Don’t let work ruin your holiday



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Jo Maughan challenges you to go about your next break differently

Key Points

What is the issue?

It’s all too easy to let work impinge upon and ruin your much deserved holiday. Don’t! Take control to ensure you feel the benefit after you’re back.

What does it mean to me?

As a professional, it’s your job to train people to work effectively with you and to role model a healthy work/life balance. Your job’s not just to provide brilliant tax advice.

What can I take away?

Easy, practical ideas to implement before you next go on holiday.

Have you ever got back from holiday, seen 2,000 unread emails and wondered if it was all worth it? After just a few hours at your desk, do the mojitos feel like last year, not last week? And your desk feels out of control? Yes?

It needn’t be like this. With a new mindset and some savvy management, you can feel in control of your inbox when you get back. Want that? Read on.

Before you go

Mindset

You probably need a mindset reboot – to believe that you and your holiday are more important than work. Ditch the belief that you can’t say ‘no’ when a client says she wants the advice before you go. Ditch the belief that you ought to be available in case something urgent comes up. Instead, choose to believe (yes, it’s a choice) that you deserve a complete break; you can leave things half done; you’re not indispensable; and it’s okay to ask others for help. This may feel uncomfortable.

If it does, that’s your critical inner voice talking. Perhaps it says things like: people won’t like it; they’ll think I’m lazy; or they won’t rate me?

Thoughts like these are not facts. They are your guesses at what other people may think. Choose to believe something empowering instead. If you find this bit difficult, which it is (let me be honest), a coach can help you break free from your inner critic’s grip.

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Boundaries

Decide if you want to disconnect completely from the office, or whether you will do a short, bounded amount of work while you’re away. Ask yourself, what will enable you to enjoy your holiday the most?

A partner I know spends 30 minutes before breakfast each morning of his holiday dealing with urgent emails and voicemails that only he can deal with; e.g. no one else in the firm knows about them. In these 30 minutes, he forwards urgent items to colleagues. For the rest of his holiday, he leaves his phone in the villa. I also know a sole practitioner who turns off her work phone and emails as she goes through security at London Heathrow and only switches them on again when back at the airport.

'Yes,' I hear you saying, 'but my work emails are on my personal phone.' Okay, turn off all email notifications while you're on holiday and don't look in your work inbox, or temporarily delete your work email account from your phone (you can reinstate it later).

If you have colleagues, decide if they can catch you up on your return, or whether you're going to catch yourself up. If colleagues, clearly tell them you want them to do this and that you won't be reading emails on said projects or clients because you're relying on them. Then schedule a 20 to 30 minute meeting with them on your first day back.

Diary

Block out your first two days back to give yourself time to get on top of your in-tray and to prevent others from hijacking your time.

Communicate

Communicate your absence clearly in advance to colleagues and clients. Say that until you go, your focus will be on existing urgent and important matters and you'd like them to support you with this.

I recommend you tell them 10 to 14 days in advance. Start earlier and people have time to put in extra requests. Start later and people may complain you've not given them enough notice.

Enlist the help of others

If any new requests come in during this pre-holiday period, delegate. If there's no one to delegate to, coach the person to take action without you. Say something like: 'I'm sorry, I'd like to help but I don't have any spare capacity before my holiday.' Ask: 'How could you progress things?' 'What could you do to move this forward?'

‘What alternatives are there to handle this?’ Your sole aim here is to leave THEM with the monkey (the action) and not end up with the monkey on your back.

If you’re a sole practitioner, you may not want to take this approach with clients. What to do? Have you considered setting up a reciprocal arrangement with another sole practitioner to progress urgent client work in your absence (and you do the same for them)?

Also, if it’s just you, you may worry about a client being unable to reach you on a truly urgent matter, or that you’ll miss a new business lead. If so, get yourself a Virtual Assistant (VA) to handle your urgent calls – and divert your phone to them. Your VA will contact you in the way you’ve agreed, if something urgent does come up. In my experience, VAs provide a very professional and affordable telephone answering service which they usually charge on a per-call-answered basis.

Be smart with your out of office message

I bet your current out of office reads something like this: ‘Hi, Thanks for your email. I’m on holiday from [X date] to [Y date] inclusive and will not be checking emails. If your request is urgent, please contact [Name] at [Email] or [Phone]. Otherwise, I will respond to your mail on my return. Thanks, [Your Name].’

This approach is boring (sorry!) and leaves you with the time consuming job of sifting through your inbox on your return to fathom what’s important and what’s not.

‘Yes,’ I hear you thinking, ‘that’s the job.’

It’s also your job to train people to work effectively with you. And to model a healthy work/life balance. How about this instead…?

‘Hi, Thanks for your email. I’m currently on holiday [in the land that invented the stapler/ enjoying German efficiency/ something amusing] until [X date]. I’m sorry, you’re stuck in the office. If your request is urgent, please contact [Name] at [Email] or [Phone].

‘If it’s not urgent, I fear your mail may become swamped in the [2,000] new emails I expect to receive while away! To help me get back to you as quickly as possible, please resend your email again on [X date], with ‘For info’ or ‘For action by [date]’ in the subject line. Thank you for help. I appreciate it very much, [Your Name].’

‘I can’t do this,’ I hear you thinking. ‘Why not?’ I ask. Put yourself in your client’s shoes – you’ve been amusing and friendly upfront; and you’ve asked them to do one small thing to help you get back to them more quickly. Go on, try it. I call it the ‘Resend tactic’.

While you’re away

Enjoy your holiday!

Stick to the boundaries you’ve set yourself. If you notice yourself wanting to check your work phone, pause. Notice what you’re feeling and thinking. There will likely be an uncomfortable emotion and some unnoticed, habitual thoughts. It’s these thoughts you need to grab hold of and change because they’re driving your habit. Just like Ann and Matthew (not their real names) did…

Ann realised she had FOMO (a Fear of Missing Out). This originated from when she was young and felt left out by her older brother. She told her boyfriend over a bottle of Malbec and asked for his help. By the end of the holiday, she’d kicked her phone habit.

Matthew realised he felt bored sitting by the pool with his family; checking his phone was an excuse to get away. He decided this was sad so suggested they all visit the local market – a trip that led to one of the best meals of the holiday.

When you’re back

1. Have meetings with the people who are catching you up.
2. De-brief with your VA.
3. If you used the Resend tactic, don’t read ANY of the emails that arrived during your leave. Move them all into a new sub-folder called ‘Holiday’. Instead read those received on [X date]. Read what’s in the ‘Holiday’ folder if the business need arises, plus schedule some time to read newsletters, etc. After (say) a month, delete or archive the sub-folder.
4. Celebrate.