

UNUSED VACATION NEGATIVELY IMPACTS WORK PERFORMANCE

Summary

Only a third of U.S. workers are taking full advantage of their paid vacation days, and managers are the worst offenders. Employees who don't take vacations are more likely to be burned out by work, unable to meet work requirements, and lacking the energy they need for work. These characteristics do not describe ideal employees, nor the kind of managers we want leading our teams.

Even when employees take vacation, it often doesn't "feel" like vacation either because the vacation days are really being used to care for dependents or take care of things at home, or because employees feel compelled to check in on work while on vacation. This study of more than 4,000 working adults across industries sheds light on the impacts of forgoing vacation, both on individuals and on their employers.



Unused Vacation Negatively Impacts Work Performance

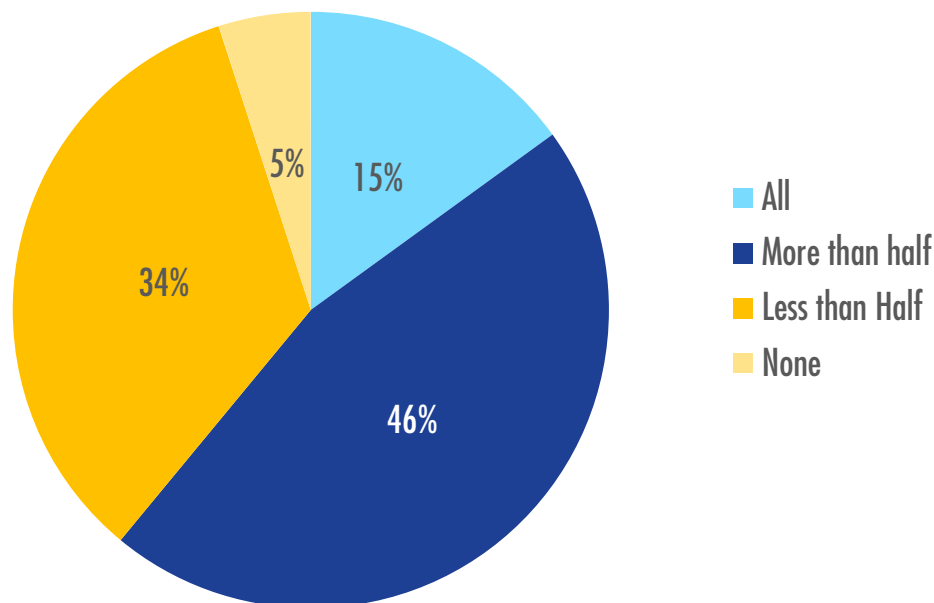
U.S. workers receive the least paid vacation of any country in the industrialized world, yet, the majority of U.S. employees are not taking all of the paid vacation they earn. More than a quarter (26%) of respondents in this 2015 study indicated that over the previous year they had taken less than half of their available vacation time. Only one third (33%) indicated that they had taken all of their vacation time.

Why would employees pass up vacation? A third of employees (33%) agree or strongly agree that they feel guilty taking vacation time. Not surprisingly, respondents who feel guilty taking vacation are less likely to take it. Of those who indicated feeling guilty, 46% took minimal vacation (a quarter or less of their allotted time) and only 24% took most (75% or more) of their available time.

Technological advances allowing employees to stay connected and easily check in on work also impact the quality of vacation time that is taken. Approximately half (49%) of respondents indicated that they feel compelled to check in with work while on vacation. Fewer than half (45%) of those who “strongly agree” that they feel compelled to check in while on vacation indicate that they took most of their vacation, whereas 66% of respondents who “strongly disagree” that they feel compelled to check-in took most of theirs.

Taking vacation time and really feeling like you’re on vacation can be two different things, especially given the number of people who are checking in on work while they are supposed to be away. Employees also often use vacation time to meet life needs such as taking care of children when school is not in session, caring for elder relatives, and catching up on personal chores or doctor appointments. To that end, we asked respondents how much of their used vacation time “actually felt like ‘real’ vacation.”

Amount of Used Vacation Time that Felt Like a “Real” Vacation

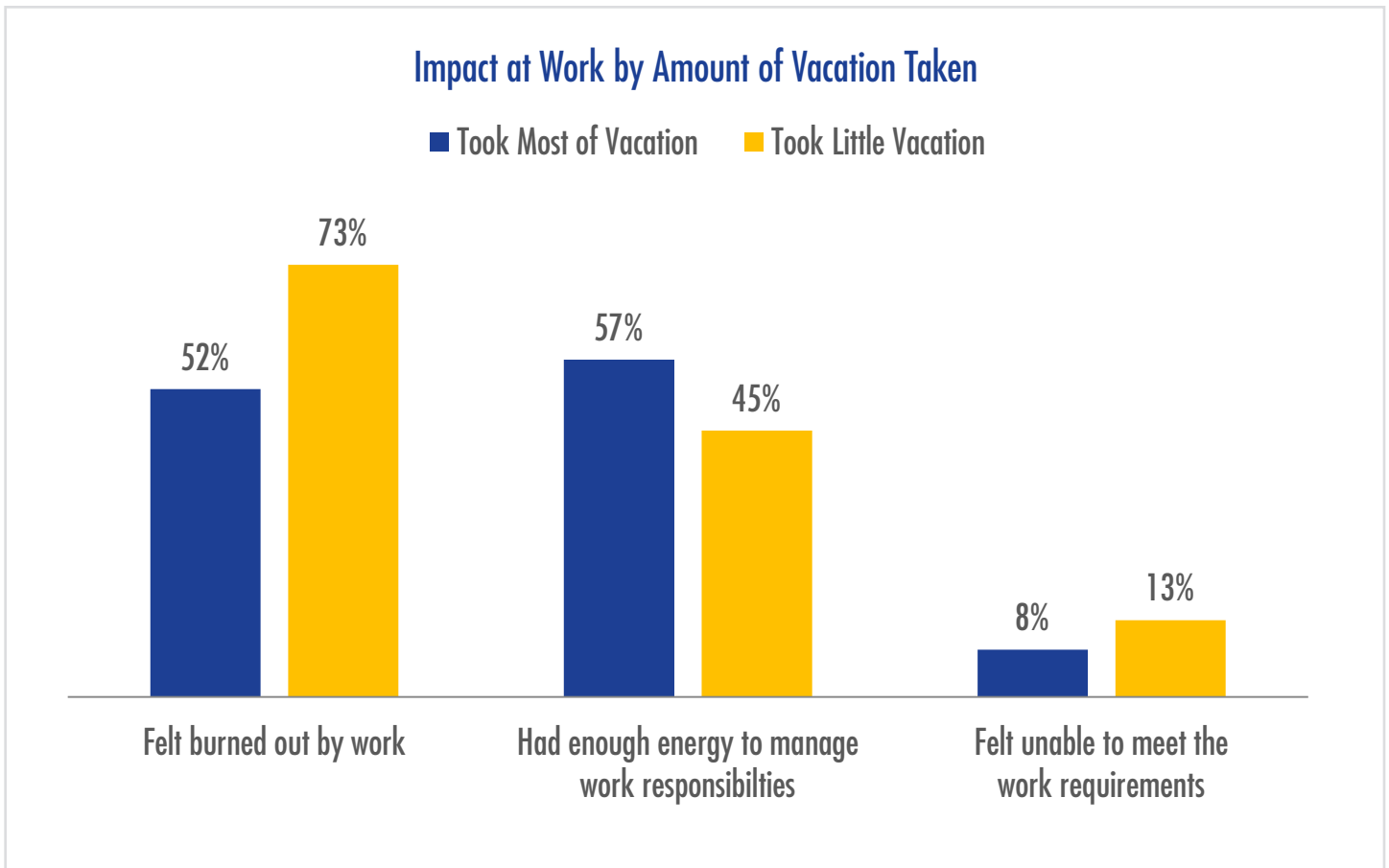


Parents of children ages 12 and under are less likely to take their allotted vacation time (60% of nonparents took most of their time compared with 55% of parents) and are less likely to report that the time they take feels like “real” vacation (41% of nonparents indicated that most of their vacation felt like real vacation compared with 35% of parents.)

Based on years of talking with employees across industries, this is not surprising. We often hear from employees who burn all of their vacation time caring for their children. Spring break and winter break alone can account for a full two weeks’ worth of vacation, and many employees report using vacation time to care for sick children.

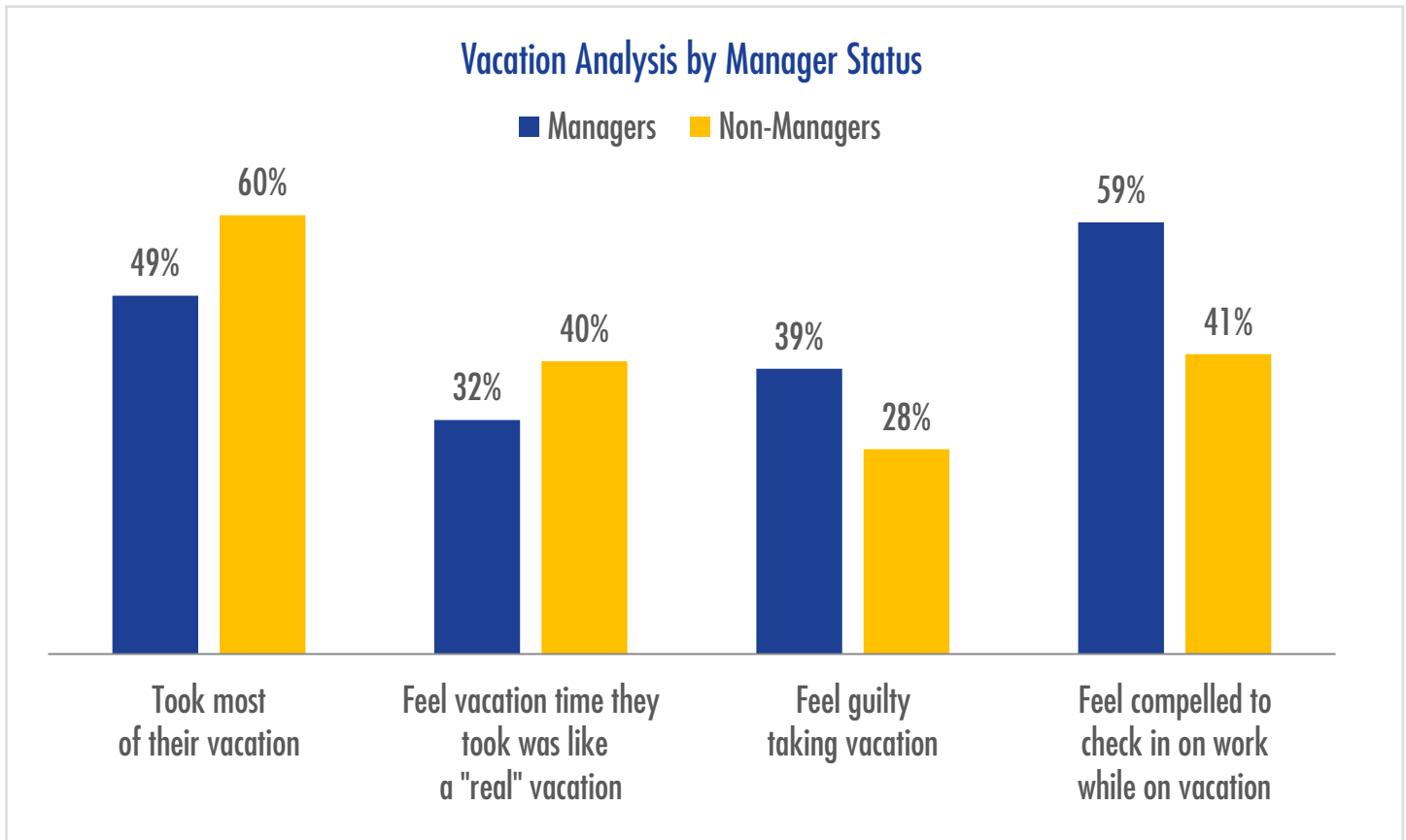
What Does this Mean for Employers?

Vacations have been shown to spark creativity, offer a fresh perspective for problem solving, and increase productivity. Therefore, by not taking vacation time, employees are hindering their work performance. Our study found employees who take less than 25% of their earned vacation are more likely to feel burned out, have less energy to manage their work responsibilities, and are considerably more likely to feel unable to meet work requirements.



What About Managers?

Managers are less likely to take vacation than non-managers, they are more likely to feel guilty taking vacation, and they feel compelled to check in while on vacation. Given the additional level of responsibility for managers, their lack of real vacation time likely has an even greater negative impact on organizations.



What Can Employers Do?

By creating a culture that values and respects vacation time, employers can improve employees' effectiveness and overall contributions to the organization. Employers should expect employees to take their vacation and encourage them to do so. Additionally, employers can offer programs such as back-up care to support employees in caring for their children and elderly relatives so they do not need to use vacation days to provide dependent care. This allows employees to use vacation time to truly decompress and refresh themselves.

During winter break week in 2014, more than 17,000 dependents were cared for through Bright Horizons' employer-sponsored back-up care programs in the U.S. alone. This is about three times the volume of care during a more typical week. Clearly parents and caregivers rely on this important support to get them to work when their kids are out of school. Those fortunate employees are then able to use their vacation time for "real" vacation.

“Back-up care makes it so that I don’t have to ‘hoard’ my vacation days to save for when my kids fall unexpectedly ill or times that daycare falls through. I can use my vacation days for vacation and know that I have back-up care when I’m in a pinch. This program shows that my employer is in touch with the needs of modern employees,” says a Back-Up Care user.

Modeling from the top layer of the organization, such as with executives talking about their vacations and discussing how time away fuels their energy and creativity, will also go a long way towards creating an atmosphere where taking vacation is supported. Putting programs in place to cross-train employees to cover for each other when they are on vacation will allow employees to truly disconnect, reduce the feeling that they need to check in, and keep the work from piling up while they are gone. An added advantage is that this provides professional growth opportunities for employees covering for their supervisor when he/she is on vacation.

Creating a culture that honors vacation time is another demonstration that an employer cares about employees and their overall well-being, which will increase engagement, loyalty, morale, and productivity.

About Horizons Workforce Consulting

With global capabilities and services ranging from work/life needs assessments to customized response strategies, Horizons Workforce Consulting, a division of Bright Horizons, assists clients in identifying and addressing the work, life, and dependent-care obstacles their employees face. The industry experts at Horizons Workforce Consulting help create workplace environments that allow employees to reach peak performance and productivity while enabling employers to achieve organizational success.

Horizons Workforce Consulting regularly publishes reports on the business outcomes associated with employer investments in the workforce. These briefs contribute to the thought leadership of today’s talent management practices.



To learn more, contact us today at
(800) 453-9383 or clientservices@brighthorizons.com

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2015 HORIZONS WORKFORCE CONSULTING STUDY

METHODOLOGY AND RESPONDENT PROFILE

- Study conducted during January and February of 2015 using web-based survey instrument
- 4,166 full-time U.S. workers from across industries and geographies are represented

Gender

Male	29%
Female	71%

Marital Status

Single (Never married)	7%
Married/Domestic Partnership	86%
Separated or divorced	7%

Caregiving Responsibilities
(respondents were able to select multiple options)

Expecting or adopting a child currently or within 3 years	17%
Child or children under the age of 6	57%
Child or children ages 6-12	28%
Child or children ages 13-18	20%
Child with special needs	3%
Elder, ill, or disabled adult	20%
Expect to have adult/elder care responsibilities in the next 1-3 years	8%
Care for a pet or pets	39%
No caregiving responsibilities	4%

Age

18 to 30	12%
31 to 40	50%
41 to 50	24%
51 to 60	12%
61 and over	2%

Household Income

Under \$40,000	3%
\$40,000 to \$79,999	10%
\$80,000 to \$119,999	36%
\$120,000 to \$159,999	22%
\$160,000 to \$199,999	13%
\$200,000 and over	16%

Employer Size

Fewer than 25	7%
25 to 49	5%
50 to 99	6%
100 to 499	15%
500 to 999	9%
1,000 to 1,499	7%
1,500 to 1,999	5%
2,000 to 4,999	13%
5,000 to 9,999	11%
10,000 or more	23%

Tenure

Less than 6 months	3%
6 months to 1 year	5%
1 to 2 years	13%
3 to 5 years	24%
6 to 10 years	27%
More than 10 years	29%

Education

High School Graduate	3%
Completed Some College	10%
Associate's Degree	6%
Bachelor's Degree	36%
Completed Some Postgraduate	6%
Master's Degree	28%
Ph.D, Law or Medical Degree	10%

Geography

New England	9%
Middle Atlantic	19%
East North Central	15%
West North Central	6%
South Atlantic	20%
East South Central	3%
West South Central	8%
Mountain	5%
Pacific	14%

Job Type

Salary	76%
Hourly	23%

Industry

Advertising & Marketing	1%
Agriculture	1%
Airlines & Aerospace (including Defense)	1%
Automotive	1%
Biotechnology/Pharmaceuticals	6%
Business Services	3%
College or University	4%
Computer and Electronics	3%
Construction, Machinery and Homes	1%
Consumer Products	2%
Entertainment & Leisure	1%
Finance & Financial Services	14%
Hotel and Food & Beverages	1%
Government	5%
Health Care	15%
Legal Services	3%
Other Education	2%
Primary or Secondary Education (K -12)	3%
Publishing	1%
Insurance	2%
Manufacturing	4%
Nonprofit	2%
Retail	3%
Real Estate	1%
Telecommunications	2%
Technology	7%
Transportation and Warehousing	1%
Utilities, Energy, and Extraction	2%
Other	7%