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## Business

### When the Boss Says to Chillax, Take a Break

Executives are starting to take mandatory time off as seriously as they take work.

By EMMA GOLDBERG

The symptoms set in sneakily — foggy judgment, mounting malaise. They build into fatigue, frustration. Then there's the inability to make key decisions: pizza for dinner or pad thai?

People need a vacation. They always have. But especially when the office is closed, and work is what happens when you're near your phone, which is to say every waking hour, employees need to re-charge. Some are quietly asking permission to rest. Others know that their break is overdue, and now they're getting nudges from the boss: log off.

**"I don't think I've taken one day off in 22 months,"** said Carol Goodman, an employment lawyer at Herrick, Feinstein. **"And it's starting to catch up."**

Two years into a crisis that has scrambled the best-laid plans, and made time feel immaterial, office workers and their bosses are faced with a question: What constitutes an out-of-office status when people aren't in the office in the first place?

So the C.E.O.s, ever ready to problem-solve, have stepped in to mandate some fun. They're being candid about their own time away. They're forcing people to unplug (and stop sly-checking Slack). And they're making it clear — or trying to, anyway — that one expectation of a job is that you step away from it regularly.

The technology company Notarize created a required week off, Operation Chillax: "It's the combination of chill and relax," the chief executive explained in rolling out the initiative.

Just over a decade ago, Workforce Institute data showed that one-third of American workers surveyed took the whole week off between Christmas and New Year's. Now



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Carol Goodman, an employment lawyer, is feeling the effects of working nonstop for two years.

those plans are trickier to navigate. Last year, one-third of American paid time off went unused on average. And executives have come to realize that vacations aren't just a perk. They affect the company's bottom line, too.

"Knowledge workers are like athletes," said Wendy Barnes, chief people officer at GitLab, in an interview during that last pre-Christmas workweek sprint, citing a corporate talk she had recently attended. "If you're training, training, training for a marathon — or you're training to get a gold medal, or go to the Olympics — you do need to take that time off to rest and recharge."

But many office workers have continuously delayed their paid time off in the hopes of a real, non-Covid-tainted vacation: July 2021 was the plan until the Delta variant arrived, then New Year 2022 until

along came Omicron. With the recent surge of Covid cases, it's become clear to people that a new age of normalcy — flights and hotel bookings unencumbered by coronavirus fears — is unlikely to hit before the next wave of burnout.

**"Unplugging has been put off because we all thought things would get a little more back to normal,"** added Ms. Goodman, who is finally planning to go to Vermont with family this month. **"I will be bringing my phone and laptop, but I will be trying to disconnect when I can. You can't return calls on a ski lift."**

Only about one-third of American workers had the ability to work from home even at the pandemic's peak. But those who can do so face a unique challenge: The fuzziness of remote policies creates a perma-working state, where people are never completely

offline but not always fully online either. Rebecca Chen, 29, who works in marketing, noticed that some of her teammates had grown so used to being reachable that they were pressing ahead on scheduling meetings over the December holidays.

“Someone pinged me to say, ‘I’m cool to take the meeting next week if you are,’” she said. “It puts you in the awkward position of saying, ‘No, I’m not cool taking a meeting on the day we both have off.’”

For Ms. Chen, the realization that she was burned out crystallized when she started ghosting on paid consulting opportunities outside of her day job this fall. She realized that she desperately needed rest. Over Thanksgiving, she put her laptop in a drawer and deleted Slack from her phone so she wouldn’t be tempted to check in.

“To feel through your bones what it actually was like to unplug for a week makes you realize you just hadn’t been doing that,” she added. “It felt like I was really at a breaking point.”

No executives want to see their staff members broken down — and some are starting to take mandatory vacations as seriously as they take their work.

Pat Kinsel, chief executive of Notarize, went off the grid last June for a trip to the Caribbean with his family. He discovered the thrills of untethering from his Google calendar: He played chess with his son, kicked a soccer ball on the beach, let his kids bury him in sand. Upon his return, one of his subordinates wanted to know: Can we also unplug the way you did?

A few weeks later, Mr. Kinsel held a video

meeting for his 440 employees to introduce Operation Chillax, the company’s one-week mandatory vacation. With the whole firm shut down, except for a few customer service people, nobody worried about checking emails. Following their boss’s orders, they chillaxed: ziplining, golfing, fly-fishing, home improvement.

“The pandemic normalized the concept that work is interrupted by life, but the downside is that sometimes people’s work extends into personal time,” Mr. Kinsel said in an interview last week, while waiting outside the Dallas airport for an Instacart delivery of a baby monitor for his family’s vacation to Mexico. “You have to set boundaries.”

America has long been a fixture in the global vacation hall of shame, mandating no paid vacation time, unlike the European Union, which requires its member states to give workers at least 20 paid days off.

Some U.S. employers have gone the route of offering unlimited vacation days; the share of companies with that policy rose by 178 percent between 2015 and 2019, according to data from Indeed. Studies have shown, though, that such a policy often leads to workers taking even less time off, because there’s no clear benchmark of what’s appropriate to do.

But mandated relaxation time is becoming an increasingly popular company perk. GitLab introduced Family and Friends Day early in the pandemic, a once-monthly day off for nearly all employees. Real, a mental health care start-up, instituted quarterly mental health breaks, when all employees get a full week off.

Executives have also come to understand that vacation isn’t restorative if it’s spent sneaking peeks at emails. Personal experiences with those vacations-in-name-only have prompted some to set firmer guardrails around staff holidays.

Sam Franklin, head of the Britain-based job platform Otta, recalled traveling to Nepal on a two-week trip years ago while working as a consultant at McKinsey. He left his laptop and work phone at home, so he was flustered when he received a text on his personal cell from a manager who wanted to discuss his next project placement.

He recalled texting back something like: “I’m on holiday. If you need me to respond that’s your problem.”

This year, as Mr. Franklin’s employees take time off, he demands that they delete their productivity apps. “It’s a weird position being a founder,” he continued. “You’re a business owner, but you also feel a little bit like a parental person.”

Meanwhile, some executives are going further, urging their workers to disconnect more regularly. Ariela Safira, whose start-up Real gives its staff quarterly breaks, tells her employees that there’s a difference between an emergency vacation, when you take time off because you’re already breaking down, and vacation prophylaxis, when people make a habit of periodically unplugging.

“We live in this world that’s like, work, work, work until we’re nearly burned out, and then we take a vacation,” she said. “The point of vacation isn’t to save your burnout. Offer yourself preventive care.”