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Why You Should Take a Vacation From Your Phone. And Why You Probably Won't.

There's a wider recognition within the legal profession that true downtime for lawyers is crucial. The trick is to actually take it.

By **Angela Morris** | July 31, 2018

On a three-week family vacation to Greece and Croatia, Andrew Giacomini left his phone in his room to disconnect from his litigation practice.

Although Giacomini, the managing partner at Hanson Bridgett in San Francisco, checked emails, his colleagues probably didn't know—because Giacomini never responded. He billed zero hours during his 21-day trip and focused on recharging.



Pictured, from left, Susan Harris, partner with Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, on vacation with her daughters Rebecca Harris and Sarah Harris in Paris.

“I have the philosophy: Balanced lawyers give balanced advice,” Giacomini said. “You’re not going to be offering the best advice to your clients with burned-out lawyers.”

Giacomini’s strategy is part of wider recognition within the legal profession that true downtime for lawyers is crucial. With mental health problems and addiction percentages higher among lawyers

(<https://www.law.com/sites/almstaff/2018/02/05/aba-passes-measure-on-lawyer-substance-abuse-and-mental-health/>) compared with other professions, some firms are acknowledging that lawyers truly need to detach from the office to recharge.

“If you’re continuing to do work, the opportunity to de-stress and downgrade your level of anxiety and intensity—you’re not getting the full benefit,” said Bree Buchanan, chairwoman of the American Bar Association’s commission on lawyer assistance programs.

In recent years, law firms have increased the number of days off for their partners and staff. It’s not uncommon for law firms to offer four weeks

(<https://www.lawcrossing.com/article/900044571/Vacation-and-Leave-Policies-of-Top-Law-Firms-Paternity-and-Maternity-Leave-and-Gay-Benefits/>) of vacation annually, and some firms even provide unlimited vacation

(<https://www.law.com/almID/1202750414457>). When Hogan Lovells (<https://www.law.com/law-firm-profile?id=143&name=Hogan-Lovells>) announced in 2016 that it was shifting to limitless vacation days, the firm said it was critical for lawyers to have schedules to fit with both their work and personal lives.

Matthew McClintock and his partner, Jonathan Mintz, completely closed down their estate planning practice, which has offices in Evergreen, Colorado and Newport Beach, California, during part of July to visit the Pyrenees mountains in France, go cycling and watch some of the Tour de France.

They planned for the break all year long by producing more revenue early on, and setting an expectation to hustle hard when they got back. McClintock said that he did monitor his email, but that all of their clients, colleagues and referral sources were well aware they were unavailable.

“We started our firm with a focus on lifestyle and joie de vivre, so we take it as it comes,” said McClintock.

Partners in firms set the example to communicate whether downtime is acceptable, and even valued, Buchanan said. Especially in larger firms, as in Giacomini’s case, when partners fully sign on, it sends the message that associates and other staffers should, too.

Still, the type of firm culture that supports unplugged lawyer vacations is the exception rather than the rule, especially at elite firms. Despite the obvious health benefits of real, nonworking vacations, many attorneys still feel pressured to stay connected with clients and colleagues, even when there’s an ocean between vacationers and their law firms.

Lawyer wellness consultant Patrick Krill said some attorneys don’t know how to relax completely anymore, because they’re accustomed to staying available for work 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“They could be stuck in some dysfunctional cycle. They have been prioritizing work over everything else for so long,” said Krill, founder of Krill Strategies in Minneapolis. “They don’t know how to turn it off.”

And not tuning out works to the detriment of lawyers—and their firms—Krill said. When lawyers overextend their time in the performance zone over a long period, it diminishes productivity.

What's more, even though law firms have upped the time off available for lawyers, it doesn't mean they're vacationing longer. In fact, most don't even take a full four weeks of vacation.

Staff attorneys and associates take off an average of 12 paid vacation days per year, while nonequity and equity partners vacationed 15 days per year, according to Working Mother magazine. Lawyers in counsel positions take the most vacation—16 days annually, on average, according to the magazine's 2017 statistics. Those numbers represented a one-day decline in average vacation days for each job level compared to Working Mother's 2016 survey. The survey results did not identify whether those lawyers still worked while they vacationed.

A two-week summer vacation can't cure a lawyer of serious mental health or substance use problems, Buchanan said, but it can help attorneys gain the perspective that work isn't all there is to life.

"The other thing that's so important to well-being and resilience is not just taking a break from work but taking time with family, your loved ones, those you're connected to," she said. "Connectedness is a tremendous protective factor against the stress of work."

Houston health care attorney Susan Harris, a partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius (<https://www.law.com/law-firm-profile?id=214&name=Morgan-Lewis>), said she was able to reconnect with her husband and two adult daughters in late July when the family visited Paris and London to experience the typical tourist attractions while "eating and drinking our way through France and England."

But along the way she did stay plugged in to her practice.

Harris said that her firm imposed no official obligation, but she admitted to having a self-imposed expectation to work while on vacation. She noted that as a partner, opposed to an associate, she has greater duties to her firm, fellow partners and clients.

She only performed light work duties during her travels, she said, like checking in every day through email and phone. Harris also participated in conference calls while abroad, despite the problem of time zone differences.

“I have made sure my clients know where I am and that I have very trusted and talented colleagues who can ensure we keep all work going while I am out of the country,” she said.

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