

The joy of sabbaticals

Sue Hodges extols the virtues of career breaks for both staff and employers.

A SABBATICAL (OR CAREER BREAK) can vary in length from one month to a few years. It may be fully paid, unpaid, or somewhere in between – and all have the valuable guarantee of a job to return to. Options include going on an extended travelling trip, pursuing further education, developing new skills, taking up charity work, or devoting time to hobbies or a young family. The key aspect is to temporarily retire from the rat race, correct your work/life balance, and recharge the batteries. Potentially appealing – but what are the obstacles?

Concerns about the effect on your career are common, but the reality is that a sabbatical can have a very positive influence. If you are feeling a bit stale or jaded then a career break can bring renewed enthusiasm for your job – at least once you get over the usual ‘return to work blues’ on your first Monday morning back. Experiences such as travelling or charity work can have a lasting effect on how you deal with day-to-day problems, increase your creativity, and improve your ability to cope with stressful situations.

Break or change?

Taking time out may also give you the impetus to move on in your career, seek a promotion internally or switch jobs. If you had been feeling unappreciated, you may find

that you’re sorely missed and are welcomed back with open arms. Of course, you may not have been missed at all – indicating that it’s probably time for a move and taking a sabbatical will have kick-started the inevitable. As an added benefit, your CV will now clearly demonstrate that there’s more to you than your actuarial prowess and gives interviewers plenty to ask about.

However, the timing of the sabbatical can be important. Taking a break midway through

your exams may make it harder to motivate yourself to finish them, or it could be just what you need to tackle them with renewed vigour. Try not to burn any bridges by leaving your employer at a key time – aim to be as flexible and as accommodating as possible to ensure everyone can gain from your break.

Financial worries may be another concern for the individual, especially if the sabbatical is on reduced or zero pay. As well as raiding your savings, you could consider a short-term let to cover mortgage payments. And it’s worth remembering that in a number of popular destinations, such as Asia or South America, living costs are substantially lower than in the UK.

Motivational?

From an employer’s point of view, offering sabbaticals as a staff benefit, perhaps after a number of years of service, is a relatively cheap incentive to potential employees to join a company and remain there. And a key employee being on sabbatical can allow for a useful exercise in succession planning as junior team members temporarily take on increased responsibilities. This may also encourage more efficient ways of operating as the extra workload is absorbed into the team and thus free the returning employee for new projects.

The returning employee may decide to resign, but losing an unmotivated staff member is also likely to be beneficial in the long run, as recruitment brings fresh ideas and new life into the company. Allowing or encouraging staff sabbaticals can also be a convenient way of allowing for a temporary downturn in business without resorting to redundancies. Many staff will be delighted at the opportunity to take extended unpaid leave and there should be no shortage of volunteers.

In the lead-up to taking a sabbatical, the employee may naturally find it harder to be motivated about work as his or her mind may be elsewhere. Involvement in different short-term projects can help to overcome this. Similarly, on her or his return, it’s well worth trying to utilise the fresh enthusiasm and ideas by providing new challenges to help the person get back in the swing of things.

What have you got to lose?

With careful management a sabbatical can bring benefits for both the employee and the employer and really can be a win-win situation.

So, why not plan a sabbatical, take some time out and enjoy yourself? □

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