

Employee Sabbaticals: Just What the Doctor Ordered

Ric Edelman has no problem telling his employees to "Take a hike!" As CEO of Toronto-based Edelman Financial Services Inc., he orders his 73 employees to take a four-week paid sabbatical after they have been with the company for seven years (and once every seven years thereafter).

How did he become such a time-out evangelist? Edelman took a sabbatical himself. OK, he didn't climb Mt. Everest or audition for "Survivor." Instead, he wrote a book entitled *The Truth About Money*, which became a national bestseller.

Sabbaticals, he believes, can be a valuable recruitment and retention tool. Moreover, they give employees the creative space and respite they need to balance their work/life needs. When combined, these benefits often recharge the employee, yielding greater productivity, improved camaraderie, and higher morale on the job.

"During our employees' sabbaticals, they can't take pagers with them," says Lesley Roberts, director of human resources. "It's truly time off with no office worries."

The sabbaticals are offered to all full-time and part-time employees, she adds. Upon an employee's fifth anniversary, HR notifies the individual that it's time to make his or her plans. No later than his or her sixth year, the employee must provide the company with the start and end dates of the sabbatical. Roberts says it must be taken between the beginning of the eighth year and the end of the ninth year. And at least one year before the start date, the employee must submit a sabbatical syllabus that will be approved by the company.

So far, employees have used their time in various ways. One employee used the time to restore a car. Another traveled to England and Greece with his wife and friends. A new mother added her sabbatical to her maternity leave to spend time with her baby.

"I'd take cooking lessons in France," says Roberts, who is in her second year of employment. "I'm anxiously awaiting [my turn]."

Indeed, as employers struggle to stabilize their workforce, more companies are willing to consider such options. Nearly half of Fortune magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work for reportedly offer sabbaticals or similar leave programs - up 18 percent from a year ago. Many of these sabbaticals range from a few weeks to six months or longer.

The key is planning, says Roberts. By preparing at least one year in advance, HR can adjust the pending workload. As the employee sketches his or her plans, coworkers get excited, too. They cross-train so the departing employee's job duties are temporarily covered. This gives workers an opportunity to interface more closely with others, and "learn more about different jobs," she says.

Edelman considers these paid sabbaticals as loans to the employee. They are "forgiven" provided the employee stays with the company at least two years following completion of the sabbatical.

Other companies offering sabbaticals include Intel Corporation, Ralston Purina Co., and Netscape Communications. According to an article in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Intel has offered the perk for more than two decades. Many Intel employees are already planning their second and third sabbaticals.

What would you do?