

Post-Vacation Strategies For Hitting The Ground Running

Lydia Dishman, Fast Company 8/20/12



Do you spend your entire first day back from vacation wishing you were still asleep and mindlessly clicking links from your Twitter feed? Here are 6 strategies for leveraging that week of relaxation.

When we last checked in with Carson Tate, the managing partner of Working Simply was making a business case for taking time off. A real vacation--completely disconnected from technology--she argues, is the key to unlocking real innovation and productivity.

We then polled our readers and experts to cull a set of tips for unplugging. Suggestions ranged from allowing a sparing amount of office check-ins to quitting the technology compulsion cold turkey to truly restore the over-stimulated brain.

Whatever degree of relaxation you chose, one thing is inevitable: Work is waiting on the other side. So how do you soften the transition and switch gears?

“People often share with us that they don't feel like they can unhook and go offline for vacation because they will come back and get stuck in a landfill of backlog. They feel like they pay the 'vacation tax' of being out of control and never getting caught up,” says Mike Williams, CEO of the David Allen Company. Volume isn't the issue, he maintains. Visions of hundreds of unread emails may be dancing in your head, he says, but it's the lack of processing time people allow to deal with that volume that's the biggest improvement opportunity.

Here are some strategies that work.

Before You Touch Down

Daina Middleton, global CEO of Performics, the performance marketing division of Publicis Groupe, has the good fortune of being able to travel to Hawaii often. "I always catch up on email on the return trip from vacations. The six-hour return plane ride is a great opportunity to dig out and get back up to speed on everything that happened while I was out. This helps me get my mind back in the game and mentally organizes me for the first week back so I don't feel so lost that first day in the office."

If you're not traveling that far, Pam Horan, president of the Online Publishers Association, says when scheduling a trip she always makes sure to return by Saturday so she can devote Sunday to catch up on email. "I find that this reduces the stress and allows for a smooth re-entry to reality."

The First Morning Back

Take it from Ask.com's chief product and technology officer Lisa Kavanaugh. She reserves the night before returning to work to get caught up with her inbox. But even more important to hit the ground running is food. "I ensure I have a good breakfast and energy-boosting workout so that I have the stamina to power through my day," says Kavanaugh.

Williams says a Getting Things Done strategy is to book a meeting with yourself for the sole purpose of catching up. "If you normally take 30 minutes to go through your inbox in the morning, multiply that by the number of days you've been out--or whatever good chunk of uninterrupted time you can carve out to collect, process, and organize what's come in, to get clear and current."

Andrea Wasserman, national Bridal Director at Nordstrom, who travels a lot for work and (some) play, uses long flights to get through emails but puts time on her calendar the first day back to re-connect with the team, return phone calls, and have any urgent meetings.

In the Buffer Zone

Tate advises creating an "expansive buffer zone" to process all those new insights gained while taking a break. "Make space in your calendar to capture them before they slip away, so you can then begin implementation," she says.

She encourages also using this time to ask yourself some honest questions about your tasks and to-do list. "What activities started to creep into your work day that aren't a high return on impact or aligned to your strategic goals?" she suggests asking, "and what new idea or approach are you going to start using today?" In other words, take a look at those reports you keep generating that no

one is reading or missed while you were gone, and think about how you can offer the information more effectively.

Throughout the Day

“Show your photos, talk about your trip, and give yourself some grace,” says Tate. Don’t schedule very challenging work in the first two or three days back when “your brain is soaked in Coppertone.” She recommends intentionally and purposefully allowing yourself the time to ease back in. “Remember, the world didn’t collapse while you were away,” she says.

And if things start to feel overwhelming (or you’ve re-entered with the dread that you just can’t do the job any longer) Tate says take a minute to identify whether it is the type of work, hours, the environment, the team, or your boss. “Once you identify specifically what needs to change, then drill into what you can control,” she offers. If you enjoy your work but have a challenging boss, determine what you do will do differently to better communicate.”

Stuck Time

To combat the stuck feeling, blogger and fitness expert Carla Birnberg of MizFitOnline.com suggests taking steps before and after a break to keep things humming. “Breaks from posting are also crucial for creating compelling and interesting content,” says Birnberg. “It’s when I get out there and live that I have experiences about which to blog. I even have posts where I share [news of an upcoming hiatus] with my readers as a kind of accountability for myself.”

As with exercise, Birnberg says, “The surest way to never start back is to pressure yourself to be perfect.” The difference with regular work is that you can always regroup (or in the case of Birnberg’s v-logs, re-shoot). “I’m pretty certain, once you take a breath, relax and [be] the authentic you,” she says, you’ll be able to precisely convey what you want.

The Next Day

Having trouble keeping the calm going? Tate suggests bringing a bottle of suntan lotion with you to work. Take a deep whiff when things start to feel overwhelming. “Remember, it’s a marathon not a sprint,” says Tate.

And while you’re filling up your calendar with meetings and project deadlines, don’t forget to schedule another unplugged vacation.

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