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Embracing work breaks: Recovering from work stress



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According to recent reports from the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health (NIOSH), as many as 40% of U.S. employees report their jobs as being “very or extremely” stressful. Despite this fact, many U.S. employees end the year with unused vacation days! These and other examples show how uncertain economic times and increased work demands impact employees’ work and home lives. The costs of work stress appear not just in lost productivity and absences, but also in impaired employee well-being and health. Because stressful work environments may – to a certain extent – be unavoidable, recent research has made significant strides toward understanding the processes and the factors relevant for unwinding and recovering from work demands and for creating a healthy work-life balance. Not surprisingly, research to date suggests that a key to unwinding and combating the effects of work stress is...taking breaks!

In this article, we examine the role of breaks from work (vacations, weekends, evenings, and breaks at work) in employee recovery and unwinding from work. We review findings from organizational psychology and occupational health psychology to address the following questions: First, do breaks from work have measurable effects on employee well-being and job performance? Second, are there specific experiences and activities associated with work breaks that impact the recovery process? Furthermore, are there specific individual or organizational factors that can hinder or facilitate the process of recovery during work breaks? Based on these empirical findings, we will discuss implications for management practice.

RECOVERY DURING WORK BREAKS

Breaks from work take many forms, ranging from several days or weeks off of work, as in the case of vacations or

sabbaticals, to very short breaks lasting only an hour or less. Common among these breaks is the opportunity for employees to step away from their work and experience, for however long, the absence of work-related demands. We believe that it is precisely this absence of work-related demands that allows for the process of recovery from work to occur. Specifically, when work demands are removed – for example, during evenings after work – employees have the opportunity to replenish their psychological resources (e.g., energy, positive mood) that may have been lost during work, due to effort expended in the process of performing work tasks and coping with work-related demands. In turn, the ability to recover is presumed to directly relate to employees’ well-being and health, as well as employees’ performance capacity (i.e., an employee’s readiness to perform, attentional capacity, and/or feelings of being focused, energized, and motivated to work).

So, what makes for a good break? How does it occur? Are there circumstances, experiences, or activities that facilitate, or hinder effective recovery? And, does effective employee recovery really matter for organizations? The answers to these questions appear to depend—at least partially—on the activities one engages in during their breaks from work, as well as the broader psychological experiences these activities bring about. For example, recovery *activities* might include taking a walk or reading a book, while recovery *experiences* would group activities such as these under the common experience of relaxation. By looking at the recovery process in this way, researchers are able to not only identify specific activities important for recovery, but are also able to account for the fact that individuals might experience different activities in different ways (e.g., rock climbing might be relaxing for some and stress-inducing for others). In the following subsections, we review recent empirical findings related to recovery activities and experiences across differing lengths of time away from work.

TYPES OF WORK BREAKS

Vacations

Perhaps the most obvious breaks from work are vacations. In most organizations, employees are allotted a specific number of days, or hours per year, that they are encouraged to take as time away from work to “recharge their batteries.” The assumption is that providing vacation time means employees will come back to work reinvigorated, re-energized, and ready to work. The Internet subscription service company Netflix believes so much in this philosophy that they have adopted vacation policies that allow employees to take as much time off as they like. In addition to better performance, so they argue, these policies help attract and retain top talent. But, do employees really benefit from taking vacations? If so, are there certain aspects of vacations that are more or less beneficial for employees in terms of subsequent well-being and job performance?

To date, research on employee recovery during vacation generally finds that employee well-being and performance capacity increases from before to immediately after vacation. However, unfortunately, those positive effects seem to “fade out” relatively quickly (i.e., within a few weeks after vacation). This pattern of findings emerges across a variety of countries (e.g., Israel, Germany, Netherlands, U.S.) as well as across different occupations (e.g., clerical employees, academic employees, industrial plant workers, teachers). For example, in a study of employees from an electronics firm in Israel, employees felt less burned out (i.e., less exhausted and less disengaged) after vacation compared with right before vacation. However, feelings of burnout returned to their pre-vacation levels within three weeks of returning to work. While these findings may be somewhat discouraging in the short-term, it is important to note that research has also shown that not taking vacations for several years is associated with increased cardiovascular risk. Therefore, it may be that while the positive effects of vacations fade out relatively quickly, regular vacations may be protecting against the long-term health effects of chronic work stress.

Beyond the positive links with well-being, employees report higher work engagement and job performance right after the vacation. While vacations generally seem to increase employee well-being and performance, those benefits may be enhanced or impaired through specific experiences during vacation as well as the factors present upon returning to work. For example, the positive effects of vacation are hindered by high levels of workload upon returning to work. In essence, a greater number of demands placed on the employee upon their return may accelerate the fade-out of vacation effects. Additionally, not every vacation may be a positive experience for every employee. For example, in a study of workers in the Netherlands, as much as 23% of the study participants reported experiencing no positive effects from their vacation, and 17% of the workers actually reported a decline in their health and well-being after vacation.

To better understand how vacations may be more or less beneficial for employees, research on recovery and unwinding from work has begun to examine specific factors and experiences related to the vacation that may impact

employee well-being and performance capacity. For example, relevant factors may be the length (number of days) or the location (staying at home vs. leaving town) of the vacation. Although, research has not yet been able to indicate the ideal length of vacation or the advantages of leaving versus staying at home during time off, it has identified a number of activities and experiences that seem to be important for maximizing the beneficial effects of vacation. For instance, a study of school teachers, found that having relaxing experiences (e.g., going for walks, reading books) during vacation was related to feeling less emotionally drained and more engaged at work after vacation. In another study, engaging in experiences that involved learning or broadening one's horizons (i.e., mastery) was associated with reduced exhaustion.

On the other hand, thinking about the negative aspects of one's job (i.e., negative work reflection) during vacation has been associated with greater burnout, more health complaints, and lower job performance after vacation. Additionally, having to deal with “non-work hassles” (i.e., ongoing day-to-day demands such as dealing with car trouble or arguing with a spouse during the vacation) is linked to greater exhaustion after vacation.

In summary, vacations appear to be an important time for employees to replenish resources and recover both physically and mentally from work-related demands. Taking vacations is associated with increased well-being and job performance upon returning to work, although these effects seem to fade out within a few weeks. Significant progress has been made in identifying how different activities and experiences that one engages in during time off impact the beneficial effects of vacations. Relaxing, avoiding negative work-related thoughts, and engaging in experiences that provide opportunities for learning or growth are especially important for recovery from work. Worrying about work or having to cope with substantial non-work hassles appears to impair the recovery process during vacation by additionally draining individual resources.

Weekends

While it would be nice to schedule a vacation from work whenever we are beginning to feel a bit burned out, or in need of recovery, the reality is that most employees have only a limited amount of vacation days each year. Rather, the weekend is used by many as a time to recover from work demands and to regain energy that translates into employee well-being and that can be invested into work. Much like research on vacations, the focus of researchers has been aimed at understanding whether or not recovery can, and does occur over the weekend, and which specific factors (e.g., activities, experiences, or otherwise) impact the recovery process. Employees who do not completely recover during the weekend (i.e., they feel that a free weekend is not enough time to recover from the work week) over time are at an increased risk for depressive symptoms, fatigue, energy loss, and cardiovascular disease.

What makes for a “good weekend” in the sense that it translates into higher employee well-being and job performance during the following workweek? Thinking about the positive aspects of one's work (i.e., positive work reflection)

is associated with higher levels of well-being and job performance after the weekend. More specifically, positively thinking about one's work has been shown to predict higher levels of proactive behavior, creativity, and helping others at work, as well as lower levels of exhaustion and disengagement during the following workweek. Spending time engaging in joint activities with a partner during the weekend is linked with increased positive mood and lower exhaustion at the beginning of the work week.

Furthermore, getting a chance to not think about work at all (i.e., psychological detachment from work) fosters a sense of happiness and serenity in employees. Employees report feeling more refreshed (i.e., "feeling recovered") after a weekend in which they were able to detach from work-related demands. In addition, psychological detachment during the weekend is linked to more proactive behaviors at work during the following work week.

Using the weekend to pursue activities that are relaxing as well as activities that provide opportunities for mastery or growth (e.g., learning a new hobby, taking on a challenge) is related to better mood. Relaxation over the weekend, similar to psychologically detaching from work, seems to promote a sense of happiness and self-assurance in employees, and also reduces negative emotions such as fear, hostility, and sadness. Employees also report lower levels of exhaustion and higher levels of vigor after a relaxing weekend. Furthermore, mastery experiences show similar positive effects as detaching from work and relaxation in increasing employee happiness.

In contrast, having to deal with non-work "hassles" over the weekend, such as conflicts with other people, financial problems, or other demands, is detrimental for employee recovery. For instance, employees experiencing hassles over the weekend report greater disengagement and exhaustion at work and lower overall levels of well-being at the beginning of the following workweek. These hassles are also linked to an increase in negative emotions, such as hostility, fear, and sadness. Furthermore, weekend hassles also seem to be associated with lower job performance and less proactive behaviors at work during the following workweek.

In summary, it seems that specific experiences (e.g., relaxing, mentally disengaging from work, mastery experiences) during the weekend can help "recharge one's batteries." However, certain other experiences during the weekend (e.g., not being able to mentally disengage from work, dealing with financial or relationship problems) can manifest themselves during the following workweek in the form of exhaustion, negative mood, and lower performance capacity.

Evenings After Work

In addition to engaging in recovery from work during longer breaks, like vacations and weekends, unwinding from work on a day-to-day basis is critical. This is especially true for employees who have demanding jobs. Specific job demands, such as high time pressure, overtime, or dealing with difficult customers, can drain an individual's resources and may contribute to lower employee well-being. Lower well-being includes increased feelings of fatigue and emotional exhaustion, all of which can also be linked to increased rumination about work and poorer sleep. How do employees best recover

from work demands and unwind at the end of a workday? And do these processes impact employee experiences and behaviors the following workday?

So far, research examining recovery during evenings after work shows that engaging in activities associated with "low effort" (such as reading a magazine), with socializing with others, or with physical activity during evening hours, is associated with higher employee well-being, an increased sense of vigor, positive mood, and less fatigue at bedtime. In contrast, engaging in work-related activities during evening hours after work relates to lower well-being. Accordingly, employees who used their Smartphone shortly before bedtime reported reduced sleep quality as compared to those who did not use their Smartphone. Finally, household activities seem to not impact employees' well-being at bedtime. Volunteering is associated with a sense of mastery and spending time exercising is related to greater psychological detachment and better mood at the end of the day.

With regard to psychological experiences during evenings after work, opportunities for mentally distancing oneself from work (i.e., psychological detachment), for mastery experiences, and for relaxation, all seem to be associated with higher positive mood the next morning.

While certain activities and experiences during evenings after work seem to affect employee well-being, they can also translate into performance capacity at work the following day. For example, when feeling recovered in the morning, employees report higher levels of work engagement, higher job performance, and a greater willingness to be proactive and help others during the workday. In addition, employees who feel recovered in the morning report that their job requires less effort. Furthermore, feeling recovered in the morning may actually help employees deal with job demands more effectively. Specifically, one study found that demands at work were associated with higher engagement throughout the workday (i.e., feeling highly vigorous, dedicated, and absorbed in one's work), but only for those employees who reported feeling recovered at the start of the workday. In other words, feeling recovered at the start of the workday may help employees confront demands at work (e.g., time pressure) in a way that facilitates high levels of engagement throughout the day.

Another important experience that is highly relevant for recovery from work on a day-to-day basis is sleep. The quantity, as well as the quality of sleep—or lack thereof—can have powerful effects on both well-being and performance at work. Sleep helps employees restore and replenish important individual resources that are especially important for effortful behaviors (such as those at work). Therefore, lack of adequate sleep (especially over several or more days), can lead to decrements in both emotional and mental functioning that can ultimately translate into negative individual and organizational outcomes. For example, low sleep quantity and quality have been associated with poorer concentration, lower job satisfaction, work motivation, and task performance, as well as with increased absences from work and increased number of injuries at work. The relationships between sleep and work outcomes may be more complex than previously thought. For example, a recent large-scale U.S. study found that employees who spent more time on work-related tasks (at work or at home) and on addressing family demands spent less time sleeping. Thus, while poor

sleep seems to affect performance-related outcomes at work, performance-related behaviors also seem to contribute to sleep.

At Work

One may wonder if the same processes that occur during work breaks away from work (such as vacations, weekends, and evenings) apply to break periods while *at work*? Specifically, what keeps employees energized throughout the workday? After all, employees do not spend every moment at work engaging in behaviors dedicated to the fulfillment of job-related tasks. Behaviors can range from performance-related behaviors to those relevant for maintaining the employees' health and wellness, such as taking lunch breaks or rest breaks. These breaks can vary both in length and structure. While research examining recovery processes at work is still sparse, we believe it is a growing stream of research with implications for management practice.

One common at-work break is the lunch break, during which employees are allowed and encouraged to halt their work in the middle of the workday. Depending on an employee's work schedule, "lunch breaks" may not always be during lunch time. However, they are usually in the middle of one's workday or shift, are between 20 and 60 min long, and employees are expected to use them to eat, use the bathroom, rest, etc. The limited research on lunch breaks so far indicates that lunch breaks do not seem to increase employee well-being across the board. Instead, specific experiences during lunch breaks seem to enable higher performance capacity after the break. Specifically, employees who report higher levels of relaxation and mastery during the break experience higher attentiveness and less fatigue, immediately after lunch. Furthermore, employees who engaged in respite activities during breaks, such as socializing or napping, felt more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions after their breaks. Thus, in and of themselves, lunch breaks may not improve well-being, but rather actively seeking out activities that may enhance the likelihood of experiencing critical recovery experiences may be crucial for recovery during these breaks. In contrast, employees who engaged in work activities, such as preparing work materials for the next meeting, during breaks experienced more negative emotions later.

Not all breaks are as structured as the lunch break, where the scheduling and activities are relatively pre-established. Employees often insert shorter breaks (so called "micro-breaks") throughout the workday to help stay energized (i.e., alleviate fatigue and physical discomfort). From a manager's perspective, while these breaks may be important for maintaining employee well-being throughout the workday, the time spent away from work due to breaks may be seen as detrimental to employee performance. After all, the time spent *not* working results in less time to complete the same amount of work. However, research in blue collar occupations so far suggests otherwise – meaning that short rest breaks either have no impact on employee job performance, or even improve employee job performance.

Recently, attention has been directed toward examining specific strategies that employees use during micro-breaks to stay energized during the workday with the intention of

uncovering the particular activities and experiences that maximize employee well-being and performance capacity. For example, common break activities such as drinking coffee or smoking cigarettes may, on the surface, increase employee vitality. However, the health detriments of smoking (e.g., cardiovascular complications, cancer onset) and coffee (e.g., nervousness, anxiety, and sleep disturbances) outweigh the health benefits from taking frequent breaks. Findings from a study including business consulting and software development employees indicate that work-related micro-break activities seem to be more strongly related to employees' sense of feeling energized at work. Specifically, activities related to learning something new, creating meaning, and building positive relationships at work are associated with higher experienced energy and less fatigue. In contrast, micro-breaks including non-work-related activities (e.g., checking personal e-mails) are linked to lower levels of energy. These findings seem counterintuitive at first. However, these findings possibly indicate that the short time frame of micro-breaks limits the positive effects of non-work-related activities. Thus, work-related energy management strategies (such as creating positive relationships at work) may be more beneficial during micro-breaks, while non-work-related strategies may be more helpful during longer breaks (e.g., lunch breaks or evenings after work) (Table 1).

COMMON FINDINGS ACROSS DIFFERENT TYPES OF WORK BREAKS

Our work, as well as that of others in the field of recovery from work, suggests that specific activities and experiences during breaks play an important role in "recharging one's batteries" after coping with the exigencies of work. Adequate recovery from work demands in turn is associated with increased employee well-being, performance capacity, and performance-related outcomes at work. Across the different types of work breaks we discussed there are a number of experiences that research has identified as especially important to recovery from work. Perhaps the most consistent finding is that engaging in relaxing experiences is linked to increased employee well-being regardless of the length of the break (e.g., vacation, weekend, evening, lunch breaks). More specifically, we find that relaxation is associated with positive mood, a sense of vigor and attentiveness, as well as with less fatigue and negative emotions. Similarly, pursuing opportunities to mentally and physical distance oneself from work (i.e., psychological detachment) appears to play an important role in promoting recovery and subsequent well-being during breaks *AWAY* from work (e.g., vacations, weekends, evenings). When considering employee job performance, the relationship is curvilinear: very low and very high levels of psychological detachment are detrimental for job performance, while moderate levels appear to be most beneficial. Furthermore, findings suggest that during very short breaks while at work (i.e., micro-breaks), mentally detaching from work may be less useful in terms of benefiting well-being and performance. Rather, engaging in activities related to work in some positive capacity (e.g., building social relationships with co-workers), may be more beneficial. In addition, engaging in experiences during non-work time that offer opportunities for learning and growth (i.e.,

Table 1 Relationships Between Work-break Activities/Experiences and Employee Outcomes.

Activities and Experiences	Health, Well-being, and Performance Outcomes
<i>Relaxing experiences</i> (taking a walk or reading a book)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased positive mood and vigor • Decreased negative mood and exhaustion
<i>Mastery or growth opportunities</i> (learning something new)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased positive mood and sense of vitality • Decreased fatigue
<i>Psychological detachment from work</i> (mentally and physically distancing oneself from work)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased positive mood and life satisfaction • Decreased burnout • Highest levels of task performance and proactive behavior at medium levels of detachment
<i>Social activities</i> (spending time with friends or family)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased positive mood, vigor, and overall well-being • Decreased disengagement • Increased job performance
<i>Physical activities</i> (exercise or outdoor activities) <i>Sleep and napping</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased positive mood and vigor • Decreased fatigue • Increased work motivation • Increased task performance
<i>Work-related activities</i> (spending time working during the work break)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased well-being • Decreased sleep quality • Increased negative mood
<i>Reflecting on work</i> (thinking about the negative or positive aspects of work during time off)	<p>Negative work reflection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased health complaints and exhaustion <p>Positive work reflection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased burnout • Increased proactive behaviors, creativity, helping behaviors, and pursuit for learning behaviors

mastery experiences) appears to be another recovery experience that demonstrates positive associations with well-being regardless of the length of the work break. For example, mastery experiences have been linked to increases in positive mood upon returning to work after vacations, weekends, evenings, and even lunch breaks. Although engaging in activities such as learning a new skill, may require additional psychological and/or physical resources, research suggests that doing so may provide additional resources in the form of increased self-efficacy and skills that translate in to greater feelings of self-worth and competence at work.

WHICH FACTORS CAN HELP OR HINDER RECOVERY FROM WORK?

The growing body of research on recovery from work underscores the importance of finding time to unwind and rejuvenate, but as we know, this is easier said than done. For example, various circumstances (e.g., responsibilities at work or at home) can influence our success at recovery. Research has begun to examine those factors that may impact recovery during work breaks. While some of these factors have been studied with regard to longer work breaks such as vacations, most research has focused on evenings after work.

Individual Factors

There are a number of factors related to the employee that are associated with the experience of recovery from work across different types of breaks. For longer work breaks, such as vacations or sabbatical leave, one’s level of respite

self-efficacy (i.e., a sense of confidence that one can recover even under unfamiliar situations and circumstances) and perceptions of control (e.g., locus of control) have been shown to relate to greater psychological detachment from work. Further, employees high in respite self-efficacy and perceived control also tend to view their time away from work as more positive and experience more beneficial effects, in terms of their well-being.

Employees differ in their approach to creating bridges and boundaries between their work and non-work lives. For example, employees who prefer to segment (i.e., create boundaries between) work and home life tend to use less work-related technology at home, which in turn is linked to greater psychological detachment from work during non-work time. However, other individual factors (e.g., high non-work demands, low levels of respite self-efficacy) have been shown to hinder recovery during work breaks. In contrast, employees who are highly involved in their jobs tend to have a harder time psychologically detaching from work.

Organizational Factors

Certain features of the workplace may help or hinder recovery during work breaks. Specifically, high workload (i.e., having a lot to do in a limited amount of time) and long work hours are associated with less psychological detachment and higher fatigue. In addition, emotionally draining work situations, such as conflicts with customers or generally having to continuously display certain emotions at work, are associated with reflecting more negatively on one’s job and being less able to psychologically detach from work during work breaks. Furthermore, organizational constraints (i.e.,

lack of adequate materials, equipment, or information to complete one's work tasks) have been linked to recovery processes. Specifically, organizational constraints seem to be associated with less time spent on exercise and more time spent on "low-effort" activities (e.g., watching television) during evenings, and generally a higher need for recovery.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

We suggest the following implications for management practice:

Encourage Employees to Take Vacations

Providing employees with time away from work in which they can pursue opportunities for recovery from work demands should be a priority for management. Specifically, management should provide employees with vacation time and make sure that employees actually use this time, rather than trading it in for additional monetary rewards or accruing it over consecutive years. Evernote, a software startup located in California, has taken this message to heart and has actually started paying employees up to \$1000 to take their vacation days. Companies such as REI, DreamWorks Animation, Intel, and Microsoft even go a step further by offering their employees fully paid sabbaticals, and encouraging them to make use of this time. During vacations and sabbatical, management should minimize contact with the employee. This may require some preparation (such as the redistribution of responsibilities while the employee is away) and commitment from management, as well as from employees themselves. In addition, because the positive effects of vacation often fade out quickly, encouraging employees to take a few days (or more) off more than once a year will help maintain employee well-being in the long term. Furthermore, providing employees with a "transition day" before and after vacation would allow them to phase in and out of their work responsibilities gradually.

Be Aware of the Importance of Psychological Detachment from Work

Research findings across all types of breaks away from work (vacations, weekends, evenings) indicate that mentally distancing oneself from work is linked to employee well-being, specifically higher life satisfaction, lower burnout, and fewer health complaints. Therefore, managers should encourage their employees to psychologically detach from work during non-work hours. For example, this could include limiting work-related phone calls or e-mails during evenings, weekends, and vacations. In accordance, companies such as McDonald's and Volkswagen have agreed to stop sending e-mails to their employees after hours. In fact, according to a recent survey published by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), as many as one in four companies have created similar no-e-mail policies. It may also be helpful for employees to create a "transition time" that allows them to psychologically detach from work at the beginning of a work break (e.g., the weekend) and "reattach" at the end of the break. Specifically, before leaving work on Friday, employees

may write a "to-do list" for Monday. They may also decide to check their e-mails on Sunday night or early Monday morning to help them mentally prepare for the upcoming workweek. On a day-to-day basis, employees may choose to use the commute to and from work in a similar manner, using the commute home as a time to begin transitioning to the non-work role. The following morning's commute may be spent "reattaching" by thinking about goals to be accomplished that day at work.

Understand that Employees May Differ in their Needs for Recovery

It is important for managers to acknowledge that employees may differ in their need for recovery from work as well as in their preferences for segmenting or integrating work and non-work life. Therefore, creating workplaces with enough flexibility to allow employees to fulfill their needs with regard to work-life balance is crucial for employees' job satisfaction and their commitment to the organization. Supervisors' support of employees' work-life balance is especially important. In the worst case, employees may even consider leaving an organization if their needs for recovery and work-life balance are not being met.

Utilize Lunch Breaks and Micro-breaks

We know that lunch breaks can help employees regain energy, and maintain high job performance throughout the afternoon. In addition, and somewhat in contrast to lunch breaks, micro-breaks may be better used to enhance employees' work experiences. Specifically, creating a work environment that allows for learning, a sense of meaning, and connecting with others can help employees feel more energized and less fatigued at work.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Work stress has serious implications for employees and the organizations they work for. Therefore, encouraging employees to take advantage of their time away from work to recover and re-energize is crucial to the health of employees, as well as the long-term health and sustainability of organizations. Recovery from work-related demands can occur during longer breaks away from work (e.g., vacations), during the weekend, on a daily basis after work, and even during certain breaks at work. Although findings vary somewhat in terms of the activities and experiences that promote optimal recovery during different types of breaks, overall findings show that it is important to take time to step away from work and allow for the recovery process to occur. Organizations that understand their role in facilitating employee recovery, and that encourage their employees to leverage work breaks for the purpose of recharging and unwinding, will benefit from a workforce that is healthy, energized, and ready to work.



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