

Taking 6 weeks off unrealistic? Even weekend respite will help

By Sonja Haller

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Varying surveys report that only 2 to 4 percent of American companies offer European-style work environments: six-week vacations

and 35-hour workweeks. But author Mary Lou Quinlan shares how women still may carve out a little time to assess their lives.

QUESTION: How is "time off" different from an extended vacation?

ANSWER: It is different. On vacations: 1. People never really take them or don't take all of them; 2. They tend to work on their vacations, so vacations are not as relaxing as they used to be. And, often we have everyone else's agenda on our vacation. It's a happier to-do list, but for women especially, it's still a to-do list.

Q: Is the biggest impediment to taking time off financial or something else?

A: The knee-jerk reaction is that it will be financial. And it's important to have a plan first. This (break) is not something you do spur of the moment. You don't quit your job. You work with your company and use its policies. ... I think the money flag goes flying up in women's faces, but, really, it's the guilt or the permission to let yourself rest.

Q: Can minibreaks (three days, a week or two) be useful in reassessing your life?

A: Yes, if there was any message I wanted to get out, that's it. If (women) can't take the time to build into their life breaks as a natural part of working, maybe pick a weekend. It could be once a year, and say I'm going to have two days to rest and do some exercises and take stock: Does your life match up with what's important to you? (There are

worksheets in the book.) Or say to yourself, "This Saturday, these two hours are mine." But don't fall into you've got to take the kids, you've got to pick up the kids. Say, "I need this time."

Q: How would you suggest a woman negotiate extended time off in a company that doesn't offer it and has no history of allowing it?

A: The first thing you need to do is find out what the company has. A lot of companies will say employees don't know what they offer. It may be a policy, or it may be Mary over in finance took some time, so go see Mary. And you need to first think about your own needs. What are you asking for, what would work for you and what would be fair? Pick a time that's sensitive to your company's needs. And think about how your job will be covered in your absence. Help figure it out by the time you sit down with your boss.

Q: What are some common discoveries women make after taking time off?

A: I've put it into three categories. The first is that they identify or remember a passion. That could be a hobby. There are some people who loved music and they end up studying that. Or, it's a career passion. Giving yourself a little space helps you identify that. The second one is perspective. That is, they realize what's important in their lives, what their priorities are. And the third is that many get a sense of their purpose in their life.

Q&A



Mary Lou Quinlan