

HUMAN RESOURCES

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**Beat the Recession**

**Worried workers don't feel comfortable taking long vacations**

**In dicey job market, employees want to avoid being seen as expendable**

Sacramento Business Journal - by [Melanie Turner](#) Staff writer

Vacation time is taking a hit as employers and workers alike struggle to make ends meet during the recession. Employers, trying to cut costs, are doling out fewer vacation days and changing the rules for how they are taken. And employees, afraid of losing their jobs, are not using the vacation time they've already earned. Pressure to perform amid a bleak job market is driving the shift.

"I do think employees are reluctant to take it (vacation)," said Diane Miller, president of talent management firm **Wilcox Miller & Nelson** in Sacramento. "They don't want to be seen as not being team players, or have work pile up."

In addition, employees worried about losing their jobs often like to build a "buffer" of pay in case they are let go, said Karen O'Hara, chief executive officer of HR to Go Inc. in Elk Grove. "Some are holding off for that purpose." In some cases, employers are asking staff to take time off as it's accrued — "to spread it out a little bit more,"

Miller said. And employers aren't offering as much vacation time to new hires, she added.

"In times like these, people are feeling generally insecure about their jobs," said **Billie Blair**, president and chief executive officer for **Change Strategists Inc.** in Los Angeles. "When that's the situation, people are a little reluctant to go away for a long time."

They fear that if they're gone for too long and the business operates successfully without them, they'll be vulnerable during the next wave of layoffs.

"That's the belief, but there's some merit to that as well," Blair said, adding that employers might be more apt to question whether an employee is needed if he or she is not around making a contribution.

Employers also are looking for loyalty, she said, adding that particularly during a recession, it would be smart for workers to take their employer's needs into consideration when planning time off.

Employers deciding who will be laid off might think it's the "perfect time to get rid of those employees who are not as good at supporting the organization," Blair said. Given that, it's not the best time for an employee to simply say, "It's mine, I earned it," she said.

Workers and their employers should communicate to figure out what works best for both, she said.

Employees might take time as long weekends, for instance, to get much-needed downtime without being gone too long.

"From an organizational psychology view, downtime is important, but you need to figure out strategies," she said.

"It's a contract, in my view, between the employee and employer."

That's not to say big trips are out of the question. An employee who has planned a once-in-a-lifetime trip should articulate how important it is. For example, the final space shuttle missions are slated to take place this year, and reservations to view the launch are taken well in advance.

"The employer is going to understand that," Blair said.

Douglas Sietsema, talent management practice leader for Right Management, a subsidiary of **Manpower Inc.** (NYSE: MAN), agreed that employees should use common sense when planning time off. Consider an employer's business cycle and avoid taking off during the busiest times, he advised.

At the same time, Sietsema said he "cannot stress enough" that research shows the effects of taking vacation are "all good." When employees don't take time off, they become less efficient, less productive and "may not be the best in terms of applying their skills and experience."

"They're kind of wearing themselves out," he said. "We're human beings. We need to have some time to get our energy back."

Two-thirds of American workers failed to use all their vacation days in 2009, according to a Right Management survey released in December. In an online poll, the consulting firm found that 66 percent of respondents missed out on vacation days, while 34 percent took every day they were owed.