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Owners of small firms find vacations invigorating

By Joyce Rosenberg

With the summer months nearly half over, some business owners are finding it hard to let go for a vacation, even for a few days. But many do feel confident about taking time off because technology helps them stay in touch, and talented employees are able to keep the office running smoothly.

For quite a few years now, small-business owners have been able to stay in touch with the office or clients with cell phones and smart phones, handheld computers and laptops. So questions can be answered, brush fires put out and hard feelings soothed -- and fewer business owners can use the excuse of "I can't afford to be out of touch" that kept many of them from taking vacations in years past.

Many company owners might not realize that the business will benefit from the boss getting away for even just a few days.

Those who take vacations say they're more creative and more productive for having had some time off.

"I feel more relaxed; I see things from a different perspective," said Andrew Edson, who owns a public relations firm bearing his name in New York. Like many owners, he vacations with an arsenal of technology that allows him to spend time with his family but also do whatever work might be needed.

Some owners are taking less vacation right now because of the uncertain economy, choosing instead to stay home to nurture client relationships or prospect for new business.

Amanda Vega, who usually spends more time at her public relations firm's New York office during the summer, is staying in Phoenix to keep working with her clients there. With the economy dicey, "there's just such a heightened sense of fear that they require more face time," she said.

Vega says she's working six days a week, so even long weekends are out of the question. Still, she will be taking a cruise in December, an annual trip that this year will be her honeymoon.

Although she's staying on the job, Vega wants to be sure her employees do take their vacations this summer; she's concerned about them possibly burning out. So, she said, "I'm making sure they take time off."

It can understandably be very hard for new entrepreneurs to tear themselves away from their businesses, especially when a company is quite embryonic. There's no money coming in yet and there's a lot of prospecting for customers to be done.

Chris Johnson recalled taking just five days off the first year he was in business, having founded Terralever, a Tempe, Ariz.-based Web design company. "It was difficult because it was just me. Everyone's relying on you," he recalled.

Now Johnson has a business partner, and so he does take his vacations.

But how about when the business is up and running fairly well? At that point, someone who says, "I just can't take a vacation" may need to question whether he or she is a workaholic or a control freak -- neither of which is good for the owner or the company.

And if an owner with employees doesn't feel he or she can trust a second-in-command to run the place when the boss is away, then the question becomes, do you have the right staffers, and have you trained them properly? That's not just a time-off concern, it also speaks to how well-run a company really is.

At Terralever, Johnson said, "We've worked really hard to develop a management team that doesn't require our day to day participation."

Edson recalls when he ran the New York office of a PR consultancy and didn't take all of his time off -- making him the only officer in the company who didn't.

"I was the idiot," Edson said. "I felt you had to be around and watch over people," he said. Now, he knows, "you don't have to be a micromanager -- you can reach someone by e-mail or telephone."

Of course, there are some customers and clients who, no matter how good a company's staff is, will want to talk to the CEO. But again, given today's technology, that shouldn't stop an owner from taking a vacation.

Ann Stephenson, who owns a public relations firm based in Califon, N.J., takes her vacations, but is often contacted by clients. "If they have a major problem, they want to talk to the CEO," she said.

But Stephenson noted that it's her choice to work when she's taking time away from the office.

"There are times during those vacations that you do have some freedom -- but you feel like you've got to check that e-mail, check that BlackBerry," she said.

Joyce Rosenberg writes about small business issues for the Associated Press.

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