

# Fit For Duty



Relax and recharge:  
Why holidays are good for  
business and employee well-being





**W**e live in a 24/7/365 world, but those aren't the only numbers that describe the state of play for many workers today. Some Chinese companies now embrace a work practice known as 996 — working from 9am to 9pm, six days a week. While this schedule runs counter to Chinese labour law, Alibaba founder Jack Ma has endorsed it. In a recent blog post, he wrote: “If we find things we like, 996 is not a problem.”<sup>1,2</sup>

Or is it? Does all work and no play make Jack a dull boy, as the proverb claims?

Many experts argue that work without rest simply doesn't work. As UK-based HR consultancy Breathehr notes: “Even machines need downtime for maintenance. If you want your car to work well for you for many years, you take it for a service now and again. So what about your staff? You can't expect them to work at peak performance all year round without a break.”<sup>3</sup>

Holidays refresh the body, but just as importantly they refresh the mind. “Research has shown that working long hours has a measurable negative impact on cognitive function,” says Dr Lori Stetz, Senior Medical Director, Aetna International. “Our muscles need rest after strenuous activity, and so do our brains.”<sup>4</sup>

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For those reading a printed version of this PDF, head to [aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/fit-for-duty-corporate-wellness](https://aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/fit-for-duty-corporate-wellness) to access the sleep and mental health related articles.

1: [https://996.icu/#/en\\_US](https://996.icu/#/en_US)  
2: <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/15/business/jack-ma-996-china/index.html>  
3: <https://www.breathehr.com/blog/5-reasons-why-employees-taking-annual-leave-is-good-for-business>  
4: <https://academic.oup.com/aje/article/169/5/596/143020>

It can also be helpful to think of brainpower as a finite, albeit renewable, resource. As Allison Gabriel, Ph.D., who teaches Management at Virginia Commonwealth University told *Entrepreneur* magazine in 2016, “There is a lot of research that says we have a limited pool of cognitive resources. When you are constantly draining your resources, you are not being as productive as you can be. If you get depleted, we see performance decline. You’re able to persist less and have trouble solving tasks.”<sup>5</sup>

### Inspiring fresh and creative thinking

That was certainly the case with Jonathan Gassman of New York’s Gassman Financial Group. In that *Entrepreneur* report, he described his journey from taking virtually no holiday time to taking six weeks per year. After he embraced time off, he said both his personal and business income increased significantly. He even found the time to start two businesses — despite working fewer hours. “More quality time off is what really catapulted things,” he told the magazine.<sup>6</sup>

Quality time off catapulted another New Yorker, Lin-Manuel Miranda, to international stardom. After years of working to bring his first musical to Broadway, Miranda took a holiday in Mexico. It was there that he picked up Ron Chernow’s biography of America’s first treasury secretary and was inspired to create the smash hit musical *Hamilton*. “It’s no accident that the best idea I’ve ever had in my life — perhaps maybe the best one I’ll ever have in my life — came to me on vacation,” he told the *Huffington Post* in 2016.<sup>7</sup>

Miranda’s musical is unique, but his experience isn’t. In the tech world, Dropbox and Instagram are just two of the companies whose success stems in part from their founders taking a holiday. In fact, when UK-based business-development consultancy Sandler Training polled successful entrepreneurs, they found that nearly one in five start-up ideas had come to their founders while on holiday. As Shaun Thomson, CEO of Sandler Training, noted, “Having a rare moment to unwind can actually be the perfect time to think up a winning concept for a business idea. Although it may be hard to imagine whilst you are packing your suitcase, you could be running your own business by Christmas.”<sup>9,10</sup>



### Boosting morale and company loyalty

Holidays don’t turn most workers into entrepreneurs, but they do have a measurable impact on work performance. According to Project: Time Off’s *State of the American Vacation 2018*, “85 percent of managers agree that encouraging employees to use their vacation time can dramatically improve morale and cut down on employee turnover,” whilst “a majority (72 percent) of managers agree that encouraging time off makes their employees more willing to put in the long hours when really needed.”<sup>11</sup>

Project: Time Off also reported that workers who use all or most of their available vacation days feel significantly better about their jobs than those who take little or no vacation (57 percent vs 46 percent). They’re also more likely to receive promotions, pay rises or bonuses.<sup>12</sup>

5: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/237446>

6: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/237446>

7: [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lin-manuel-miranda-says-its-no-accident-hamilton-inspiration-struck-on-vacation\\_n\\_576c136ee4b0b489bb0ca7c2](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lin-manuel-miranda-says-its-no-accident-hamilton-inspiration-struck-on-vacation_n_576c136ee4b0b489bb0ca7c2)

8: [https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media\\_root/document/High\\_Price-of\\_Silence\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media_root/document/High_Price-of_Silence_FINAL.pdf)

9: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hollieslade/2014/06/30/want-a-brilliant-idea-for-a-startup-go-on-vacation>

10: [https://www.oxford.sandler.com/blog\\_article/show/28590](https://www.oxford.sandler.com/blog_article/show/28590)

11: [https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media\\_root/document/High\\_Price-of\\_Silence\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media_root/document/High_Price-of_Silence_FINAL.pdf)

12: [https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media\\_root/document/High\\_Price-of\\_Silence\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media_root/document/High_Price-of_Silence_FINAL.pdf)



So, if employers and employees alike think holidays are a good idea, why does the average American use barely half of his or her vacation days?<sup>13</sup> Katie Denis, lead researcher for the Project: Time Off report, suggested one major factor in a 2018 interview: “Two-thirds of employees say they hear very little about vacation time from their companies. That silence creates a vacuum, and we fill that vacuum with our anxieties and assumptions about what our bosses and colleagues could think about our vacation time.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Planning rest to avoid burn-out recovery**

“No one wants to be seen as slacking off, which is why so many people skip holidays or report to work when they’re ill,” says Senior Medical Director Stella George, Aetna International. “Unfortunately, these ‘work martyrs’ are really doing a disservice to both themselves and their organisations.”

Other workplace barriers cited in the Project: Time Off report were a fear of looking replaceable (61 percent of respondents), a heavy workload (56 percent) and a lack of coverage at work (56 percent). Those factors edged out travel costs, concerns about personal safety and family dynamics.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the work martyrs surveyed by Project: Time Off probably end up calling in sick instead of taking holiday. A 2017 report from Breathe found that 16 percent of UK workers had ‘thrown a sickie’ in the past 12 months, costing the country a staggering £900 million in productivity. Forty-two percent of these workers said their reason was the need for a rest day. But here’s the irony: more than half of UK workers fail to use their full holiday allowance each year. As the Breathe report noted, “Sometimes when you’re operating at a million miles per hour it is easier to call in and have a ‘rest day’ than it is to utilise holiday. Especially if there are policies in place outlining how long in advance notice needs to be given of holiday being taken.”<sup>16</sup>



13: <https://www.glassdoor.com/about-us/glassdoor-survey-finds-americans-forfeit-earned-vacation-paid-time/>

14: <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/workers-taking-more-vacation-.aspx>

15: [https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media\\_root/document/High\\_Price-of\\_Silence\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media_root/document/High_Price-of_Silence_FINAL.pdf)

16: <https://www.breathehr.com/blog/encourage-employees-to-take-annual-leave>



The report also put much of the blame on business owners: “They don’t take holiday themselves and they contact employees whilst they are on holiday, which, in turn, leads to employees calling in sick to have rest, but not succeeding. It’s a vicious cycle that businesses are increasingly becoming caught up in.”

### **Healthy ways to tackle the ‘always on’ urge or expectation**

Today’s always-connected culture and our increasing ability to work virtually anywhere in the world makes it harder than ever to escape the office. How can you achieve freedom from work — the literal meaning of vacation — when work is as close as your smartphone? A 2017 survey by job website Glassdoor found that workers on holiday are increasingly likely to actually work while they’re away. Of survey respondents, 27 percent said they were expected to stay aware of work issues and plug in as needed, 29 percent had been contacted by a co-worker about a work issue and 25 percent had been contacted by their boss — and all of those numbers had increased since a similar survey three years earlier. Surprisingly, just 14 percent said a

family member had complained about their working whilst on vacation. (Perhaps other family members were themselves working remotely at the same time.)<sup>17</sup>

Of course, if someone doesn’t keep up with work-related emails while on holiday, he or she is likely to return to an overflowing inbox. Vancouver-based iQmetrix Software Development Corp. prevents this problem by deactivating the email accounts of workers on sabbatical. (The company offers two-month sabbaticals to employees after seven years of service.)

iQmetrix also addresses another issue — cost — by giving its workers free, all-expense-paid trips each year. The trips, such as one to Hawaii in 2017, combine team-building and personal development. “It brings us together as an organisation, and the buzz this trip creates is crazy,” Krystal Ho, Director of Corporate Relations, told *Benefits Canada* magazine in 2017. “It’s everyone’s favourite time of the year.”<sup>18</sup>

Other employers underwrite the cost of trips without doing the planning. In 2012, Colorado-based tech company FullContact began offering employees USD\$7,500 per year on top of their salaries to pay for

17: <https://www.glassdoor.com/about-us/glassdoor-survey-finds-americans-forfeit-earned-vacation-paid-time/>

18: <https://www.benefitscanada.com/news/how-can-employers-encourage-employees-to-take-vacation-102230>



holiday travel. There were just three caveats, according to a blog post from CEO and co-founder Bart Lorang: “1) You have to go on vacation, or you don’t get the money. 2) You must disconnect. 3) You can’t work while on vacation.”<sup>19</sup>

In announcing the policy, Lorang stressed the value of holiday to workers, but he also acknowledged how the company would benefit: “If people know they will be disconnecting and going off the grid for an extended period of time, they might actually keep that in mind as they help build the company.” That could mean empowering their direct reports to make decisions, sharing their knowledge with colleagues or documenting their work so others can understand it.<sup>20</sup>



## The role of corporate culture

According to Brad McCarty, Director of Communications, the ‘paid, paid vacation’ policy stemmed in part from an unfortunate photograph. When Lorang was travelling in Egypt, someone photographed him checking his email on his smartphone whilst sat on a camel in front of a pyramid. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, McCarty said, “We are all really passionate about technology, but at the end of the day, I don’t think anyone’s dream is to just have a job. You’re not going to remember the 20 extra hours you put in every week when you’re 90. But you will remember the trip to Venice.” (You’ll probably also remember your trip to Egypt, assuming you don’t spend it working.)<sup>21</sup>

If some holiday is good, one might think that unlimited holiday would be better. That’s not necessarily the case, however. When U.S.-based tech company Buffer offered employees all the holiday time they wanted, many chose to keep working instead. In 2016, 53 percent took 15 or fewer days, and fully a third took 10 days or less. In response, the company switched to a minimum of 15 days per year at the end of that year. Although no one was forced to take that much time, the average days off jumped to 18.2 per worker, and the percentage of workers taking 10 days or fewer dropped by two-thirds. In a blog post, the company speculated that one problem unlimited holiday creates is decision fatigue: “Because an unlimited vacation policy isn’t explicit about how many days off someone should take, we’re all mentally weighing each day and how it makes us look to others. That takes a lot of mental energy — so much so that we might end up choosing nothing.”<sup>22,23</sup>

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19: <https://www.fullcontact.com/blog/paid-paid-vacation/>

20: <https://www.fullcontact.com/blog/paid-paid-vacation/>

21: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2014/10/23/no-vacation-nation-one-company-gives-workers-7500-to-unplug-and-get-away/?utm\\_term=.503554184c95](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2014/10/23/no-vacation-nation-one-company-gives-workers-7500-to-unplug-and-get-away/?utm_term=.503554184c95)

22: <https://open.buffer.com/employees-take-vacation/>

23: <https://open.buffer.com/unlimited-vacation-tips/>

## Seven corporate time-off strategies to consider

Since holiday benefits employers and employees alike, organisations have a vested interest in making sure workers take the time off they need. Here are seven ideas organisations can implement to help their employees:

**1** Simplify vacation policies and processes: Organisations of all sizes can benefit from leave-management systems that streamline and automate the process of requesting time off.<sup>24</sup> These systems keep track of workers' available days off — a common question posed to HR departments — and show them when colleagues are planning to be away, which can aid in planning.<sup>25</sup>

**2** Encourage the use of time off: While you shouldn't penalise workers for not taking time off, it does make sense to remind them when they have holiday time that's going to waste. "Workers are used to hearing from their bosses about their progress toward performance goals," says Pamela Berger, Health and Well-being Director, Aetna International. "When they hear about their progress toward using vacation days, they realise that the organisation sees time off as important."

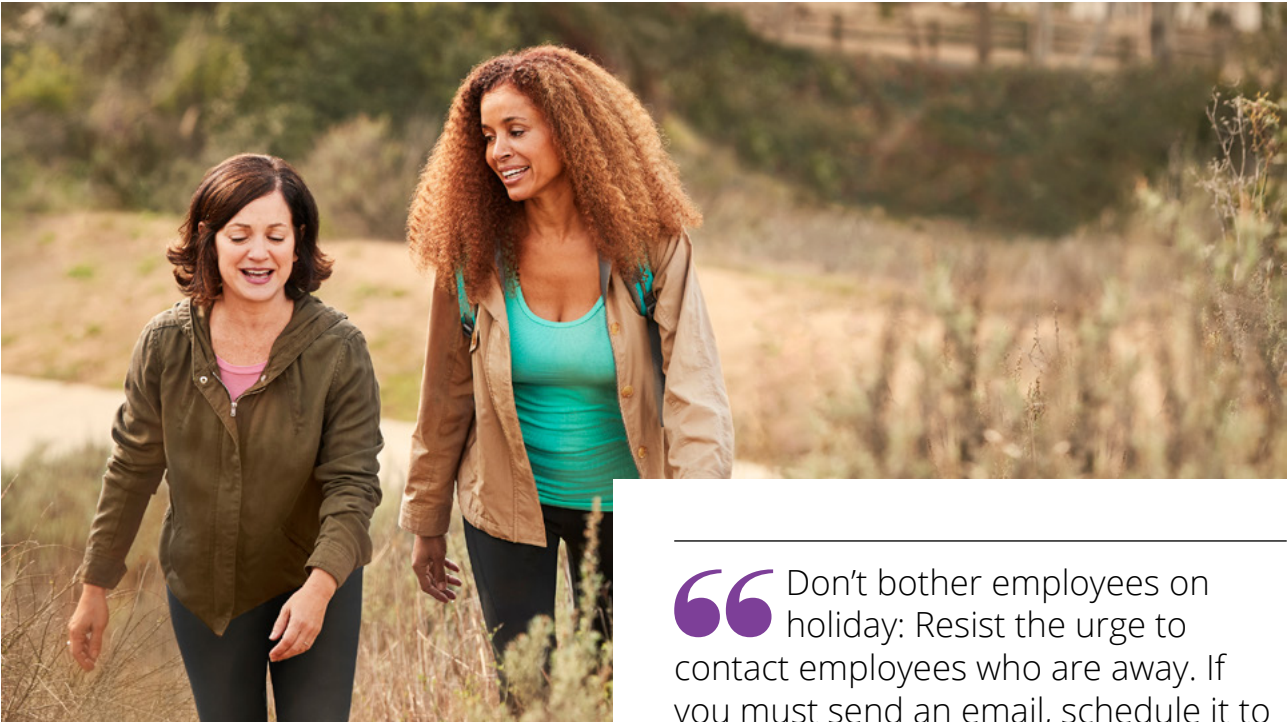
**3** Offer assistance: Paying for workers' holidays as companies like iQmetrix and FullContact do isn't feasible for every organisation, but many organisations can afford to give some sort of financial or planning assistance. For example, Marriott International offers its employees, as well as their friends and families, discounted rooms at properties around the world. As Marisa Milton, Vice-president of Human Resources for Canada, told *Benefits Canada* magazine, "We've heard anecdotally and from surveys that it's something that people really value."<sup>26</sup>



24: <https://www.hrsifu.com/six-benefits-using-online-leave-management-system/>

25: <https://www.breathehr.com/blog/select-did-away-with-multi-stage-holiday-approval-with-simple-hr-software>

26: <https://www.benefitscanada.com/news/how-can-employers-encourage-employees-to-take-vacation-102230>



“Don't bother employees on holiday: Resist the urge to contact employees who are away. If you must send an email, schedule it to arrive the day after someone returns to the office”

**4** Don't bother employees on holiday: Resist the urge to contact employees who are away. If you must send an email, schedule it to arrive the day after someone returns to the office. And consider starting it with a message like this: "I hope you had a great holiday, and I'd love to hear your stories."

**5** Set a good example: Actions always speak louder than words. After Buffer created its minimum-vacation policy, CEO Joel Gascoigne announced his own vacation plan to the company. Then, according to a company blog, "When he got back in November, he sent another company-wide discourse reminding the team of the importance of self-care and sharing some beautiful photos."

**6** Celebrate what workers have done: Holiday sharing shouldn't just come from the executive suite. Chatbooks, a U.S. company that creates photo books for customers, sets aside time each month to let employees share their own photos with each other. "The photos usually portray something that occurred during time off," Rachel Hofstetter, Chief Marketing Officer, told American Express. "This tradition does a great job of celebrating and encouraging vacations."<sup>27</sup>

**7** Share tips and advice: Regularly sharing articles and information with employees can prompt them to make small adjustments to their behaviours, gradually helping to improve their well-being over time. As an example, read and share "[Summer holiday health, wellness and safety: 9 tips for a great holiday](#)".

27: <https://www.americanexpress.com/en-us/business/trends-and-insights/articles/3-tips-help-encourage-employees-use-vacation-days/>





### **Safety and security services:**

Members with an Aetna Summit company plan either have access to AdviceLine services – 24/7 expert safety advice and assistance, email and text message alerts – or ActionResponse services – on-the-ground crisis management and evacuation from danger if they face a threatening situation. Members should check their plan area of cover to ensure their destination is covered before travelling.

Similarly, self-paying members with an Aetna Pioneer plan have access to AdviceLine. This includes 24/7 expert safety advice and assistance, email and text message alerts. Depending on their plan level, members with an Aetna Pioneer may have access to ActionResponse – including on-the-ground crisis management and removal from danger if you face a life-threatening situation, such as a natural disaster or local crisis. Members should check their plan area of cover to ensure their destination is covered before travelling.

Read more about how our [safety and security services support our members.](#)

## How Aetna can help employers and employees

### **Medication and vaccination planning:**

Aetna International's care and response excellence (CARE) team can help members understand how to access health care in their chosen destination, whether it relates to a long-term relocation or a short trip abroad. Their pre-trip planning guidance includes helping members understand:

- How to ensure they have sufficient medication for their relocation or trip
- Locating a health care provider (such as a doctor or specialist) in the destination country
- Which vaccinations are recommended for the destination country
- How to effectively manage a condition or disease and receive on-going treatment around their trip.



### **Cultural awareness:**

Staying safe while in an unfamiliar country and getting to know a new culture are important considerations for individuals moving abroad for a new lifestyle, those on assignment or globally mobile individuals. We can provide personalised city security briefs, as well as a comprehensive list of 'dos and don'ts' specific to a country, including what to wear, how to greet people and dining out.

### **Healthy behaviours and lifestyle coaching:**

Our CARE team clinicians can work with globally mobile employees and those seeking advice/support around developing healthy behaviours. This can extend to what to do to maintain healthy behaviours while on holiday. Contact the CARE team for more information by calling the number on the back of your Member ID card or logging in to the [Health Hub](#) – your secure member website.

### **Medical emergency clinical support and evacuation:**

Providing your plan covers the area in which you intend to travel, having the Aetna International CARE team contact details on hand means that you have advice and support in the event of an accident or health care emergency. Remember to take your Member ID card with you when you travel, so you'll always have our contact details to hand.

### **Want more information?**

Read "[Summer holiday health, wellness and safety: 9 tips for a great holiday](#)" or share it with your employees to provide clear guidance on how people can get the most out of their holidays and return to work refreshed.

Find more Fit For Duty materials [here](#).



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