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Personal Growth And Transformation

Research: The Transformative Power of Sabbaticals

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Burnout, meaningless work, and stalled careers continue to contribute to a historic number of workers quitting (or quiet quitting). How can these people craft work that is truly better?

Our research suggests that one answer is to take a sabbatical — an extended break from your job lasting long enough for you to truly distance yourself from your normal work life.

In recent years, the number of employers offering sabbaticals has grown exponentially. In addition, many more workers, especially employees in managerial and professional roles, are taking their own unpaid sabbaticals when their organizations fail to offer them. Both groups need to know: What are the major benefits of a sabbatical? And how can a sabbatical be structured to maximize its benefits? While a host of memoirs and practitioner guides claim to have answers, these are largely based on anecdotes and opinions.

Our rigorous study of professionals who took a sabbatical found that people largely experienced significant, positive changes in their work and life. Our 50 interviewees worked in a variety of private, public, and non-profit organizations from diverse sectors including consulting, design, finance, medicine, education, and technology, all located in the United States. Their ages ranged from 20s to 40s. Women and men were equally represented, and slightly less than half identified as a person of color. All held

college degrees. More than half paid for their own sabbatical.

We dug deep into their experiences before, during, and after their sabbaticals to map what made their time away so transformative. Our work offers important practical insights for employees and employers alike.

Three Different Types of Sabbaticals

We discovered three different sabbatical types, each with a unique combination of experiences that led to increasingly radical transformations in people's work and life.

Working holidays

People who were pulled into this type of sabbatical did so to work on a passion project (for example, to volunteer for a think tank or found a start-up). During a working holiday, they alternated between intense periods of work and dedicated breaks to rest and rekindle long-neglected relationships. For instance, one interviewee interspersed hunkering down upstate to write a novel with visiting New York City to have fun, connect, and decompress.

Through this combination of chosen work and rest, they slowly gained trust in "that little voice" in their head and started "feeling more sure-footed" with themselves and their decisions. As one sabbatical-taker described it: "You're forced to rely on yourself and to trust yourself, and you just develop a completely new relationship with yourself."

These sabbatical-takers ended up largely returning to their former jobs, but with new confidence about how to make that work fit them. One explained, "Coming back and choosing my role and really owning what it means to be in this role has changed." Many

claimed a new and welcomed sense of independence. As one interviewee described it, “I think I’m a better leader now, not asking permission.” Their confidence also extended to drawing clearer personal boundaries: less work travel or turning down opportunities that sacrificed too much family time.

Free dives

People who fell into this category were pulled into their sabbaticals by wanderlust. Having read inspiring memoirs or having heard friends’ stories, they reached the point where they “needed an adventure and a kind of a soul reset.” As one told us: “It’s now or never.”

Free divers leaped out of work and dove straight into intense exploration — think finishing work on Friday and getting on a plane on Saturday to trek Nepal, sail the Pacific, or backpack Patagonia. This travel was often far more intense than expected, however, and exposed people to the elements, health risks, and their own limitations. As a result, breaks were necessary to rest and heal.

Alternating exploration and recovery created, as one interviewee noted, “space to really reflect on my life thus far and what it was about it that I liked and what it was about that that was contributing to me not feeling happy or fulfilled or connected.” Another person explained: “It’s like having a whiteboard that’s completely clean. We get to figure out how we want to fill that space… The essence of who we are, it’s there, it’s just buried.”

In particular, the experience of free divers entailed shedding others’ expectations. They no longer felt compelled to make

themselves fit into an all-consuming professional image, or what one described as "the idea of success and failure and self-worth, all of those things I have historically linked to my job, my job title."

Free divers embraced a more authentic life and lost the fear to live it. Most returned to their pre-sabbatical profession but not their pre-sabbatical work itself. They pursued new projects, arrangements, positions, or employers that fit their talents and their values.

Quests

The third group had the most dramatic transformations. Questers weren't pulled into projects or adventures but pushed out of work by unsustainable expectations and toxic organizational cultures. Exhausted and burned out, the sabbatical was a last resort because continuing on their current path was untenable.

Quests started slow, with extended time to heal: sleeping in, eating healthier, and reconnecting with family or friends. As people felt better, they grew excited to make more of their sabbaticals. Like free divers, they ventured out — climbing, diving, and meditating around the world — pushing their personal limits to discover themselves. "What changed is the ability for me to articulate what I want, and then to just get it," one person said. "That type of audacity: I think it's pretty rare and I'm really thankful I have that now."

But their sabbaticals didn't stop there.

As they gained perspective, they grew eager to put that growth

into practice. Like those on working holidays, they pursued non-routine work — certification, gig work, or networking opportunities to "prototype," "craft," and "hypothesis-test" potentially better careers. But unlike those who took working holidays or free dives, questers rarely went back to their old jobs.

From questers, we learned that when sabbaticals serendipitously unfold from recovery to exploration to putting that learning into practice, they "lead you to a really radical new self." We spoke to a tech strategist who founded a wellness practice, a consultant who became an artist, a marketing manager who became a wildlife photographer, and a teacher who became a life coach.

Building the Right Sabbatical for You

If you feel like you're ready to take a sabbatical, we recommend asking yourself a few questions first.

What kind of sabbatical do you want?

Before leaving on a sabbatical, truly think about how much change in yourself, your work, and your life you need.

We found that the more people anticipated and planned, the more likely they were to go on a working holiday or free dive. If you're pulled in this direction, it means you can enjoy a break spent on your passion project or travel but then largely return to your former life (though with greater affirmation and perspective). But is that right for you? Are you seeking a radically different life and career? If so, plan less, and embrace the unfamiliar, unusual, and uncomfortable opportunities that turn your sabbatical into a quest.

Should you work?

A common misconception is that sabbaticals involve zero work. But most of our participants did work. Such non-routine work was not only fine — especially if it helped fund the sabbatical — but had real benefits. It instilled pride in those on working holidays and revealed new careers to those on quests.

Just be careful: Time for recovery requires being completely free from work of any kind. And interviewees resented when intrusive work demands prevented a clean break at the start of their sabbatical. Save yourself this aggravation by picking the right work at the right time.

Will you go solo?

Half of our participants took their sabbatical alone, while the rest were joined by partners or children. Across all three types, going solo created more space to explore and work, unencumbered by the wants and needs of others. Thus, those traveling alone gained more self-clarity and changed more radically.

But going alone also means you may not have the support and insights of others, nor time to explore and build those relationships. For some, a hybrid approach turned out to be best as they consciously split time together with dedicated solo adventures.

Harnessing the Power of Sabbaticals for your Organization

If your organization currently offers sabbaticals, or is considering doing so as an employee benefit, keep the following in mind.

Make sabbaticals win-win.

Let's not mince words: There is a risk that a great employee who takes a sabbatical will not return. But employers have a surprising amount of influence on that decision. We want to emphasize that sabbatical-takers were least likely to return when the sabbatical was a last resort: not a pull into an exciting, temporary adventure but a push out of unsustainable work. With burnout rates at historic highs and organizations struggling to find effective interventions, consider sabbaticals as relatively easy-to-implement, preventative investments.

If you facilitate sabbaticals *before* employees are pushed to the brink, most will return with renewed energy and greater clarity about how they want to contribute. Be ready to leverage that enthusiasm: Listen to and work with returnees pitching you new projects, requesting transfers, or embracing leadership opportunities.

Use sabbaticals to foster talent.

Indeed, sabbaticals offer a surprising opportunity to invest in leadership. Those who took sabbaticals reported greater self-clarity and confidence in their managerial skills and were eager to step up. Further, those who filled in during the sabbatical-taker's absence had their own experiences of self-discovery and were able to showcase hidden talents.

Two CEOs in our sample were particularly excited by this unexpected benefit: Both credited the sabbatical as essential to kickstarting their own succession planning and providing their organization with trial periods to succeed without them. In these situations, those who filled in were able to full take on leadership responsibilities, and sabbatical-takers were able to craft their

responsibilities, and sabbatical-takers were able to craft their leadership roles to fit their new sense of authenticity when they returned.

Manage potential inequities.

Sabbaticals beget sabbaticals. Participants in our sample were often inspired by, and would then push, friends and colleagues to take one. But these professionals also confessed that they felt part of a privileged circle, acknowledging the great career and financial success that made their sabbatical possible. They expressed guilt that this life-changing opportunity was unavailable to most of their subordinates.

Organizations must be aware that sabbaticals can further inequality. To harness their full potential, companies should consider the most equitable ways to allocate sabbaticals and provide resources to enable a diverse range of employees to take advantage.

Regardless of the sabbatical they chose, and in spite of any harsh experiences, elements, or emotions that many would face, every one of our participants reported a positive transformation. So the question isn't whether sabbaticals change employees' work for the better, but how and how much. Our research offers some clarity into different options for sabbaticals and their consequences, which can help both employees seeking a change and organizations looking to better support these workers.

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