

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERWHELMED AMERICA: WHY DON'T WE USE OUR PAID TIME OFF?

Americans are overwhelmed—but they aren't taking the breaks they've earned. Nearly three-quarters of workers say they are stressed at work, with one-in-four reporting they are either "very" or "extremely" stressed.

It's no surprise that Americans feel this way. Many workers leave their paid time off (PTO) unused, despite near-universal recognition of the importance and benefits of using PTO, from reducing stress to improving productivity when we return to work.

But when the U.S. Travel Association asked GfK Public Affairs and Corporate Communications (GfK) to examine the attitudes and beliefs underlying America's hard-charging work culture, GfK discovered that the benefits of PTO were no match for the fears that are keeping them at work.

A survey of more than 1,300 employees and senior business leaders across the United States revealed that workers construct many of their own biggest barriers to taking time off. Returning to a mountain of work and the feeling that nobody else could do their job were cited as the top reasons for not using PTO. The effects of a tough economy still linger with one-third of respondents reporting they cannot afford to use their time off, and another fifth of workers expressing concern that they would be seen as replaceable if they used their PTO.

According to the survey, employees' fears about using PTO are reinforced in the workplace, where the silence can be deafening. While senior business leaders overwhelmingly feel supportive of their employees in taking time off, they aren't communicating it. In fact, two-thirds of employees are hearing nothing, negative or mixed messages from their employers about using PTO.

THE BENEFITS OF PAID TIME OFF ARE UNIVERSALLY RECOGNIZED.

- Nearly everyone surveyed (96%) recognizes the importance of using PTO, including 95 percent of senior business leaders.
- Huge majorities of American workers say PTO helps them relax and recharge (90%), offers the opportunity to do what they enjoy (88%) and makes them happier (85%). Nearly two-thirds (65%) say their concentration and productivity improve with PTO, and 61 percent report greater satisfaction at work.
- Senior business leaders agree that time off from work delivers benefits to their employees and companies: 91 percent believe employees return from PTO recharged and renewed—and ready to work more effectively.

YET MORE THAN FOUR IN TEN OF US WILL LEAVE PTO ON THE TABLE.

- Forty-one percent of American workers do not plan to use all their paid time off in 2014, even though it is part of their compensation.

WHAT'S HOLDING US BACK?

The Rise of the Work Martyr: A “Mountain of Work” That “Nobody Else Can Do”

When it comes to taking PTO, Americans themselves can be the biggest barriers. A variety of justifications lead about two-in-five workers (37%) to conclude it is not “easy” to take the PTO they have earned.

- **Returning To A “Mountain Of Work”:** Fully 40 percent of American workers cite the heavy workload awaiting their return as the top challenge in taking PTO.
- **The Work Martyr Complex:** More than one-third of employees (35%) won't use their time off because they believe “nobody else can do the work while I'm away.”
- **Face Time, All the Time:** Roughly three-in-ten (28%) respondents do not use all their time off because they want to show complete dedication to the company and their job.
- **Lingering Effects Of A Tough Economy:** One in three respondents (33%) say they simply “cannot afford” to take PTO. More than one-fifth of respondents (22%) said they didn't want others to see them as “replaceable.”

America's Hard-Charging Work Culture

America's always-on work culture exerts powerful influence on our decisions about using PTO. Some of the leading cultural barriers include:

- **A Negative Vibe About PTO:** Two-thirds of American workers (67%) say their company says nothing about taking time off, sends mixed messages or discourages them from using PTO.
 - ▷ About one-in-five Americans (19%) say their company culture sends mixed signals or actively discourages them from using PTO.
 - ▷ Nearly half (48%) report that their company culture neither encourages nor discourages PTO, leading to anxiety about how their time away from work is seen by their employers.
 - ▷ When asked to name barriers to taking time off, one-fifth of workers cited their company's culture (20%).
- **No Control When it Comes to Earned Benefits:** PTO is typically a defined employee benefit, just like salary and healthcare. Yet despite being a significant part of their total compensation, nearly one-third of workers (31%) say they do not control their own PTO—the company does.

A Failure to Communicate

Senior business leaders know the company benefits when workers take time off. Yet our research shows that many are sending mixed messages to employees.

- **Poor Communication From Above:** One-third (33%) of senior business leaders state they never (19%) or rarely—just once a year (14%)—talk with employees about the benefits of taking time off.
- **Staying Connected 24/7/365:** When taking time off from work, many senior business leaders have a hard time unplugging—just over a third (37%) reported being able to get away from work completely. Nearly half (46%) keep responding to emails, while roughly three-in-ten (29%) return calls from work during their PTO—sending the signal that it's never okay to be away from the job.
- **Grudgingly Granting PTO:** More than one-quarter (28%) do not find it “easy” to approve PTO requests, and among those who do not find it easy, 32 percent worry it puts an extra burden on other employees.

IDEAS THAT WORK

While the GfK survey was not designed to explore all the answers, it did provide insight that could encourage workers to use their paid time off.

- **Communication is Critical:** Nearly two-thirds of workers (64%) who report having little or no stress at work say that their bosses actively encourage them to take their PTO. And 80 percent of workers said if their boss fully supported and encouraged them to take their time off, they would be more likely to use it.
- **Listen to Family:** Almost half (47%) of workers say family is their #1 advocate for using their PTO, with 42 percent citing their spouse or significant other as their top motivator.
- **Follow Women's Lead:** Female senior business leaders are more likely to use all their time off than their male counterparts (71% to 47% of men). Women are also more likely to recognize the health benefits of PTO than men. They agree more strongly that taking time off improves their overall health (44% to 33% for men). Female senior business leaders in particular are much more likely to believe that PTO reduces their stress level, while only 41% of male business leaders said the same.
- **Use It Or Lose It:** At companies with a "Use it or Lose it" policy, an overwhelming majority of American workers (84%) use all their PTO each year. Yet only about one quarter of workers (26%) report their employers have accepted such a policy.

AMERICA'S ALWAYS-ON, OVERWORKED CULTURE IS NOT ONLY OPTIONAL, IT IS UNNECESSARY AND HARMFUL—TO OUR HEALTH, OUR WELL-BEING, OUR RELATIONSHIPS AND OUR CAREERS.