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Sabbaticals

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Sabbaticals

Many tout advantages of sabbaticals, such as time to recharge or retool, that increase employee engagement, retention and productivity.

So why do so few workers get to take advantage of this benefit?

Readers of this column have likely noticed my fascination with total rewards. This obviously includes wages and salaries and benefits like life and health insurance. It also includes important attributes of the job, such as working conditions, colleagues and culture. With the year end

upon us and many workplaces closing, reducing hours or accommodating employee vacations because of the holidays, this column focuses on rewards in the form of time away from work that is not so common — sabbaticals.

Faculty Sabbaticals

Sabbaticals are a generous benefit to those workers who have them. And they can clearly be an important part of a total rewards package. Some industries and jobs are much more likely than others to have them; the most recognized, perhaps, is university faculty. A general rule in academia is that after a faculty member accrues six years of service, he/she can take one semester away at full pay (or one year at half pay). Bai Kang and Michael T. Miller acknowledge Harvard University as starting the practice in 1890 (“An Overview of the Sabbatical Leave in Higher Education,” 1999 working paper). They note that by 1930, 178 universities had sabbatical policies. Today, most every competitive college and university has one. The idea is that this is intended to help the faculty members spend concentrated time furthering their research or improving their skills in teaching, practice or service. For example, one of my colleagues is spending this year

learning Mandarin and intends to explore an entirely new research program dealing with employment in China. These activities further the mission of the organization and make the university or college a more successful and interesting place going forward.

Private Sector Sabbaticals

Of course, some companies offer sabbaticals, too. According to inc.com, while 5 percent of firms in the United States offer sabbaticals, 25 percent of the companies listed in “Best Companies to Work For” offer them (“Why Paid Sabbaticals Are Good for Employees and Employers,” inc.com last updated Dec. 25, 2013). Corporate sabbaticals, however, aren’t typically as generous in length as those offered to academics. At the same time, while on sabbatical, most faculty are furthering their research, which is a large part of their job.

Huge companies (e.g., General Mills and American Express) offer sabbaticals, but so do some smaller ones, for example ClifBar (See Jillian Berman, “Why ClifBar Offers Sabbaticals and Other Unconventional Work Perks,” *Huffington Post*, Aug. 26, 2013).

The Chicken and Egg Research Problem

Trying to understand whether sabbaticals increase productivity or profits, even morale or job satisfaction, is a lot more difficult than it seems. To do this well, it is important to have a credible and believable research design. Simply comparing organizations that have these practices with those that do not isn’t going to cut it because of the classic chicken and egg problem. If organizations that offer sabbaticals have higher profits, it could be because they already had higher profits, and the higher profits are just the thing that allows an organization the flexibility to offer sabbaticals. In other words, how do you know which came first, the sabbatical or the higher profits? This research design challenge is there when you look at the return in terms of individual employees, too. Do employees who take sabbaticals appear more productive because sabbaticals are offered to the more productive employees?

Robust quantitative evidence on the impact of sabbaticals is an area in which academic research is notably thin. These research design challenges are real. Researchers in one group recently published a study (conducted within

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the university setting), for which they took great strides to try to address in their research design some of the chicken and egg problem (Oranit Davidson, et al, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, “Sabbatical Leave: Who Gains and How Much?” 95(5), September 2010, 953-964). They studied a matched set of faculty and found positive effects of sabbatical leaves on well-being, but did not study output (for example, publications or teaching evaluations).

Published, robust research analyzing the benefits and costs of sabbaticals in the corporate setting is scarce to nonexistent. I’ve discussed how difficult it is to do good and credible research on human resources in previous columns, including “Does That

Pay Practice Really Have Any Impact?” *workspan*, June 2011. Given the cost of sabbaticals and proponents’ claims of their value, it may be worth really trying to figure out the net benefits to your organization.

Sabbaticals in the Future?

I wonder what the sabbatical landscape will look like in the future. Academia has led the way in sabbaticals, but in higher education there appears to be talk of the sabbatical no longer being a professorial right, but a privilege. With increasing cost pressures in higher education, how will sabbatical programs fare? Knowing better the return on investment of sabbaticals (including retention of top employees) will be important.

The same may hold true for firms. Even if you think that sabbaticals are productive and (in the long run or even short run) cost-effective in terms of decreased turnover, increased productivity and the like, with increasing emphasis on short-term goals, what case can be made for their bottom-line value the next time business slows and cost savings need to be found? Are sabbaticals a cost-savings or a benefit to put on the chopping block? Perhaps now is the time to build the research evidence. [WR](#)



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