chance to occasionally work part-time without risking their jobs. The answers usually revolve around the company's productivity needs or cost inefficiencies.

Can it really be so bad for business to let people fully recharge their batteries, be well rested, and lead balanced lives? Or is the justification just another bottom-line, shortsighted bean-counter dictate devoid of consideration of the human lives it affects? (If I see one more advertisement on a company site for an off-hours or lunchtime stress management course sponsored by the company, I think I'll scream!) In *Programming Productivity* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1986), Capers Jones cites studies showing that companies providing 10 to 15 days of internal training rates per year have higher productivity and lower attrition rates than those that provide no training at all—hardly a surprise. Intuitively, I believe the same would be true for substantial periodic vacations of six to eight weeks.

CREATING NEW OPTIONS

So what can we do about this? As a start, perhaps we can negotiate our own individual agreements with our companies. We can choose to build the breaks we need into our schedules, and if the company we work for cannot honor them, then we'll need to make some hard choices. These may include

- ◆ burning out and possibly developing a stress-related health problem,
- ◆ quitting to take a break and starting a new job at another company—beginning with two weeks' vacation per year again, or
- ◆ taking a leave of absence and perhaps being

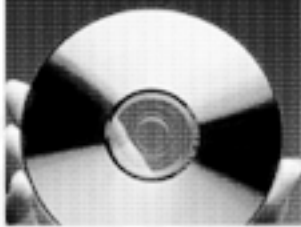
branded as "not a team player," and not being able to reverse the label later on.

Such options hardly seem attractive, yet more palatable ones do not currently exist. Software and other workers would surely benefit if their companies or even national policy supported more viable options rather than each of us having to swim upstream on our own. The US is beginning to look at sustaining company benefits like health care across jobs, in acknowledgment of our new migratory work pattern. I recommend that we look at vacation seniority as part of the sustained benefits. The least we can do, as individuals and collectively as software professionals, is to explicitly request the same or better vacation seniority as part of our sign-on negotiations at a new job.

Companies that let employees buy an extra week of vacation could easily extend this policy to let them buy more vacation based on professional seniority. It might help the company cut some salary costs for its senior people, help with retention, and also be an attractive recruiting tool. I could definitely live with this alternative! ♦

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