Preparing At Work for Your Vacation

Vacations are supposed to be fun – but it's difficult to relax when you're worried about all the to-do's you're leaving behind at the office. You work hard enough when you're at work. You should be able to enjoy your time off without phone calls, emails, and business requests chasing after you while you travel! That's why having a set of procedures that you follow each time you're away from the office can alleviate some of the stress and reduce the likelihood of a problem occurring while you're gone.

Learn To Draw the Line

Modern business people often feel pressured to be "at work" even while they are away from the office. They type on their laptops while sitting at the airport, draft letters on the plane, make cell phone calls in the taxi -- and are constantly thinking about their job responsibilities, even as they flip channels in the hotel room at night. They never have (or take) the time to relax during their vacation, and come back more stressed and worn out than they were before they left. The solution to this problem is to leave work at work. Take care of as many matters as you can before heading out. Return phone calls, respond to any outstanding letters, and inform important contacts of the dates that you will be unavailable. Clear your plate. Rid yourself of as many distractions as possible. Then give yourself permission to let it all go. Tell yourself that once you walk out the door, that's it – no more work until you return from your trip. You'll thank yourself when you return to the office.

They Can Live Without You!

Some people have the mistaken impression that if they leave the office for even one day, the entire operation will fall apart without them. Not as long as you prepare your staff to deal with emergencies that might arise while you're gone. Don't assume that your folks will know what to do when client X calls with problem Y – provide written instructions on how to handle specific situations during your absence. Have your voice mail message direct callers to the appropriate party and assign urgent matters to a colleague. Of course, true emergencies do occasionally arise. So clearly define which issues warrant interrupting your trip and make it easy for your co-workers to find you if something really important should come up. Your people will be less likely to panic if they know where you will be and how to reach you.

When You Return

No matter how thoroughly you prepare for your travels, your return home will probably be punctuated by a barrage of telephone messages, a pile of unanswered e-mails, and a stack of unopened mail -- welcome to the information age! Where do you start? Set aside your first day back for getting organized – no meetings, no client appointments, no new projects. Go through your mail, voice messages, and e-mail. Make note of any issues that require your attention, and then organize your list in order of priority. Now you can make the most efficient use of your work time and clear up the most pressing items first – starting at the top of the list and working your way down.

Also, take a few moments to put everything away when you return, both at home and at work. Nothing makes returning from a vacation seem as chaotic as a pile of clothes waiting to be hung up or a stack of papers that you haven't taken the time to sort. Go through the paperwork that has accumulated and divide it into three piles – "to delegate," "action items," and "to file." If an item needs to be passed on to someone else, do it ASAP rather than letting it clutter up your desk – and the same is true with reference items that simply need to be filed away. Once you have cleared up these two stacks, the rest seems a lot less overwhelming.