

CIO Careers

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The Myth (and Reality) of the Unplugged Vacation



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If you're like most CIOs, you didn't get to take an unplugged vacation this year, and you probably haven't taken one since the advent of email. However, some CIOs say a truly unplugged vacation is possible, with a little bit of planning.

The CIOs who do take unplugged vacations aren't worried that they'll be forgotten, or worse, overshadowed by their staffers who take over their responsibilities in their absence. Instead, they view their abilities to take an unplugged vacation as a chance to showcase how well they've trained their organizations to function without them.

Consider Mike Connelly, vice president of IT for FranklinCovey, a Salt Lake City consultancy that specializes in effectiveness training. Every year, Connelly takes an unplugged, multi-family vacation on a houseboat in Lake Powell, which borders Arizona and Utah.

While "some people think being indispensable is job security, I don't view it that way," he says. "My feeling is, you get your organization running as well as you can, such that the organization still runs without you."

If your company decides "things are working so well they don't really need you, you've done a really, really good job at organizing," he adds. That could lead them to conclude that you might be good at managing bigger or different organizations.

Connelly is not exactly fearless when it comes to being unplugged for a whole week. This year, he recounts, his unplugged vacation nearly gave him a panic attack, because it was the first year he did not have the luxury of having IT staffers who were embedded in certain business units. FranklinCovey has had such positions in the past; but it has fewer staff this year, so those positions were eliminated.

To make do, Connelly informally assigned some of his remaining staffers to interface with business units in his absence. He figured they could handle everything, including some outstanding issues with a project that launched a few weeks before his long-planned vacation. Yet a part of him remained worried.



On the first day, the vacationing families loaded up their houseboat with supplies and ski boats, then motored for a few hours before dropping anchor for the evening.

As the crew prepared for dinner, Connelly realized how completely unavailable he was. "It was getting dark and I'm sitting there with no access to email, no access to cell phone, no access to anything," he recalls. "At first, I was thinking, I shouldn't be here. I have things I need to be available for."

"I almost wanted to get back in the boat, go back to town and get a hotel. Of course I didn't."

By the next day, Connelly was more relaxed. As it turned out, he had no reason to worry. When he returned from vacation, there were no unpleasant surprises.

Next year though, for added insurance, Connelly plans to "create a little more definition around the contact points." In addition to simply telling his business executives and his IT executives whom to contact, he'll also circulate a contact matrix that explains which IT staffers are responsible for which problems, and whom to contact in their absence.

As with any advice, actual mileage may vary. Some of our CIOs said they limited themselves to *mostly* (but not completely) unplugged vacations, so they could take vacations they otherwise couldn't break away for, or so they could dig into email as it arrived to prevent their inboxes from being overstuffed when they returned. Others said they have stayed away for as long as seven weeks. (You can see your fellow CIOs experience with unplugged vacations in our Answers section).

Susan Bethanis, chief executive of Mariposa Leadership, an executive coaching firm based in San Francisco, empathizes with CIOs who feel that it isn't realistic for them to remain totally incommunicado for a week or more.

But even these CIOs can achieve an almost-unplugged vacation, Bethanis says. In addition to developing competent lieutenants, delegating and "over-communicating" before you leave, "establish one person to be the contact point" in your absence, she advises. That way, when you do check in, you need only call one person to find out what you need to know. The same person can forward your most important emails.

If you must phone or email from vacation, make a pact with your family and friends that you will only work during certain hours that you establish in advance. Also important: "Leave the Blackberry in the hotel when you go to the beach," Bethanis advises.

Even if you are unplugged, there is always the danger that you will pollute that vacation feeling by thinking and worrying too much about work. "Relax and be present. Make the most of the moments you do have on vacation. Refrain from being in both worlds," Bethanis says.

For those who find the last bit of advice impossible, she adds: "At least, don't act distracted."