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Work-Life Balance

Be Intentional About How You Spend Your Time Off

by **Laura M. Giurge** and **Vanessa Bohns**

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should those breaks look like if we want to maximize rejuvenation and protect our well-being? It may be surprising to learn, but passive “rest and relaxation” isn’t as effective for recovering from the daily grind as using breaks to accomplish your goals — not your *work* goals, but your *personal* goals. Examples include spending time with friends and family, pursuing your hobbies, or even organizing your closet. Whatever your own personal goals are, the important thing is that you lay out a plan for how you envision spending your time during the break. We call this proactive recovery, and we find that it makes people feel happier than passive forms of recovery.

Back in December 2020, one of us surveyed a group of 537 public-sector employees and asked them a simple question: “Do you have any goals for the upcoming winter holiday?” with the answer options “yes” or “no.” We also asked them to indicate how happy they are, which is a commonly used measure of subjective well-being.

We found that employees who set goals for their holidays indicated being 8% happier than those who didn’t. This difference in happiness emerged regardless of gender, age, employment, income, marital status, frequency of working from home, or number of dependents.

Next, we wanted to understand whether proactive recovery is associated with how many days of vacation people planned to take off from work and what activities they anticipated engaging in during those days. On average, people who had holiday goals planned to take 1.2 more days off from work than those who didn’t set goals for their holidays. This is important since roughly 768 million vacation days are forfeited annually, which is approximately \$62.2 billions in lost benefits.

Employees who had holiday goals further anticipated allocating 24% less time to passive leisure activities such as watching TV, napping, or doing nothing, and 28% more time to socializing with their friends and family.

consistent finding in time-use and well-being [research](#) on the unique benefits of social connection.

Proactive recovery can also benefit the organization: Indeed, we found that employees who set goals for their upcoming holiday indicated being 5% more satisfied with their job than those who didn't.

Notably, we found similar results in a different sample of 184 workers surveyed back in 2019 who indicated having access to paid holidays. Those who indicated that they typically set goals for their holidays were 12% happier than those who didn't. Proactive recovery was further associated with spending one's holidays pursuing more social activities and fewer rest-related activities. As before, time spent on social activities during holidays was associated with greater happiness.

The benefits of proactive recovery are not limited to holidays. In a different survey we asked a sample of 243 workers if they usually have goals for their weekends. Once again, we found that people who set goals for their weekends were 13% happier than those who did not set weekend goals. Similar to holidays, people who have goals for their weekends are also more likely to spend their weekends pursuing social activities and less likely to spend their weekends resting or doing nothing. And spending one's weekend engaging in social activities may in turn lead to greater happiness.

Further, the positive effects of setting goals aren't just limited to weekends and holidays, but can actually be tapped into on a daily basis — setting goals for how we spend our evenings can even be beneficial. In a separate sample of 242 workers, we found that those who set goals for their evenings spent more time on social activities and were also 10% happier than those who didn't set goals for their evenings.

One caveat: While setting goals for our time-off is important, that doesn't

such activities in part because leisure starts to feel like work. These authors found that when people scheduled leisure activities loosely, they were still able to maintain the enjoyment of leisure time. In our research, we suspect the reason setting break goals works is because it makes us more intentional about how we will spend our time away from work and not because it allows us to cross things off from yet another to-do list.

With the challenges of an ongoing pandemic and unforeseen economic consequences, many employees might question whether they should make any plans over the holidays. Their flights might get cancelled, they might get sick, or they may simply feel too exhausted to do anything. Although it might be counterintuitive, as we might look forward to lying around in our pajamas and doing nothing for a while, our research suggests that setting goals can actually help us recharge and ensure we get the most out of our leisure time.

Editor's note 12/1/21: We corrected information about the 2019 sample of worker surveys.



Laura M. Giurge is an assistant professor of behavioral science at the London School of Economics. She is also a research associate of organizational behavior at London Business School, the Barnes Research Fellow at the Wellbeing Research Centre, at the University of Oxford, and a DSI Fellow at the University of Zurich. Her research focuses on the intersection of management and behavioral science and includes topics such as time, well-being, gender inequality, leadership, and the future of work. Follow her on LinkedIn here.





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