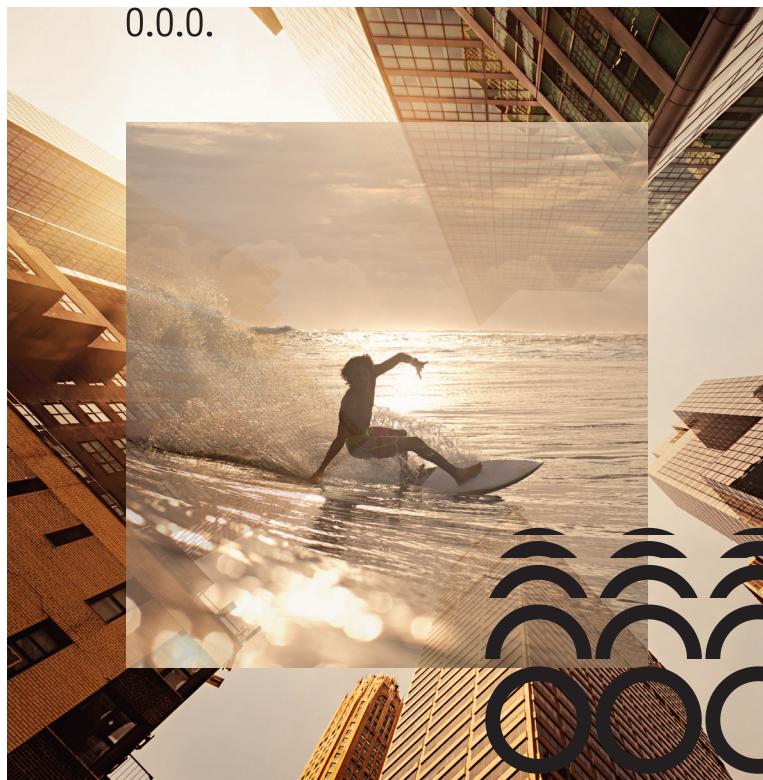


# Out of office

Although the practice of taking sabbaticals is rare in corporate Australia, the benefits are clear, as these converts tell **Sangeeta Kocharekar**.

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IT WAS 2005 and Darrell Wade was sitting under a tree in the African savanna when it hit him: Intrepid Travel, the company he'd co-founded, was contributing significantly to the planet's carbon emissions.

That realisation kicked off a company-wide effort and, in 2010, Intrepid became 100 per cent carbon-neutral, an achievement that can be traced back to one thing: Wade's annual three-month sabbatical. "If I hadn't been away on holiday at that particular time, that concept just wouldn't have happened," he says. "You tend not to think laterally when you're not having an extended break."

A 2018 poll conducted by the Australian Human Resources Institute found that Australians work an average of 55 hours a week, which is more than two workdays in excess of the 38-hour working week introduced in 1983. "There's also lots of material that has found senior executives are doing 60, sometimes 70 or 80 hours a week," says Peter Wilson, chair of the institute. "That has edged up in the past 15 years." He also notes a recent trend of large employers "clamping down" on their staff's untaken annual leave. "Some organisations had people who'd accrued 10 years' or more annual leave."

At the same time, Wilson says, employers have become more flexible. "Around 2012 to 2013, you started to see actions to make it more amenable for anybody going through a change in circumstances in work or life... to take off." One such action is the "negotiated sabbatical" – when a person's salary is spaced out over a period of time that includes a long break.

People who choose to take extended leave are, like Wade, "achieving personal objectives in a career in a way that hadn't been contemplated 15 to 20 years ago", says Wilson. He believes employees are better understanding their value and negotiating more. "Employers are responding because they know they need to."

In the TED Talk *The Power of Time Off*, viewed more than three million times, designer Stefan Sagmeister points out that sticky notes were born out of "personal time" mandated by the company that invented them, 3M. Sagmeister closes his New York studio for one year after every seven years. He says that, following the first one-year shutdown, everything his studio produced in the next seven years resulted from thinking that occurred during his sabbatical. He's now taken three.



Jeremy Blackshaw has also taken three sabbaticals. He's a managing partner at law firm Minter Ellison, which offers partners eight weeks off every six years and contributes financially towards that. The biggest benefit for Blackshaw has been a strengthening of his relationships with family and friends.

He has surfed in the Maldives with mates, holidayed in Colombia with his wife and tripped around Asia and Europe with his family. He says his children have enjoyed spending a large chunk of time with a father who's much less distracted and stressed. In turn, he's relished the opportunity to see them grow. "You learn a lot more about them as people and what they're doing," he says. "You start talking about things you wouldn't have if you were worrying about the minutiae of day-to-day existence – school for them and work for you." While in Athens on sabbatical, his middle daughter, who had been studying classics at school, gave her family a tour of the Acropolis.

Uninterrupted family time also prompted Dale Beaumont, CEO of education program Business Blueprint, to adopt his practice of taking regular sabbaticals. Inspired by *The 4-Hour Workweek* by American author Timothy Ferriss, as well as conversations with older friends who'd "made it" but regretted missing out on personal moments while doing so, Beaumont and his wife began working two months on, one month off.

In the decade since, they've taken their two boys around Europe and to New York and Antarctica. As in Wade's case, Beaumont's sabbaticals have paid off with fresh ideas for his company. "One of the things about travelling is that often you see what other

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businesses are working on and you think, 'How could that apply back home?'"

He says his long breaks have also made his employees more self-reliant, giving his business a competitive advantage. "If you're always there, you weaken the business. You stop people from thinking for themselves. If the business is going to become successful, it has to survive without your constant input and grow beyond you." Long-term, he says, his absences build a "stronger, more resilient and, one day, more saleable business".

A 2017 study by the Society for Human Resource Management found that most of the 61 leaders surveyed reported that, upon return from their sanctioned sabbatical, their interim leaders were more effective and responsible. Many of the interim leaders maintained some responsibilities and a number of the returned leaders said their relationship was more collaborative.

Susan Bannigan, CEO of Westpac Foundation and Scholars, says her first sabbatical, a four-month tour of Western Australia in a campervan with her husband and three young children in 2009, made her a better leader because it encouraged her staff to also take extended breaks. "We all need to check in with ourselves every now and then and ensure we're getting the balance right in our life and goals," she says.

The break also had a profound impact on her career, prompting her to reconsider her direction. "I was on a path I probably wouldn't have deviated from," she says. "A path of leadership, finance and running businesses. I needed to have some sort of purpose beyond that trajectory." Now, in addition to her full-time role at Westpac, she serves as chair of the Business/Higher Education Round Table.

Bannigan's future plans include another campervan trip with her husband – without the children this time – and a secondment

to Jawun, an organisation supported by Westpac to share employees' professional skills with Indigenous communities.

No-one suggests that taking a leave of absence is seamless. "It can be hard to switch off when you start," says Dale Beaumont. "Sometimes you can't help checking emails or calling your team to ensure they're doing things right."

Susan Bannigan adds, "What stops everyone is thinking, 'I don't even know how I'd get started' or 'I can't take that much time out of work'. And I'm like, 'Well, what if you could? What would you do?' Once you've got that, things fall into place."

For Darrell Wade, regular time-off is non-negotiable. Now executive chair at Intrepid, he and his co-founder, group director Geoff Manchester, have been taking three months of "no-questions-asked" leave each year since they started the company nearly 30 years ago. "We call it holidays but it's turned into sabbaticals to the degree that we really use that time to travel and think about where trends in the industry are going and what opportunities are available to us."

Like his carbon emissions epiphany, his idea for city tours also came to him while on a break. He was strolling through Bangkok sampling street food when it dawned on him: Intrepid didn't offer this experience. Today, Intrepid offshoot Urban Adventures has an estimated worth of between \$US200 million and \$US300 million (about \$275 million and \$412 million).

In 2017, Intrepid had estimated revenue of \$US341 million (about \$468 million) and last year is expected to be even higher, with January 2018 their biggest month of bookings ever. "Some people just think I'm a lazy bugger who doesn't want to spend time working, which is possibly true," says Wade, laughing. "But there are real commercial benefits." ●

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