

Breaking News from The Globe and Mail

Worst of times might be best of times to take off

TAVIA GRANT

SATURDAY, APRIL 04, 2009

Sure, taking an extended break from work can offer many benefits to employees: A chance to rejuvenate. An opportunity to see the world, and gain new experiences and skills that can be brought back to work. And, for employers in this tougher economic climate, paid and unpaid sabbaticals offer a creative way to cut labour costs for a while instead of cutting staff altogether.

At the same time, employers that are slashing head counts may face challenges in covering for absent workers with fewer, and maybe resentful, staff left behind. There are also financial costs to both employees and employers. And, at a time when companies are paring jobs, many employees may fear the risks of asking to take off: Will they be seen as bailing during tough times? Will they even have a job to come back to?

Employers on board

Some employers are using sabbaticals as a cost-cutting measure. Accounting firm KPMG, for instance, has just started to offer its employees paid sabbaticals, at 20 per cent of their salaries while on leave. They'll also keep their benefits intact – and be guaranteed a job when they return.

Employers are also motivated by other benefits to long-term loyalty. Deloitte & Touche LLP, for one, has pressed ahead with a new sabbatical program, even as Canada's recession deepened.

In January, it offered staff across Canada a chance to apply for international development fellowships, leaves of one to five months that come with a variable stipend to help cover costs, and a guaranteed job upon return. In answer to that call, the accounting firm plans to send more than 20 employees as far afield as Mozambique, Egypt, Ghana and Latin America, where they will work with non-profits on projects relating to their professional skills.

The idea took flight after enterprise risk consultant Amirali Batada took a year's sabbatical from Deloitte two years ago. He volunteered with the Aga Khan Foundation's economic development projects in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The effect he had – helping hotels develop corporate social responsibility policies – so impressed his employer that it asked him to develop a program for other Deloitte employees to do volunteer work.

Deloitte tried out a pilot project last year, sending seven employees on the fellowship before rolling it out to all staff this year.

The new program comes at some cost to the company – it pays a stipend to each partner organization its employees work with, which, in turn, goes to cover travel and accommodation costs. And some hassle, too: It has to figure out how to juggle employees' absences in a tough economic environment. Those who are indispensable to a project will have to stay on the job, but the company will try to find a future date when a leave can be arranged, says Sean McConkey, Deloitte's national talent lead.

Deloitte sees many rewards. There's the altruistic side of letting employees volunteer. There's also the benefit from employees developing their work and leadership skills, Mr. McConkey says. Employees learn how to work with people of different cultural backgrounds, something that is useful back in multicultural Canada. “When you look at the complexity of Canada and the work force becoming more diverse, the more international experience we can get, the better for us and our clients,” he says.

Sabbaticals engage and motivate staff, he adds, and increase dialogue among co-workers: Employees who go abroad can write articles about their experience that are posted on Deloitte's internal website.

Mr. Batada is constantly fielding questions about his sabbatical from curious colleagues.

“The opportunity outweighs the challenge,” Mr. McConkey says. “This is a program we're going to stick with.”

Employee experience

For kids in many places, lugging heavy textbooks is part of life. But not in parts of rural Uganda where there are no textbooks. Lessons – from multiplication tables to diagrams of the human heart – are painted on school walls.

Tim Elgar and his wife, Laura, helped draw those charts about two years ago during a three-week volunteer stint in Uganda that was part of a nine-month sabbatical of travels through Asia and Africa.

It began when Mr. Elgar, then 28, took a deep breath and asked for an unpaid leave from his marketing job at American Express Canada in Markham, Ont.

“It was a big decision. But we'd talked about seeing a different part of the world, and carving out more time for volunteer work, for years,” says Mr. Elgar, who returned to Canada 18 months ago. “A sabbatical met both those needs.”

His employer agreed to let him go for up to a year, and promised he could return to a similar job. “My boss saw this as a great opportunity for personal and professional growth,” he says.

He and his wife, who left a human resources job in the hotel industry, set off first for four months in Asia, travelling through Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia. They spent several weeks volunteering in Malaysia with special-needs children, helping them to build gardens and stage plays.

Then they moved on to five months through South Africa, Swaziland, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, where they put in that volunteer stint.

Mr. Elgar says the experience enriched his life, and his career, in ways he never imagined. “It gave me a really genuine appreciation for diversity. There's a tremendous amount to learn from people with different backgrounds, and there's no better way to grow in that regard than to spend time away surrounded by people with different perspectives and values,” he says.

Having to navigate new environments every day – which bus to take, or street vendor to choose – gave him more confidence in making speedy decisions.

It's also given him a sense of perspective. “People say don't sweat the small stuff. It adds perspective if you've been away and seen how different people are living. A day in the office suddenly doesn't seem like such a bad thing.”

And it didn't hurt his career. Mr. Elgar returned to a similar job and was promoted seven months later. He is now senior manager for membership rewards.

Lastly, there's loyalty to the company that let him make the leap. “That gratitude is still motivating me today.”

And what would he say to others pondering such a move in this economic environment? “Personally, I would make the same decision now because I think many of the skills I built upon – decision making, leveraging diversity as an asset and focused prioritization – are more important skills today than they were when I left.”

29.7%: The portion of Canadian corporations and professional service firms that offer unpaid sabbaticals

6.4%: The portion of Canadian corporations and professional service firms that offer paid sabbaticals

Source: International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans, 2009 survey

Ten cool sabbaticals:

1. Travel Iceland by horseback. Soak away cramps in the hot springs while giving the country much-needed tourist dollars.
2. Experience Canada's North. Learn throat singing and dog sledding.
3. Try out a new career or a job you've always wanted to do.
4. Learn a new language. Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin or Cree.
5. Take your mom or dad back to their native country.
6. Live off the fruits of your land for a year. Learn to love turnips.
7. Show your kids sea turtles and the cloud forests of Costa Rica.
8. Complete a triathlon without passing out.
9. Take a painting and drawing course in Florence, Italy.
10. Form a rock band. Go on tour.

– Adapted from you sabbatical.com's top 100 sabbatical ideas

What to watch for:

For both employers and employees, here are some potential challenges around offering or taking a sabbatical, especially in today's economy:

Scheduling: Having too high a percentage of the work force take a sabbatical in the same year might cause difficulties in covering for absent staff. Time them carefully.

Support from the top: From the start, executives have to be committed. A company can't offer sabbaticals and then resent it when people take them.

Potential attrition: Although it rarely happens, an employee on sabbatical might decide not to return. To reduce the risk, sabbatical policies sometimes include a clause that requires reimbursement of a sabbatical taker's salary while away if he or she leaves within a year after returning.

Budgeting: Companies may be less willing to fully pay for sabbaticals in this leaner environment, so many workers may have to go it alone.

A job to return to: In a risky economic climate, make sure that a position will be guaranteed upon return.

Re-entry: Returning to work after a long break can be intense, but appropriate delegation, planning and client communication should substantially ease this burden. A solid work-coverage process ensures a smooth and painless re-entry.

Sources: The Globe and Mail, yoursabbatical.com.

Websites:

vocationvacations.com

thecareerbreaksite.com

gapyear.com

gapadvice.org

mondochallenge.org

© The Globe and Mail

© Copyright 2009 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

CTVglobemedia

globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc., 444 Front St. W., Toronto, ON Canada M5V 2S9
Phillip Crawley, Publisher