

Take leave for your senses

All work and no play makes Jack and Jill dull people and may seriously damage their health. Firms are realising that they do not get the best out of over-worked, stressed employees and are starting to insist that staff take their holidays. James Macneil examines changing attitudes in the workplace and, overleaf, Jessica Cargill Thompson tries out a National Trust working holiday.

WITH HINDSIGHT, BRYAN G SHOULD have seen the stroke coming. For six years he had been working harder than he ever had in his life. A 42-year-old director with a medium-sized engineering contractor, he found the firm's demands on his time unceasing. Every task had a deadline of yesterday and, it seemed, the hardest ones always landed on his desk.

At first, Bryan saw the extra tasks piling up in his in-tray as a mark of his colleagues' respect. Then he noticed that everyone else was working flat out too. His fellow directors were reluctant to hire extra staff – they needed to keep margins down in a fiercely competitive market and, in any case, profits were shrinking.

For Bryan, this meant mountains of work. He lurched from running one marginal contract to the next. Twelve-hour days were the norm, free weekends were a rarity, and he couldn't remember the last time he took a proper holiday.

Then it happened, ironically on the first short break he had managed for years. Late on the second evening away from the office, he remembers his body going numb before he collapsed. The next thing he knew, he was waking up in hospital, partly paralysed from a stroke.

Bryan is only one of a legion of stressed employees who believe their jobs demand gruelling hours, and don't think they have time for holidays. They may also believe that such a dedicated attitude will impress their bosses.

Many people would dismiss such attitudes as ridiculous, but the fact is that personnel managers are increasingly recognising them as a serious problem. The latest research into stress in the workplace has proved that not taking the breaks you are due actually reduces your efficiency and can endanger your health.

Rising working hours are a growing trend. In a recent survey of 407 managers

carried out by the Institute of Personnel and Development, more than 75% said their workload had increased significantly in the past 12 months, and 54% said they couldn't meet deadlines within their usual hours of employment. For 42% of senior managers and 33% of middle managers, pressure was so intense that last year they took less holiday than they were entitled to.

Experts on stress in the workplace back up these research findings with personal observation. Peter Martin, a management consultant with Arlington Associates, says: "I have met people who regularly work from seven in the morning until 10 at night."

He adds that company culture is often to blame. "People feel trapped, particularly when there is a macho culture," he says. "They daren't go home early, let alone go on holiday."

Lowering your resistance

Vanda Green, a management adviser with work and welfare think-tank the Industrial Society, warns that such conditions can have a detrimental effect on employees' health. According to Green, who specialises in stress-related problems in the workplace, the link between overwork and ill-health is well proven. "It has been shown that stress lowers the immune system, making you more likely to catch something," she says. "This can be anything from colds and viruses to strokes and heart attacks."

Green adds that as stress builds, individuals become less capable of taking a break to fight it. "Not taking holidays is in itself often a sign of stress. People tend to lose their sense of perspective and assume that if they take a break, their colleagues will see them as weaklings."

Although construction consultants and contractors are subject to unrelenting pressures on margins, they are beginning to recognise the importance of their

employees' holidays. Speaking to *Building* last month, Mike Jeffries, chief executive of multidisciplinary consultant WS Atkins, said: "It's essential to encourage staff to take their holidays. Because of pressure on fees, there has been a tendency for people to work longer and longer hours, but it becomes counter-productive."

Experts believe there is also a benefit for companies in ensuring that their employees get a break from the office. Management training consultant Sheila Ritchie says: "It has been shown that if someone begins a task and then takes a short break after they have learned it, when they begin again their performance will be at a higher level than when they stopped. This is because they are able to release the tension that has built up from mistakes they made first time round."

John Eyers, personnel manager at consulting engineer Mott MacDonald, says that time off is seen as important by the firm. "We are particularly keen that senior staff have at least a week's continuous break every year rather than just days here and there," he says.

Ritchie agrees with Mott MacDonald's approach. "When you are working, you build up tension. This takes time to be released, which is why at the start of a holiday it can be hard to wind down."

In some organisations, this should become easier. Tarmac Professional Services' director of human resources, John Manson, says modern organisational culture is starting to discourage a workaholic lifestyle. "There is less value being put on working long hours and more on working harder for shorter lengths of time. People are starting to look at colleagues who spend long hours in the office and ask why they can't organise themselves better."

Many companies encourage staff to take holidays by having senior management set an example, but some are more proactive. Employees at Higgs & Hill who haven't managed a break this year can expect a phone call in September. "We remind them that they lose their holidays if they don't take them, and we say we don't want that to happen," says personnel director Ivan Ezekiel.

As for Bryan G, after six months off he returned to the same job. He still spends long days at the office, but now at least he makes sure he takes his holidays.



WHICH FIRMS GIVE THE BIGGEST BREAKS?

IT MAY COME AS A SURPRISE to many employees, but there is no statutory requirement for UK employers to give their workers any holidays at all.

In spite of this, most companies are benevolent enough to give their staff four to five weeks (20-25 days) a year. This is supplemented by eight public holidays – the lowest of any European country. Spain and Germany top the European public holiday league with 14 days each.

Firms in the construction industry generally pitch their holiday allowances at the upper end of this bracket and this is often supplemented with allowances for long service. But the time of year staff can take their holiday is often limited by mandatory shutdowns.

For instance, staff joining Tarmac Professional Services get 1.5 days a month, plus the Christmas shutdown for their first part year and then 26 days in their

first full year, starting from 1 January. Four of these days must be taken between Christmas and new year, "so staff can decide when to take the other 22," says TPS human resources manager, John Manson.

After five full years, the holiday entitlement rises to 29 days including the shutdown and, after 11 years, it becomes 31 days. There is no formal allowance for time in lieu or overtime – "doing the hours to do the job is de rigeur," says Manson – but local managers are allowed to exercise discretion in extreme cases.

Higgs & Hill's approach is similar. Employees get a standard 24 days with an increase of two days at five years, a further three days at 10 years and five on completion of two decades. Scotland-based contractor Morrison Construction gives employees a straight 25 days plus public holidays.

Consulting engineer Mott MacDonald is slightly less generous and gives a standard 20 days, plus

two days, which must be taken at a time set by the company. This rises to 27 days after 10 years. Hertfordshire-based QS and project manager Currie and Brown gives its staff 20 days' holiday.

Manson, who recently joined the Tarmac subsidiary from an electronics firm, says the construction industry appears to be more generous with holidays than other firms. This generosity is tempered by the fact that, particularly for contractors and site-based consultants, there are enforced breaks at Christmas and Easter.

David Yeandle, head of employment affairs at the Engineering Employers Federation – the industry body covering 5000 engineering firms ranging from Rolls-Royce to small metalworking firms – says the norm in that sector is 25 days. This often includes two enforced shutdowns, one at Christmas and one in August.