



GLOBE AND MAIL



## VACATION STRATEGY

Sittin' here resting my bones, work won't leave me alone

It may be chill-out time, but that doesn't mean office politics take a rest. Whether it's firings, a shuffle or perhaps a chance to job hunt, there are strategies for employees and employers alike to guard against vacation surprises

RANDI CHAPNIK MYERS

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Louise Evans was ready for a break from her job as a corporate communications manager for a natural resources company when she left for a week of Cancun sun in May.

She never expected it would turn into a permanent break.

Ms. Evans was, at first, "relieved that my BlackBerry didn't connect from so far away," she says. Until, that is, she telephoned a colleague back in Toronto to check on a personal matter - and that's when her R&R came to an abrupt end.

"Monday morning of my vacation, three of the five members of the senior leadership team in my business group were fired," she says.

Instead of frolicking in the resort pool, Ms. Evans spent the rest of her holiday worrying about her career future.

"All I could think about was updating my résumé in case I'd be next," recalls Ms. Evans who, sure enough, lost her job five weeks later in another wave of the restructuring.

It wasn't the first time she had a career surprise while on vacation. In 1989, she took a week off from her job as a file clerk for Texaco Canada Inc. to relax at an all-inclusive resort.

"When a fellow guest asked where I worked and I told him, he said: 'Not any more you don't.' Apparently, it was all over the news that Texaco had been sold to Imperial Oil," Ms. Evans says.

“When you’re on holiday... you can never be sure what you’re going back to.”

Ah, vacation: a time for that well-deserved break to recharge the batteries and dive back into work refreshed.

But step away from the rat race for a bit, and lots of things can take place, says Toronto-based career coach Mark Swartz, founder of [careeractivist.com](http://careeractivist.com) and author of *Get Wired, You’re Hired*.

From takeovers to reorganizations to shutdowns to management shuffles to individual firings and resignations, there’s always the risk that the unexpected can happen while you are taking a time out, especially during uncertain economic times.

And it’s not just employees who might be in for a surprise over holiday time. Many workers leave the office - and shock their employers with a decision that they are never going back, Mr. Swartz says.

That was the mid-June surprise that Rick Hodge, one third of the Roger, Rick and Marilyn morning show at Toronto’s CHUM FM, owned by CTVglobemedia Inc., delivered when he left for vacation - and vanished from the radio station’s airwaves for good.

“It was a complete surprise,” admits Roger Ashby, Mr. Hodge’s 22-year on-air cohort. “It was the first time the three of us had taken a vacation at the same time. We had nicely left for our vacations, and that’s when we were phoned by our boss to say Hodgie wouldn’t be coming back.”

It was a departure the boss learned about, Mr. Ashby says, when Mr. Hodge, during his own time off, resigned to take up a new position widely believed to be with cross-town rival radio station Astral Media Inc.’s CFRB. Mr. Hodge did not return calls seeking comment.

“It would have been nicer had we all been there at the office when he told us he was leaving. But he didn’t have anything finalized until after we had all left,” Mr. Ashby adds.

The fact that things may change while you are temporarily away shouldn’t actually come as a real surprise, Mr. Swartz says: It’s business as usual, with or without you present.

“Wheels are turning every hour of every day, so it’s unrealistic to expect that you’ll take two weeks from a highly dynamic situation and everything will suspend until you return.”

Rather than spend downtime worrying about what’s going on back at the office, he says employees have to accept that, when it comes to major changes, they have no control, vacation or not.

In very large companies, employers can’t always be sure that there won’t be some workers on vacation when major events occur. So, although employers do have a legal obligation to provide notice of termination, that’s not always possible, says lawyer Howard Levitt, who specializes in employment law at Lang Michener LLP in Toronto and is the author of the recently published *The Law of Dismissal for Human Resources Professionals*.

However, if you are going to dismiss an employee on vacation, it is best, both legally and ethically, to give as much notice as possible, he says.

The more advance notice given, the less the employer has to pay in severance, Mr. Levitt says. Also, it’s only fair to warn an employee who is about to break the bank on an expensive holiday that the money source will

soon be cut off, he says.

As for workers who go on holiday never to return to their jobs, Mr. Swartz says that's just business, too. Not every employer and employee are the perfect match for life, notes Lynne O'Connor, president of Advanced Career Coaching Inc. in Toronto.

"The job you were originally hired for may have changed over time, or perhaps you have changed, and now you're ready for something new."

It's a revelation that often hits once people start to unwind, and have the opportunity to think from a fresh perspective - a luxury not always afforded in the day-to-day rush of work, she says.

"You breathe a huge sigh of relief. The knots loosen, you eat and sleep well, and that's when you begin to see an irreconcilable difference between who you really are and who you have become on the job."

Sometimes, a work situation is just plain intolerable and an employee, in a relaxed state, realizes there is no going back, Mr. Swartz adds. There are also workers who have made their escape plans but wait until vacation time to create a bridge from one job to the next.

Even though big career decisions don't tend to happen overnight, when they are announced post-vacation, they seem to come out of nowhere. Understandably, the surprised person - whether employer or employee - feels ambushed, Ms. O'Connor says. "There's a sense of disloyalty, a feeling that somebody must have known, and should have given a heads up."

There are ways to head off vacation-time surprises.

When it comes to a major company change, there are usually telltale signs - rumours, gossip or newspaper headlines about a struggling industry or company that you might have wanted to pay more attention to, Mr. Swartz says.

Employees need to stay "business aware," Ms. O'Connor adds, by keeping an eye on industry trends and competition.

To catch wind of something amiss, she says to keep an ear to the ground for department amalgamations, outsourcing of marketing or human resource functions, or other signs of trouble, like obvious closed-door meetings, off-site retreats and more consultants being hired.

Many people also stay connected to the office while away, but doing so defeats the whole purpose of taking a break, Mr. Swartz says.

You should ask yourself if you really do want to be interrupted with potentially disturbing news that's going to happen anyway, Ms. O'Connor adds.

Whether you're plugged in or not, it's always good career sense to have a backup plan in the works, just in case, she says. "Have your network up and running, your résumé polished and skill sets sharp, so you can truly relax."

And when the surprise is on the employer?

Vacations create a neutral zone for an employee to check out other job opportunities in a professional way,

Ms. O'Connor says. "It's cleaner to negotiate a new job offsite, rather than in the office fishbowl, especially if there is a competitor involved."

"Disappearing from the office facilitates the departure in a more discreet way, so the person doesn't have to hide, skulk around, or confront anyone," Mr. Swartz adds. It also gives an employee time to put together everything necessary to start a new job before taking the final step of submitting a resignation from the old one.

So how can employers avoid vacation surprises? Ms. O'Connor says there are also signs to watch for if you suspect an employee is about to fly the coop: He or she has a recent pattern of taking single vacation days (presumably to go on interviews), for instance, or suddenly starts showing up at work unusually well-dressed.

It's hard for employers to defend against this problem since employees have the freedom to do whatever they wish on vacation, Mr. Levitt says.

Unless an employee has used an employer's facilities, such as sending a résumé by company fax, the boss likely won't have any clue or legal recourse, he adds.

But employers can take the time to reassure staffers before they head out the door about how valued they are, asking about problems, expressing appreciation for a job well done and helping free them to go on vacation knowing business will be taken care of in their absence, Mr. Swartz says.

Vacationers who do decide that it's time to move on may want to slow down and think about how to resign gracefully. Legally, an employee who resigns without giving adequate notice to allow the employer to recruit, hire and train a suitable replacement runs the risk of being sued for damages for "wrongful resignation," which is happening more and more, Mr. Levitt warns.

Apart from the legal ramifications, there are business reasons not to leave an impulsive "I quit" message on the boss's voicemail while you're staring at the stars in cottage country.

By abruptly resigning, you're sure to leave your boss and colleagues holding the bag, Mr. Swartz says. "The problem with just leaving is that your reputation is all you take with you. The better way is to go back, and plan how to get to the next stage of your career."

In the best-case scenario, you should give your employer a carry-forward plan to help make the transition for your boss, colleagues and clients easy, Ms. O'Connor adds.

The company should also help ease the transition for an employee who returns to a surprise change at work, she says. "You want to be compassionate and open. Rather than leaving an ominous voicemail message at 6 a.m., wait until the employee clocks in, lead him to your office, and talk through the changes to help him up to speed."

And keep in mind that some surprises that occur in your absence can be good ones, Mr. Swartz says. "You may come back to find that the boss you've despised for the past 10 years has been turfed." Or the new position you are now in is more senior than the old one. Or the employee you were itching to fire just resigned, paving the way for a more suitable candidate.

When Ms. Evans returned from her first trip, she found herself with a new job at Imperial Oil Ltd. She took

advantage of Texaco's comprehensive severance package, which included career upgrade courses, that let her springboard into corporate communications.

With her latest vacation surprise, she returned to Toronto ready to take on a new job hunt. "Fortunately, I anticipated the change, started my network humming and polished my résumé so I could hit the ground running when the inevitable happened," says Ms. Evans, who is still searching for a new position.

"You can't control every change that happens at vacation time. Shift happens," Mr. Swartz says. "But what you can do is take back control when vacation time is up."

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