PTO: Are We Getting It All Wrong?

Over the past year, we have noticed a recurring theme in our PartnerWell benefits and workforce culture surveys: **employees are consistently asking for more time off.**

In fact, it ranks higher than many other benefits employers offer today. What's interesting and often gives us pause is that in workforces where paid time off (PTO) is a top request, we encourage clients to audit actual PTO utilization rates. And time after time, we find the same thing…

PEOPLE ARE NOT USING THE TIME OFF THAT THEY ALREADY HAVE.[1]

We find ourselves in quite the paradox: Employees are asking for more PTO, but they are not even taking full advantage of what is currently available to them.

WHAT'S THAT ABOUT? HOW DO WE SOLVE IT?

There are several underlying reasons for this disconnect between what employees want from a PTO standpoint and how an organization supports it.

A few common factors include:[1]

» Lack of coverage during their absence
» Concerns that taking time off could hurt their growth or advancement opportunities

» Leaders not modeling time off
» The stress of returning to a full inbox
» But there is another major issue we often overlook: the way we work has evolved.

Historically, work had clear boundaries. You went to work, usually clocked in since most employees were hourly, completed your tasks, and left. You had the ability to disconnected from your job until the next shift. There was a natural separation between work and personal life.

Today, that boundary is nearly gone. We live in an always-connected world. Work follows us everywhere, emails ping our phones, team messages buzz on our smart watches, and the expectation to stay responsive lingers, even during time off. We know in the US, people are struggling with burnout more than ever before.

Did you know that about 68% of the US workforce is reporting working on vacations?[2] We even have a term for it – leaveism: the practice of employees using their paid time off not to recharge, but to actually catch up on their work and manage their unmanageable workloads.[3]

We often hear that people work during their time off to stay on top of emails coming in. It is obviously a very personal decision to navigate time away in what feels best for each individual. However, this is connected to larger organizational challenges.

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How can it be productive for people to be fully disconnected from work, then return to work with hundreds of emails that put them even more behind? There needs to be a structure in place to support people stepping away from work to fully recharge.

Instead of simply offering more PTO, take a deeper look: are employees actually using it? It's important to have open, supportive conversations about the value of truly disconnecting from work.

At the leadership level, discuss how to remove barriers that prevent people from taking time off. Create a culture where employees feel safe stepping away, confident that their PTO will not negatively impact their work, team, or career growth opportunities. Most importantly, ensure the right coverage and resources are in place so people can fully unplug without stress.

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1. Pew Research Center. (2023, March 30). How Americans view their jobs. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/03/30/how-americans-view-their-jobs/

2. ELVTR. (n.d.). America's alarming (lack of) work-life balance. Retrieved from https://elvtr.com/blog/americas-alarming-lack-of-work-life-balance

3. Musselwhite, R. (2025, April 11). What is Leaveism? ScheduleLeave. https://scheduleleave.com/blog/what-is-leaveism/ScheduleLeave+1ScheduleLeave+1

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