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Vacations Now and Then

Are vacations still “a part of the year, regularly set aside, when normal activities ... are suspended,” as defined on dictionary.com? Who takes them and what do they look like?

By Carol Schiro Greenwald, July 22, 2022

It’s summer, vacation time. I wondered how COVID had impacted lawyers’ plans for vacation. Vacations pre-COVID meant time away from the office for rest, relaxation and inspiration. Sometimes we were available for emergencies, sometimes not.

Post-COVID, many people are rarely in the office. Many work remotely all or part of each work week. Are vacations still “a part of the year, regularly set aside, when normal activities ... are suspended,” as defined on dictionary.com? Who takes them and what do they look like?

I asked my panel. The consensus is that everyone should take time away to recharge and renew, and most of them did. They vacationed within the past year, but for shorter periods of time and closer to home. At the same time, most did not fully disconnect from the office, a key element of the traditional vacation definition. Let’s look at their thinking in more detail.

What counts as a vacation?

“A vacation is a time that I am clear about a change in expectations about work and home life obligations. In the best of circumstances, a vacation includes novelty, opportunities to experience awe and sheer delight, and allows for circumstances to unfold outside my routine and for new ideas to percolate,” says Abby Rosmarin, Berkman Bottger Newman & Schein (<https://www.berkbot.com/>).

Others see vacations in terms of positive family time. For Mark Berman, Ganfer Shore Leeds & Zauderer (<https://ganfershore.com/>), a vacation is “getting away with the entire family and staying in a hotel and sightseeing.” Elissa Hecker, Law Office of Elissa D. Hecker (<https://www.eheckeresq.com/>), wants “time away with family.”

Most respondents define vacations in relation to work responsibilities.

- Doug Singer, Singer Law PLLC (<https://singerlawpllc.com/>), defines vacations as “time off from work that is longer than a weekend.”
- For Alan Schwartz, Law Offices of Alan J. Schwartz, P.C. (<https://www.ajslaw.com/>), “a real vacation means that my ‘away’ message is actually on in my email and that someone else is covering my calls.”
- Mark Seitelman, Mark E. Seitelman Law Offices P.C. (<https://www.seitelman.com/>), defines it as “a planned leave from the office with no set obligations for the office.”

- “Unfortunately, I realize that a vacation for me is time spent away from the office, even if it is just for a day,” says Marilyn Genoa, Genoa & Assoc. P.C. (mail to: mkgenoa@genoaandassociates.com)
- For Sarah Gold, Gold Law Firm (<https://www.goldlawny.com/>), “vacation is when I’m not scheduled to be in the office for more than a day.”
- Jim Landau, Prince Lobel Tye LLP (<https://princelobel.com/>), defines vacation as “time spent doing things that don’t involve getting business or doing business.”

Annamarie Bondi–Stoddard, Pegalis Law Group, LLC (<https://pegalislawgroup.com/>), sees the modern world as too plugged in for a true vacation. “For me, a true ‘vacation’ is a thing of the past. It goes back to a time before cell phones, tablets, and laptops. Back then, vacation meant not thinking about what needed to be done, deadlines, returning phone calls—it was enjoying quality time with my husband and kids, having fun and being truly ‘present’ with no distractions. Present–day vacations do not allow that same degree of freedom from the office and everything that goes with it.”

What kind of vacations did you take?

Most respondents said that if they went away it was for a shorter time than usual and more likely to be closer to home. Also, many felt that planes, and sometimes, hotels, were too risky due to COVID.

At the other end of the spectrum, Zara Watkins, On Point Expertise, (<https://www.onpointexpertise.com/>), has “[a] 100% digital practice so I travel a lot because I can do my work from anywhere. I usually travel for a month to six weeks. Most of that time I will be working while in a fun foreign country; two to three weeks of it will be vacation. I am currently in Europe and will be taking two weeks off completely at the end of July to travel through Poland and the Baltic Countries.”

Do you suspend normal work activities while on vacation?

It’s no surprise that most respondents never fully unplug. At a minimum, they watch their email. Many also allow calls from important clients with major problems.

- Zara Watkins says, “I let the emails seep through. I want to respond to inquiry emails from new clients and follow up question emails from existing clients when necessary. Otherwise, I clear my schedule of deadlines.”
- Abby Rosmarin says, “I try to be responsive to the immediate and urgent needs of my clients. Life for my clients continues whether or not I am on vacation. Depending on the circumstances, I let my clients know how to reach me and my likely availability.”
- Kyle–Beth Hilfer, Hilfer Law (<https://kbhilferlaw.com/>), checks “emails a few times a week to weed out junk and make sure there are no crises. I was more prone to checking email during staycations than true pre–COVID vacations. I do find it helpful to get rid of all the junk email, mark certain items for reading upon return, and set priorities for work that comes in while I’m on vacation. Those practices make the re–entry to work smoother and less chaotic.”

- Mark Berman schedules work around family time. “Clients need to be taken care of, but I take calls before the family gets up and after they go to bed. I do my review of documents when the family is asleep.”
- Charles–Eric Gordon (mail to: Sleuth32@aol.com), Law Office of Charles–Eric Gordon, feels that due to the nature of his work he cannot just cut off client contact. “As a sole practitioner concentrating in locating missing persons, I have to be at least somewhat available to serve my clients. Although I may leave an outgoing voicemail stating that my office is closed, I do provide my email address in the event that ‘the matter is urgent’ and my best clients have my cell phone number.”
- Marilyn Genoa would agree with Charles. “As a small firm practitioner, I have never been able to fully suspended activity, despite trying. For example, while on a trip through the Cotswolds, a client emergency caused the need to take a call from that client as well as from opposing counsel, in order to address and resolve the matter.”

On the other hand, two managing partners said they could never turn off work due to their responsibilities. Alan Schwartz says: “Based upon the nature of my practice and role as Principal and Managing Attorney, I am always on call 24/7/365, because I do not ever want to lose a potential new client or matter simply because I am on vacation, which would make me sorry I went in the first place.”

According to Mark Seitelman, “As the owner of the firm, some normal activities have to be done regardless whether one is on vacation or not. I personally monitor all of our banking daily. I cannot delegate the responsibility to an employee. While on vacation, I might get involved in a strategic decision or two regarding taking in a new case or resolving an old one.”

Do you see vacations as an important component of wellness?

The consensus is that vacations are a key to mental health, creativity, recharging and reducing stress.

- “Vacations are definitely an important part of mental health and can enhance creativity.” (Charles Eric Gordon)
- “It is critical to spend time away with your family for everyone’s personal wellness.” (Mark Berman)
- “Vacations are absolutely an important component of personal wellness. Vacations allow us to get away from it all and recharge our batteries. They help to reduce stress, strengthen family bonds and prevent burnout.” (Annamarie Bondi–Stoddard)
- “A change of scenery, whether it is a week by the ocean or in a vibrant city, nurtures the soul, recharges the body and helps one return to one’s life with fresh views and ideas.” (Alla Roytberg, Roytberg Traum Law and Mediation, P.C. (<https://www.goodlawfirm.com/>))
- “I am a person who works to live, not the other way around. I work so I can travel, both while working and when taking a vacation. Also, I need vacation as a time to step away from the stress of deadlines and managing projects and clear my mind so I can return to work with fresh ideas and a good attitude.” (Zara Watkins)

Will vacations change in the new hybrid work world?

Half said no; the others agreed for a variety of reasons. Annamarie Bondi–Stoddard fears that “the new hybrid, post–COVID office will take away from the traditional vacation. The ability to work from any location now comes with an expectation to be constantly working in some capacity.”

Alla Roytberg sees the impact more positively. “I think people are starting to work breaks into their daily lives more because of remote working. It used to be that you are at a ‘place’ for a certain number of hours during the day and then you go home and shift into the home life. Even though we are technically back to in–person living, people have learned during COVID that they are not required to continue living their lives in a linear way. They can mix and match and not waste hours commuting from point A to point B.”

Elissa Hecker points to new priorities in the hybrid work world. “Although people seem to be working more, I have seen companies and organizations taking wellness and capacity into consideration, as well as mental health, and requiring vacations to avoid burnout. It’s so important to be able to recharge your batteries in order to be able to perform thoughtfully and creatively.”

Thinking about the future of work and the place of vacations in that world, several respondents had interesting ideas.

- “I think governments will have to legislate to enable people to step away from their emails/phones for certain times during vacation and holidays because we are driving ourselves insane with it 24/7. I was thinking of the new European Union law that imposes limits on what businesses can expect with respect to answering emails outside of business hours. Business won’t regulate itself on this issue—i.e., not imposing negative job consequences on someone who doesn’t respond to emails or calls after normal working hours—so state and national governments will have to step in for everyone’s mental health.” (Zara Watkins)
- “I believe it truly will depend on whether or not you can literally turn off or ignore electronic connections during designated vacation times. Personality, as well as type of practice and size of firm, play a very large part in the ability to do so.” (Marilyn Genoa)
- “I think vacations will become increasingly important as the world is becoming more and more stressful.” (Jim Landau)

As the brave new world of changed expectations continues to impinge on traditional law firm culture, there probably will be more and more attention paid to work–life balance—and vacations.

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