THE
TETHERED
VACATION

PROJECT : TIME OFF

In 2003, BlackBerry introduced Quark, the first handheld device to integrate email, web browsing, texting, and phone functionality. Four years later, Americans lined up for the release of Apple's first iPhone. By 2008, when Google launched its Android device, the era of the smartphone was well underway. Today, smartphones are ubiquitous—nearly eight-in-ten Americans own one—and have made the office anywhere there is a Wi-Fi or cellular connection.

Technology has permanently changed the American workplace—and there is no turning back. But have these changes—and always-connected employees—begun to hurt American companies?

The tech-fueled transformation of the workplace is creating new problems for employers. While employers have introduced robust flex-time policies and remote-working arrangements, they often fail to clearly communicate guidance and expectations about working outside the office. This leads to vague and contradictory interpretations that affect company culture and employees' impression of their value to the organization.

By failing to establish boundaries around work, companies are unintentionally sending the message that they do not respect employees' time off. This undermines efforts to create and sustain an engaged, motivated workforce.

Time off has always been important to employees personally. The research makes clear that employers must care about vacation just as much as their employees do.

Methodology

GfK conducted an online survey from January 26-February 20, 2017 with 7,331 American workers, age 18+, who work more than 35 hours a week and receive paid time off from their employer. These data were weighted and scaled. The survey included 2,598 employees who are able to access work remotely. The following report looks exclusively at those employees.

A Modern Definition of **Face Time**

Thanks to today's technology, face time does not mean what it used to. Email response time has replaced the last car in the office parking lot. It is a dynamic that does not change even if an employee's location does. Just **one-in-four (27%)** employees actually unplug on vacation and nearly **eight-in-ten (78%)** say they are more comfortable taking time off if they know they can access work.

Most commonly, employees report (46%) checking in occasionally—once a day, every few days, or just at the beginning of their time away. More than a quarter (27%) of workers check in frequently—hourly or several times a day.

Employees may simply be responding to the expectations of their managers. The overwhelming majority—92 percent—of managers consider face time important. At the most senior levels of management, it is considered even more important, at 97 percent.

Employees who check in the most with the office when they actually do get away are the least likely to use their earned time off. Those who check in only occasionally— once a day, every few days, or just at the beginning—are better about using the vacation time they earn. Unplugged employees, those who never check in with work, use the most time off.

THE MOST CONNECTED WORKERS LEAVE MORE TIME UNUSED

CHECK IN FREQUENTLY

62% LEAVE VACATION TIME UNUSED

CHECK IN OCCASIONALLY

57% LEAVE VACATION TIME UNUSED

UNPLUG

52% LEAVE VACATION TIME UNUSED

It is no surprise more connected employees leave more time on the table. They are much more susceptible to the barriers to taking time off.

They fear work will pile up and that no one else can handle their responsibilities, due in part to their belief that taking time off is harder as they advance. They also feel that they are expected to be working, even when on vacation.

Employees who are more connected are not only taking less time off, they are also more stressed. More than half (51%) of those who check in frequently report stress in their home life, compared to 48 percent of those who check in occasionally and 36 percent who unplug on vacation. At work, where stress levels tend to be high across the board, 76 percent of those who check in frequently report stress, compared to 73 percent of those who check in occasionally and 62 percent of those who unplug.

CONNECTED EMPLOYEES MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO BARRIERS OF TAKING TIME OFF

	Check in frequently	Check in occasionally	Unplug
Return to a Mountain of Work	65%	56%	35%
No One Else Can Do the Job	54%	45%	24%
Time Off is Harder with Seniority	50%	40%	25%
Want to Show Complete Dedication	42%	30%	18%
Expected to Respond to Work Anyway	41%	26%	13%

Working Remotely: How it Affects Employees and Their Vacations

Working remotely is becoming more desirable for employees and more manageable for companies. **Current job seekers rank flexible work arrangements—the ability to telecommute and work nontraditional hours—as one of their most desired benefits.** More than a third (35%) of employees have the ability to work remotely, at least occasionally.

The ability to work from anywhere often convinces employees they should work from everywhere, including while on vacation. But as prevalence of flex-time rises, the 21st Century version of face time has too.

Face time is highly valued by employees who can work remotely, likely because they are not always seen doing the work they produce. The vast majority of employees (86%) say that face time is important. An even greater number (88%) say it is important to their boss.

Employees who are able to work remotely put more pressure on themselves to check in with work while on vacation than employees who do not work remotely (43% to 23%). They are also more likely to feel pressure from their boss to stay plugged in (26% to 15%).

> **The ability to work from anywhere often convinces employees they should work from everywhere, including while on vacation.**

The challenges of getting away may also be exacerbated by the invisible nature of remote work. For employees who are able to work remotely and are not always seen in the office, it is more difficult for their colleagues to know when they are working remotely and when they are trying to take a break. That is if they are getting away at all. Employees with access to the office are less likely to use the time they earn compared to those who are unable to telework (43% to 49%).

The Impact of **Company Tech Culture** on Employees

A company's unplugging culture can predict an employee's engagement and commitment to the organization.

More than half (54%) of employees believe their company culture supports unplugging; just over one-in-four (28%) say their culture is ambivalent about unplugging; the remaining 18 percent say their culture is unsupportive.

While workers in pro-unplugging cultures do unplug more than employees in unsupportive cultures (32% to 20%), the majority still check in with work while they are away. But there is a difference. Most employees in supportive cultures say that they like to check in only occasionally while on vacation (47%), compared to those in unsupportive cultures who are most likely to say they check in frequently throughout the day (40%).

There is a dramatic difference in work stress based on company culture. Employees working in cultures that support unplugging are much less likely to say that they are stressed than those in unsupportive cultures (67% to 78%).

In an always-on work world, it can be difficult to totally turn off, but many workers believe they are expected to respond no matter where they are. Employees who are in cultures that do not support unplugging are twice as likely to feel this pressure than those who are in supportive cultures (42% to 20%).

Employees who work in cultures that support unplugging are also more likely to go above and beyond when it is needed. Seventy-one percent of these workers say they are willing to work outside of normal business hours when a project or deadline requires it, compared to 64 percent of those in unsupportive cultures.

In an always-on work world, it can be difficult to totally turn off, but many workers believe they are expected to respond no matter where they are.

Cultures that support unplugging have employees who are more engaged and more likely to report feeling that their employer cares about them as a person (64% to 43%) and that their job is important (73% to 57%).

For many Americans, the idea of an unplugged vacation sounds ideal, even mythical. But whether or not being unplugged is a good thing is dependent on company culture. Of the employees who unplug totally while on vacation, those who work in supportive cultures are more likely to say they feel valued by their employer (57% to 45%), cared about as a person (55% to 36%), and that their job is important to the company's mission (65% to 45%) than employees who unplug in unsupportive cultures.

EMPLOYEES IN SUPPORTIVE CULTURES ARE MORE ENGAGED

Engagement Metric	Supportive of Unplugging	Unsupportive of Unplugging
Feel valued for your professional contributions	69%	50%
Feel that your employer cares about you as a person, both in and out of the office	64%	43%
Feel that your job is important to the company's mission	73%	57%
Feel you are given growth and development opportunities	57%	40%

Setting an Example: The Manager's Impact on Vacation Culture

Managers and their actions have a disproportionate impact on an employee's time. Employees report that their boss has the most influence over their time—even more than their own family (24% to 23%). But many bosses do not fully appreciate or even know the power of that influence.

Managers who are more connected on vacation may be putting pressure on their direct reports to follow suit. Just 14 percent of managers unplug when they take time off. Senior leadership is even worse— just seven percent of these high-level managers unplug. The majority—63 percent of all managers and 73 percent of senior leaders—check in at least once a day.

The more connected the vacationing manager, the more likely they are to say no to time off requests. More than a third (35%) of managers who check in frequently on vacation say that pressure from the company prevents them from approving vacation requests, compared to just 20 percent of managers who check in occasionally or 17 percent of those who unplug.

Despite management's tone, employees who are able to work remotely say they are still more likely to put pressure on themselves to check in than actually feel it from their boss (43% vs. 26%). Pressure to check in may affect an employee's engagement. Employees who put pressure on themselves are no less likely to be engaged than those who do not. But employees who feel their boss puts pressure on them to stay connected to work are less likely to be engaged than those who do not.

PRESSURE FROM THE BOSS TO CHECK IN INFLUENCES EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Engagement Metric	Feel Pressure from Boss	Feel Little to No Pressure from Boss
Feel valued for your professional contributions	45%	53%
Feel that your employer cares about you as a person, both in and out of the office	39%	47%
Feel that your job is important to the company's mission	59%	62%
Feel you are given growth and development opportunities	35%	43%

The **Connectivity Bellwether** for Companies

Talent retention and attraction depends on a magnetic company culture, and the numbers prove vacation time is an essential part of shaping that culture. **Vacation is the second-most important benefit after healthcare.**

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of employees who are currently looking for a new job say that paid vacation is "extremely" or "very" important to them in their job search. For employees currently looking for a new position, vacation is a leading indicator of company culture. Eight-in-ten (79%) employees who are leaving their current job due to poor company culture say that paid time off is "extremely" or "very" important in their next job.

Company cultures that do not support unplugging may be facing more flight risks. **Forty percent of employees in cultures that do not support unplugging are looking or planning to look for a new job in the next year. Just 21 percent of employees in supportive cultures say the same.**

Why are employees in unsupportive cultures leaving? While money is among the top reasons, it is on par with reasons like not feeling valued by their employer, a stressful workload, and lack of work-life balance.

But these have not always been the reasons people wanted to leave their job. When asked about the motivations for changing their previous job, employees were more likely to say compensation, advancement, or commute drove their decision to leave. Issues like work-life balance, value, and workload stress were further down the list. This change in priorities should be a red flag for employers who may not be thinking about the impact of vacation culture on their workforce.

MOST IMPORTANT EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

#1 Health Care	#2 Paid Vacation	#3 Retirement Plan	#4 Flexibility	#5 Bonuses
36%	**19%**	**17%**	**15%**	**5%**

WHAT MOTIVATES JOB SEEKERS?

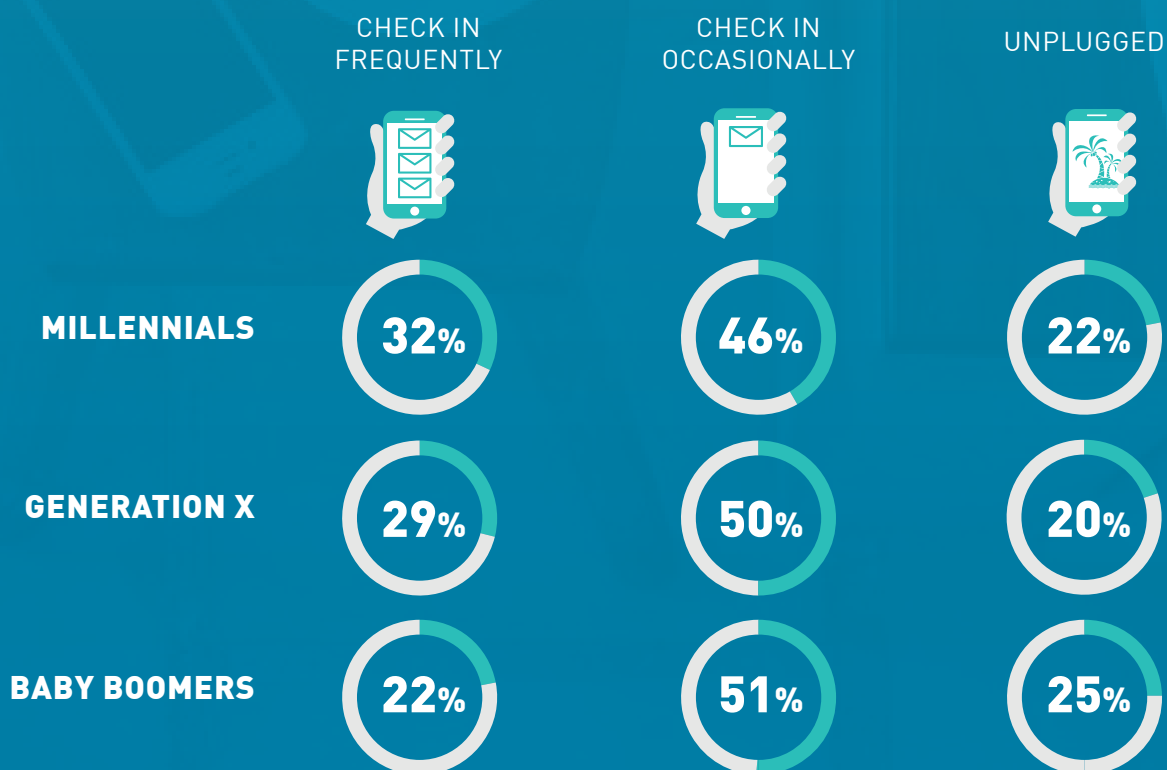|	Looking for a Job	Left Previous Job	Change
Compensation	15%	20%	↘ -5%
Do not feel valued	14%	10%	↗ +4%
Relationship with boss	12%	7%	↗ +5%
Advancement opportunity	11%	11%	═ Even
Work-life balance	11%	8%	↗ +3%
Stressful workload	10%	5%	↗ +5%
Lack of passion	6%	5%	↗ +1%
Company culture	5%	7%	↘ -2%
Location	4%	10%	↘ -6%
Commute	4%	10%	↘ -6%
Flexibility	2%	4%	↘ -2%
Other	6%	8%	↘ -2%

The Most **Connected** Generation

Millennials are a technologically savvy generation. They have been called obsessed—even addicted—to their phones, checking them more than 150 times per day, according to a recent Qualtrics study. But when it comes to connecting to work, these digital natives are not all that different from the generations that precede them. Looking at employees who are able to work remotely, Generation X and Millennials are closer than you might think.

It is actually Generation X that is most likely to say they feel more comfortable taking time off knowing they can connect to work (82%). Millennials are closer to Boomers (77% to 75%, respectively) when asked the same question.

Nearly three-in-ten Millennials (30%) and Generation Xers (28%) are checking with work multiple times a day during their vacation, where just 22 percent of Boomers are. Generation X is the least likely to unplug on vacation (23% say they do, compared to 28% of Millennials and 31% of Boomers).

HOW CONNECTED IS EACH GENERATION?

	CHECK IN FREQUENTLY	CHECK IN OCCASIONALLY	UNPLUGGED
MILLENNIALS	32%	46%	22%
GENERATION X	29%	50%	20%
BABY BOOMERS	22%	51%	25%

The most pronounced generational disparity manifests in the challenges to taking vacation. Millennials are far more likely than other generations to be concerned about how dedicated they would look if they took time off, to fear what the boss would think, and to believe they would lose consideration for a raise or promotion. Boomers who can work remotely tend to be better than average and much better than other generations.

5 KEY GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

	Millennials	Generation X	Boomers
Want to Show Complete Dedication	38%	28%	21%
Afraid of What My Boss Thinks	27%	18%	12%
Don't Want to Lose Consideration for a Promotion	30%	21%	14%
Feel Guilty Using Time Off	29%	21%	15%
Don't Want to Be Seen as Replaceable	32%	25%	17%

As Americans become increasingly connected, employers must be realistic. Work and technology are inextricably linked. But understanding technology's influence and the value of boundaries will empower employees to take a break and help determine whether your company's vacation culture is successful.

Creating an environment where employees feel supported in leaving the office behind will ultimately foster an engaged workforce that feels valued, motivated, and committed—all of which have a lasting impact.