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Feed Your Brain

Steven J. Harper, The Am Law Daily

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It's August. Vacation time. But how many people—especially hard-driving attorneys—are taking real vacations? Distressingly few, I suspect.

Many people who think they're taking time off are kidding themselves. They are simply moving their work venues to a sandy beach or resort swimming pool. In a recent *New York Times* article, ["Hit the Reset Button in Your Brain."](#) research scientist Daniel Levitin observes that essential revitalization of the brain comes only when a person enjoys a complete break from the daily demands of a job.

Previously, I've written about the [myth of multitasking](#)—the fallacy that the human mind can perform several tasks simultaneously. I've also discussed scientific studies proving that we underestimate the [extent to which distractions](#)—moving back and forth between tasks—undermine our productivity. Today we add another insight into how brains work and the implications for everyday life.

Two Roads, Different Destinations

Levitin's research shows that our minds switch between two dominant "modes of attention." One is a task-positive network, which engages when we focus on a specific activity, undistracted by anything else. In contrast, the brain's task-negative network is akin to daydreaming. The mind wanders but, in doing so, achieves its greatest moments of insight.

Importantly, when one network is working, the other is not. Likewise, constantly moving back and forth between networks—as multitaskers mistakenly think they can—is inefficient. It wastes mental energy.

Lawyers and Vacations

The relationship of the two networks to most attorneys' lives is obvious. The billable hour regime that dominates today's delivery of legal services rewards task-positive behavior. More time spent on an activity means more revenue for the law firm. Devising ways to keep attorneys engaged so that the hourly meter is always running—day, night, weekends and during so-called vacations—

becomes a key institutional objective unto itself.

Meanwhile, every minute that the brain spends in the task-positive mode is a minute that can never be available to the task-negative network. Vacations are supposed to be a task-negative period. But engaging in task-positive behavior during such times makes that impossible. It also interferes with the brain's ability to recharge itself.

Levitin concludes, "If we can train ourselves to take regular vacations—true vacations without work ... we will be in a more powerful position to start solving some of the world's big problems. And to be happier and well rested while we're doing it."

Another Reason to Make Vacations Real

When I was 14 years old, we took our first family vacation. With my three younger siblings and me in the back seat of the first new car my father ever owned—a 1968 Oldsmobile 98 sedan—we drove from our hometown of Minneapolis to the Black Hills of South Dakota.

In those days, the things that keep the brain's task-positive network engaged outside the office didn't exist. No cellphones, laptops or Internet. With our task-negative networks free to roam, a simple road trip to see Mt. Rushmore became an unforgettable experience that remains a cherished memory.

My dad wasn't a lawyer. He was a trucker—an over-the-road driver who had an interesting [run-in with Jimmy Hoffa](#) in the early 1960s and eventually moved himself up to a desk job. Except for the South Dakota trip, we didn't take two-week vacations, because he'd convinced his employer to pay him double for staying on the job instead. It was an understandable decision. Even with my mother working full-time, making ends meet was a continuing challenge.

How to Measure Costs and Benefits

In the end, the financial boost from two weeks of "double pay" each year made only a temporary difference to our family. Most of today's lawyers are working for a more subtle form of "double pay": More billable hours usually translate into higher compensation. But is the marginal return worth the sacrifice? What's a person's leisure time worth?

My father's calculation was incomplete. He failed to consider his own need for time off and the benefits accruing to an entire family as it spent task-negative time together. Attorneys are especially prone to making the same mistake. Technology conspires with institutional incentives to make it easy. If you want to become a better thinker and a more productive lawyer, take a vacation—a real one.

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