To: **The HR Specialist**

Date: August 2023
Vol. 21, No. 8

From: Business Management Daily

Subject: Practical HR strategies to boost your career

In The News ...

Employers budgeting for 4% pay raises in 2024

Salary budgets are expected to remain high in 2024 as employers become accustomed to ongoing labor market challenges, according to consulting firm Willis Towers Watson. The company's latest Salary Budget Planning Survey found that employers are budgeting for average pay raises of 4.0% next year.

Though down from the actual increase of 4.4% in 2023, the numbers remain higher than the 3.1% salary increase budget in 2021 and years prior.

Support staff's mental health to improve retention

Employers and employees alike benefit when organizations make mental health a priority, according to new research from the Society for Human Resource Management.

The SHRM study found 45% of employees have higher expectations this year than last that their employers will provide mental-health support—and 41% would consider quitting without it.

More than eight in 10 employees (84%) who say their job has had a positive impact on their mental health over the past six months are more likely to be deeply committed to their organization, compared with those who say their job has had no impact (64%) or a negative impact (27%) on their mental health.

In this issue

Child care may be this fall's hottest benefit

At the height of the pandemic in 2021, Congress appropriated more than $24 billion in American Rescue Plan funding to help child-care providers stay open. It was recognition that reliable child care is essential to supporting working parents—and their employers. Most parents can only work if someone is watching their children.

Now the post-pandemic child-care landscape is shifting. Employers are responding by offering benefits to help working parents afford quality child care.

ARP grants let child-care centers keep their doors open and make payroll. About 80% of child day-care providers received grants, which states distributed. But ARP funding ends in September. After that, the only federal support for child care will be block grants to states for low-income parents, and that funding expires in September 2024.

Without the money, day-care operators will probably have to raise tuition, cut staff or even close. It's an expensive, low-margin, labor-intensive business. One recent report says ending the grants may mean more than three million children lose day-care spots.

Especially hard hit will be low-wage workers. Without access to affordable child care, simple household math will force some of your workers to consider quitting. When child-care costs rise, most families must cut back elsewhere. However, there are steps employers can take to support

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Monitoring: Beware fixating on productivity

Are supervisors asking to install tracking software on their remote employees' computers and devices? They may be suffering from what Microsoft has termed "productivity paranoia" That's the unfounded belief, despite evidence to the contrary, that employees aren't productive when working remotely.

Fully 85% of business leaders Microsoft surveyed said the shift to remote and hybrid work made them less confident about their employees' productivity.

Of course, in survey after survey, remote employees say they're just as productive as they were when working on site five days a week—sometimes even more so. In fact, 87% reported they are more productive now than they were a few years ago.

Those employees will surely resent management moves to count keystrokes and track what websites they visit during down times or breaks. The resulting low morale may create exactly what their supervisors fear: lower productivity.

Before you approve requests for employee surveillance, work with managers and supervisors to determine if their productivity paranoia has merit. Compare productivity data from before and after remote or hybrid work began. Did remote workers continue to meet performance goals? Are assignments still turned in on time? Do employees seem prepared and engaged during virtual or in-person meetings? If so, there's probably no compelling reason to track those employees via

Continued on page 2

Child-care benefits

(Cont. from page 1)

employees' child-care needs:

- **Contract for on-site care.** All the major day-care chains are expanding, spotting an investment opportunity to fill unmet needs. They're eager to partner with employers. Employers that add on-site child care will probably recoup huge recruiting and retention advantages.
- **Offer back-up care.** Back-up care helps employees when their regular child-care arrangements fall through. This may be most attractive to workers who rely on family members to babysit. Many child-care chains work with employers to provide back-up care.
- **Help cover child-care tuition.** Some employers offer a monthly stipend to help employees pay for child care. There could be tax implications for employees, so seek expert advice when structuring such a benefit.

Employee monitoring

(Cont. from page 1)

software or other forms of remote monitoring.

Microsoft did its own analysis to see if productivity had declined among remote workers. Using anonymized data scraped from its ubiquitous Microsoft 365 software suite, the company found the opposite. Workers were attending more meetings—an increase of 153% globally since 2020. Plus, 42% of participants were multitasking during those meetings by sending emails or other messages. Not captured was time spent reading incoming emails or messages or working on files unrelated to the meeting.

Bottom line: Your workers are probably at least as productive now as they were a few years ago. Think twice before implementing intrusive monitoring programs that may actually reduce productivity and employee morale.

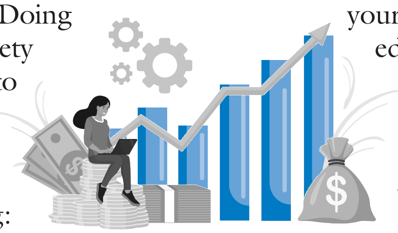
Spotlight on Benefits

Offer financial training to help employees prepare for comfortable retirements

Your employees are being bombarded with bad news about their retirement prospects. They worry that mass baby boomer retirements will bankrupt Social Security, pulling that safety net out from under Generations X, Y and Z. Inflation remains high. Federal forgiveness of most student-loan debt isn't happening after all.

Fortunately, employers like you can help employees prepare for comfortable retirements, and it won't cost a fortune. It all starts with educating employees about retirement in general and your organization's retirement benefits in particular. Doing so may ease their anxiety and encourage them to participate in your retirement plan.

Here's what to cover in your training:



Basic retirement planning. Start by providing basic information about retirement planning. Explain that a sound retirement plan rests on three pillars: Social Security, personal savings and employer-sponsored retirement benefits. Your retirement plan provider has materials you can distribute to employees.

Include instructions on how employees can obtain information about Social Security. They can visit **www.ssa.gov/myaccount** to sign up to review their latest Social Security statements. A calculator function lets employees see how much money they can expect to receive every month from Social Security once they retire.

Personal savings. Provide basic information about Individual Retirement Accounts, where employees can deposit their own savings and receive tax breaks now or later and in the future. The IRS offers information (**www.irs.gov/retirement-plans/ira-deduction-limits**) explaining which kinds of IRAs might best suit individual needs, as well as the limitations on how much an investor can contribute each year.

Your organization's retirement plan. Your employees may not know as much as you think they do about your employer-sponsored retirement plan. That's a crucial topic in any retirement-planning training.

Explain any company match and why setting aside money in your 401(k), 403(b) or other defined contribution plan you offer can provide tax advantages while rewarding retirement savings. Include basic information about the investment options your plan allows, including education on risk and appropriate allocation depending on goals, age and other factors. Again, lean on your retirement-plan provider for materials explaining these topics.

Your company's plans for next year. If your organization is planning to implement provisions in last year's SECURE 2.0 legislation, add that information to retirement planning training.

Beginning in January 2024, employers can provide matching contributions toward 401(k) plans and most other employer-sponsored plans on the basis of employees' student-loan repayments. Explain the advantages of accepting that matching "free" money, which is available even if employees are delaying contributing to their retirement accounts until after they have paid off their student loans.

Be sure to discuss the SECURE 2.0 details with your plan provider. You will have to amend your retirement plan rules to allow student-loan matching.

Note: It is unethical for HR professionals to offer personal advice on retirement investments. Urge employees to consult their own financial advisors for guidance.

From the Courts

Unintended consequences: Prepare to pay up if your diversity policy discriminates

Sometimes, employers are caught between conflicting workplace priorities. Such was recently the case for pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly. In an effort to cultivate a more diverse workforce, it wound up discriminating against a protected class: older workers covered by the Age Discrimination in Employment Act.

Recent case: At a leadership town hall meeting in 2017, Eli Lilly's senior vice president for HR and diversity noted that the company's workforce was largely composed of older workers. He then announced that the company had established goals for what he called "early career" hires, ostensibly as part of planning for the future and growing talent as baby boomers near retirement. The VP said that the company has "to make sure that we have a workforce that is distributed … by generation."

Adding more millennial employees was suggested as a feasible way to achieve diversity. *The new goal:* 40% of new employees would be "early career" hires. Upper managers were directed to review the files of any older applicants before a job offer could be extended.

Shortly after the plan was implemented, the number of older applicants for sales rep positions plummeted. The EEOC launched an investigation and decided to sue for age discrimination.

Instead of fighting the charges in court, Eli Lilly has now agreed to settle the case for $2.4 million. The money will go to older applicants for sales rep positions who were not hired. In addition, a consent decree requires all Eli Lilly managers to undergo one hour of antidiscrimination training every year. (*EEOC v. Lilly USA*, SD IN, 2023)

Advice: The safest way to diversify your workplace is to cast the widest possible net for candidates. Then subject each applicant to exactly the same hiring process, using identical criteria for evaluating qualifications and work experience. Do not require additional levels of review before making offers to members of protected classes.

What you should never tell recruiters to do

If you use a third-party recruiter to screen and refer candidates for open positions, remember this: You're still responsible for any discrimination that may occur.

Recent case: When a commercial electrical contractor began seeking candidates for estimator and project manager jobs, the vice president in charge allegedly told a third-party recruiter not to consider candidates with more than 25 years' experience.

According to an EEOC lawsuit, the recruiter located a candidate with more than 32 years of experience, and the candidate submitted an application. The VP allegedly rejected the referral, telling the recruiter that the candidate was too old for the job. The recruiter then referred an applicant who had 12 years of experience, but who was 58 years old. This time, the VP told the recruiter he didn't want to consider the candidate because he dressed shabbily.

The EEOC suit says both incidents violated the Age Discrimination in Employment Act. Barring a settlement, this age-discrimination case is going to trial. (*EEOC v. Hatzel & Buehler*, DC NJ, 2023)

Legal Brief

EEOC finding novel ways to drive industry change

Since 1986, a trucking company in Mississippi has hired only one female driver—and it fired her before she completed a single route. The EEOC investigated and discovered a significant number of qualified women with extensive truck-driving experience had applied for jobs, but never received job offers, even when they were better qualified than men who were hired.

The EEOC sued for sex discrimination and the company settled, agreeing to pay $490,000 in damages. In addition, the EEOC negotiated a $120,000 scholarship program aimed at training women to become qualified truck drivers. (*EEOC v. USF Holland,* ND MS, 2023)

The lesson: Look for the EEOC to broker more settlements like this. Not content just to punish discrimination, it is seeking ways to increase employment opportunities for members of protected classes.

Beware ethnic stereotypes that limit employee opportunities

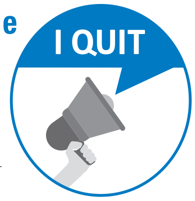
An Asian American woman who works for Meta, Facebook's parent company, has filed a complaint alleging she was denied promotions because her supervisors believe Asian women don't make good leaders.

Vaishnavi's complaint to California's Civil Rights Department says she received positive performance reviews for years. When she asked about a promotion, she was rewarded with more work—but not a better job.

Vaishnavi's complaint may have merit. At Meta, 46% of employees are Asian American, but just 27% of executives are. White employees account for 39% of Meta workers, but 58% of executives.

The lesson: Audit your workforce demographics to see if certain employee cohorts are underrepresented or over-represented in certain positions or departments. If you are a private-sector employer with 100 or more employees, or a federal contractor, use the data you compile to complete the EEO-1 report you must file yearly with the EEOC.

At-will employment, Hotel California-style



The Eagles' classic-rock hit "Hotel California" says, "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave." A McDonald's franchisee has allegedly taken that sentiment to another level by posting a sign that forbids employees from quitting. The sign reads:

> We value you, your growth and your contributions.
>
> THIS IS A NO-QUIT RESTAURANT
>
> Because we feel that many situations can be resolved, it is the policy of the restaurant that an employee cannot quit until he or she talks to the Restaurant Manager or the Area Supervisor.

Another sign offers the same message in Spanish.

There is some doubt about the authenticity of this story. It initially appeared on Reddit.com's r/WorkReform subreddit, and the person who posted it did not reveal the location of the restaurant where the sign was allegedly hung. It might all be a hoax.

However, we'll take this opportunity to point out the obvious: Putting up such a sign is a monumentally bad idea. Although it offers a nod toward progressive management by encouraging mediation of workplace disputes, preventing employees from quitting is almost universally illegal in the U.S. At-will employment is the law in 49 states and the District of Columbia. (Montana is the only exception.)

The central tenet of at-will employment is that employers are free to fire and employees are free to quit. Employment may be terminated by either the employer or the employee at any time for any lawful reason or no reason at all. Posting a "no-quitting" sign would destroy the at-will employment relationship, something far riskier for an employer than a teenager who has had just about enough of flipping burgers, mopping up spills and degreasing fryer baskets.

Latest Supreme Court opinions to affect HR

The U.S. Supreme Court handed down four decisions in the final week of its 2022–2023 term that will dictate when employers can turn down employees' requests for religious accommodations, and could affect corporate diversity initiatives, student-loan repayment benefits and use of arbitration to resolve employment disputes.

As employers scramble to analyze the fallout and determine what changes to implement, Anniken Davenport, *HR Specialist*'s legal editor, is here to help. Her new video presentation details how employers must adapt. Watch the video at **www.thehrspecialist.com/SupremeCourtVid**.

Online resource Read our summary of all four cases at **www.thehrspecialist.com/June23SupremeCourt**.

Survey: Mental, emotional stress is leading cause of employee burnout

Sixty-one percent of workers participating in a new poll by the Grant Thornton consulting firm said they had experienced burnout in the last year. When asked the cause of burnout at work, 53% of respondents indicated mental and emotional stress as the top reason. Long hours (42%), workload (42%) and people shortages (41%) followed closely behind as other top causes of burnout.

Grant Thornton's 2023 State of Work in America survey also polled employees about their well-being and how it has changed in the past 12 months. Just over a quarter (26%) of respondents noted a worsening state of financial well-being, while another 25% cited worsening of mental well-being. Additionally, 21% of survey respondents explained their physical well-being worsened over the past year.

HR Q&A: FMLA Eligibility

No FMLA left, but employee may be disabled: Are we legally allowed to terminate her?

Q: Can we legally terminate an employee who has run out of FMLA leave but who has presented medical documentation of a disability? It looks like she needs accommodations we simply cannot provide.

A: Employers faced with an employee who can't return to work after FMLA leave should consider whether the employee might be disabled and thus be entitled to reasonable accommodations. Handle this just as you would any other ADA disability accommodation—with an interactive conversation to identify any possible accommodations.

Keep in mind that granting additional time off—either intermittently or in a block—has been recognized as a legitimate disability accommodation.

Does the FMLA cover pregnancy-related conditions before the baby is born?

Q: If a pregnant employee needs time off before her child is born due to a pregnancy-related illness (in this case, hyperemesis), can she take leave under the FMLA, or is she only covered after the birth of the child?

A: An employee's serious health condition is a valid reason for taking FMLA leave independent of whether she is pregnant or not. Assuming hyperemesis qualifies as a serious health condition, your employee would be eligible for FMLA leave.

In addition, under the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, which went into effect June 27, 2023, a pregnancy-related disability—even if it is temporary—requires an employer to provide reasonable accommodations, including time off if necessary.

SHRM: Live from Las Vegas

HR pros are talking: Here's what we heard at SHRM's 2023 annual conference

When the Society for Human Resource Development held its annual conference in June, more than 25,000 attendees heard from more than 380 speakers addressing how HR can drive change in the workplace. Here are some of the big ideas that had Las Vegas abuzz:

A culture of inclusion

"The number one driver of workplace inclusion is also the number one factor of team success—psychological safety." *— Tara Taylor, ADR Vantage*

Session: Top 10 practices for workplace inclusion

"Our job is to build a safe workplace." *— Ben Greene, BG Trans Talks*

Session: Transgender inclusion at work: Combining inclusive structure with inclusive culture

* * * * *

HR on the org chart

"The role of HR is becoming one of the top two roles in any company." *— Zig Serafin, Qualtrics*

Session: Leading the way: How CHROs are shaping the future of work

* * * * *

Presidential perspectives

"We shouldn't require a college degree if the job doesn't require it. … I don't think we should make our economy less efficient by lowering workforce participation at a time when there are 10 million open jobs." *— former President Bill Clinton*

"Diverse groups make better decisions than homogenous ones."*— former President Bill Clinton*

Session: A conversation with President Clinton

* * * * *

HR takes on artificial intelligence

"AI is moving faster than anyone predicted, and HR is at the center of it. This change requires an intentional workforce strategy." *— Betty Thompson, Booz Allen Hamilton*

Session: A conversation with President Clinton

"This technology probably isn't as unbiased as you think." *— Lauren Daming, Greensfelder, Hemker & Gale*

Session: What HR professionals need to know about privacy in the workplace

"Currently, more than 160 bills or regulations related to AI are pending in 34 state legislatures. There is a tsunami coming of state regulation of AI. If you are a multi-state employer, good luck." *— Kelly Dobbs Bunting, Greenberg Traurig*

Session: I Robot: The EEOC, artificial intelligence and discrimination

Tough talks

"Friday at 5 p.m. is the worst time to have a difficult conversation, but that's when they happen. Tuesday at 11 a.m. That's a good time. The employee can walk it off and then come back with an action plan." *— Dennis Davis, Ogletree Deakins*

Session: Making difficult communications less difficult

* * * * *

The quiet part, out loud

"We have been traveling for the past two years and the vibe we are getting is work sucks." *— Jeffrey Harry, Rediscover Your Play*

"The reason we keep talking about employee engagement is because we aren't there yet." *— Samm Smeltzer, The HRart Center*

"Our jobs have the word 'human' in it, but we're not connecting." *— Jeffrey Harry, Rediscover Your Play*

"I want respect." — SHRM participant

"I want feedback. I don't get that from my boss." *— SHRM participant*

Session: Making work suck less by fixing broken HR systems

* * * * *

Why we do what we do

"I obsess over taking care of our people so they can take care of you." *— Delta CEO Ed Bastian*

Session: SHRM's Ethical Leader of the Year Award

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The power of SECURE 2.0

"People ask how we can attract and retain employees—this legislation will help us do that." *— Mike Griffin, UBS Workplace Health Solutions*

"Employers have a responsibility to help their employees become financially well." *— Laurel Taylor, Candidly*

"Student debt has a profound impact on retirement participation." *— Matt Bahl, Financial Health Network*

Session: It's more than just retirement: SECURE 2.0 legislation supports your employees' overall financial well-being

* * * * *

It all starts with pay

"The root of all pay equity evil begins at starting salary … Removing the request for starting salary puts the onus on us as employers." *— David Cohen, DCI Consulting Group*

Session: Pay equity in 2023: ESG reporting, state requirements and proactive analytics

 Copy the text below and distribute it to the managers at your organization.

To: ______________________________ **Date:** August 2023
From: ______________________________ **Re:** Employee motivation

Wellness

Summer 'blahs' or burned out? Find out and fix it

With workers feeling the strains caused by higher performance requirements, greater responsibilities and an uncertain economy, it's important for managers to be able to identify and deal with burnout—the loss of interest and motivation that can result from workplace pressures.

It's a problem that can feel even worse in the dog days of summer—the halfway point of the year, when work can seem like an endless slog.

Burnout can lead to depression and diminished performance. Plus, it's contagious, spreading through the team unless you act early and decisively to head it off. Here's how:

Watch for burnout indicators

Be alert for subtle shifts in perception and behavior, particularly those that reduce an employee's ability to cope with daily pressures. These include:

- **Lack of motivation.** Previously enthusiastic workers lose interest in doing a good job and explain the change with comments like "What's the point?"
- **Pronounced negativity.** Griping or cynicism about their current situations combined with predictions of more unsatisfying results.
- **Loss of creativity.** Employees who once solved problems on their own now ask for direction or need prompting every step of the way.
- **Chronic lateness or absenteeism.** When you see it in previously responsible team members, sniff for telltale signs of burnout.

Look for the source

If you suspect burnout, try to understand the cause. Possible sources:

- **Disappointment.** Has the competent, ambitious young employee been disappointed when an opportunity for advancement went to someone else?
- **Uncertainty.** Some uncertainty and change in the workplace is normal. If it lasts too long or overshadows all other job concerns, expect to see burnout in some employees.
- **Anxiety.** Pressures to work faster, meet stricter standards or learn new procedures are common these days. Burned-out employees frequently report exposure to high anxiety with too little time to adjust.
- **Overwork.** Whether the crunch comes from a single major project or a change in procedures, team members who are asked to work harder than normal for longer than usual can eventually reach their limits.
- **Departing co-workers.** People become comfortable not only in their positions, but in their relationships with co-workers. Resignations and layoffs can lead team members to worry about their own stability.
- **A decision or desire to leave.** Once one of your team members decides to leave—or feels there's no other choice—the decision is frequently expressed in behavior that resembles classic burnout symptoms.

Smother the flames

Your best way to combat burnout depends on the person, the cause and your relationship with the worker. The following approaches can help:

- **Share feelings.** Just listening can help. Once a promotion goes to someone else, for example, it's gone. But you can listen while the passed-over employee vents his disappointment. Showing him that someone cares and helping clear his mind for a fresh try at the next opening will ease some frustration.
- **Restore some certainty.** Teams that burn out from uncertainty can blossom again as variables firm up. You can help by nailing down team assignments, work schedules, guaranteed hours and other things within your control.
- **Establish new challenges, incentives, motivations and "exciters."** Teams suffering burnout from boredom or lack of direction can be rejuvenated with tougher—rather than easier—assignments. Or offer your team new training, procedures and equipment, and you'll see their interest (and eagerness to work) return.

Rekindle the spark in long-term employees

When your most experienced employees start to struggle, step in right away. Some suggestions:

1. **Coach them up.** Use training, workshops or refresher courses to stimulate longtime workers and expose them to new methods or ideas.
2. **Turn them into mentors.** Long-term workers can serve as great mentors and trainers for new employees. Set up a formal mentor program. Or have them help in developing new training sessions or projects.
3. **Add to the job.** Consider increasing the employee's responsibilities (and challenge) if the job has become too routine.
4. **Offer a transfer.** A new setting and responsibilities—even a lateral move—may rekindle the employee's fire.
5. **Open your door.** Let long-time employees know you are free to listen to them about day-to-day issues as well as their big-picture roles in the organization.
6. **Allow job flexibility,** when possible. Employees feel more engaged when they're allowed more control over the way they perform their jobs. By allowing freedom, you demonstrate your trust in them.

by Jennifer Morehead

Outsourcing: How to harness the power of fractional HR

The rise of fractional HR has fundamentally reshaped how businesses manage their human capital. Employers are increasingly outsourcing HR functions, and fractional HR has become one of the most affordable solutions for doing so.

This trend toward adopting more agile and flexible models for HR management has given organizations the leverage to access specialized HR skills without investing in a full-time, in-house team. The essence of fractional HR is flexibility. The choice isn't between full control or outsourcing, but rather, determining the optimal blend of the two that meets an employer's unique needs.

Where do you need help?

The first step in incorporating fractional HR into an existing HR function is identifying the areas where your organization needs support. If your organization struggles with compliance issues, you might consider hiring a fractional HR professional who specializes in employment law. If talent acquisition and retention are your weak points, a professional specializing in those areas could be of great assistance.

So, how does one retain control while leveraging fractional HR? Clear communication and well-defined roles are key. Set clear expectations about the tasks and projects the fractional HR team will handle. Ensure they understand your company's culture and policies.

More than HR temps

It's important to remember that fractional HR professionals aren't just temporary employees but part of your team. Include them in relevant meetings and communications to ensure they're aware of ongoing developments and are able to contribute their expertise effectively.

When considering which functions to outsource, it's essential to undertake a rigorous needs analysis. This involves assessing your current HR functions in terms of their efficiency, cost-effectiveness and alignment with your business strategy. Functions that are highly specialized or that your current team struggles to manage effectively are prime candidates for outsourcing.

Suppose your HR team spends a disproportionate amount of time managing payroll due to its complexity. In that case, outsourcing this task to a fractional HR professional with expertise in payroll management can free up in-house staff to focus on other tasks. If you prioritize culture and employee engagement, you might choose to keep these functions in-house.

The choice of which functions to outsource also depends on the nature and size of your organization. A small start-up might choose to outsource almost all HR functions. In contrast, a larger corporation might only outsource specific, complex HR tasks.

A transformational opportunity

The shift towards fractional HR is an opportunity to reassess and refine your HR processes. The key to successful integration lies in viewing it as a strategic partnership rather than a simple cost-cutting measure. This enables the optimal combination of control and flexibility that can meet your unique needs.

Incorporating fractional HR requires a balanced approach, blending in-house capabilities with outsourced expertise. Clear communication, a rigorous needs analysis and a flexible mindset form the backbone of a successful transition.

Fractional HR is about creating a more dynamic, responsive and effective HR function that aligns with your business goals and needs.

*Jennifer Morehead is the CEO of Flex HR (**flexhr.com**), a full-service HR consulting, outsourcing and recruiting provider.*

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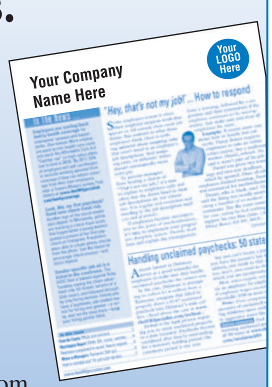

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7 ways to keep returning to work from ruining your vacation

The worst part of going on vacation is all the work that happens before and after. A survey by Harris Interactive found that 44% of employees dread the frenzy of activity on the last day of work before they leave on vacation. The only worse day, according to 77% of employees: the day they return.

Here's good advice to pass on to your organization's employees—simple tips to make sure the crush of work doesn't snuff out the post-vacation glow.

1. Screen your calendar and to-do list the evening before you return to work. Review the upcoming week, so you don't have any surprises. If you scribbled anything down on scrap paper while you were away, transfer it to your calendar and to-do list now. That way, you can hit the ground running.

2. Get a head start on email. If possible, go through your email inbox before you return to work. First, scan for messages from bosses, clients and other high-priority people. Check to see whether any of those must be handled immediately. Make responding to them a priority on your back-to-work to-do list.

Next, take all messages that you want to read (such as online newsletters) and either print them out for later reading and delete, or file them in an email folder so you can process them as a group. If you're facing tons of email, spread the task over several days.

3. Ask for a status update. If you work on a team or have staff that reports to you, make arrangements before you leave to have someone send you an email updating you on your projects. If you'll be back on Monday, ask your co-worker to send the email on Friday afternoon. You'll have a head start on your first-day priorities.

4. On your first day back, be an early bird. Start working before normal office hours to ensure you get some quiet time to organize your work and get your head back in the game. Now's the time to return voicemail messages. Once co-workers begin arriving or come online, you'll be distracted.

5. Tackle paperwork right away. Sort all the snail mail and miscellaneous documents that piled up while you were away. Create a priority pile for anything with a deadline (e.g., invoices, events that require registration). Set aside a "later" pile for nonessential reading. Make liberal use of a shredding pile and a recycling pile.

6. Take your boss to lunch. It's the perfect opportunity to catch up on projects and discuss important matters one-on-one.

7. Keep the vacation feeling alive. Before the end of your first day back, take a moment to savor something great about your vacation. Write down a memory you'll cherish or the big idea you had. Upload a photo from your trip and make it your screen saver.

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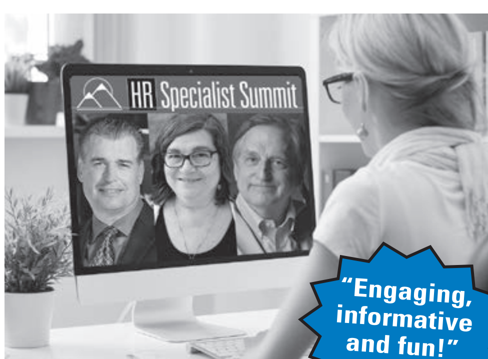

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