



Updated: Tue., May. 10, 2011, 1:40 AM

Breaking points

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Last Updated: 1:40 AM, May 10, 2011

Posted: 10:39 PM, May 8, 2011

By the end of last year, Margot Atwell was officially burnt out. A staffing change had left the 27-year-old — an associate publisher at a small Manhattan publishing house — with double her usual workload, and she was desperate to escape.

“It doesn’t matter how great the job is — sometimes you just want to run away from it,” she says.

She didn’t want a divorce, though — just a temporary separation.

So she did what many overworked employees dream of, but few actually do: She asked her boss for a month of unpaid leave. To her surprise, he said yes, and after preparing her assistant to cover her desk, Atwell boarded a plane for New Zealand.

Does a month of self-reflection — in an exotic locale, no less — sound a tad indulgent? It’s not, say the authors of a new book on work sabbaticals, “Reboot your Life: Energize Your Career and Life by Taking a Break.” In fact, they argue, such a pause can be a savvy career move.

Co-written by four female execs who dub themselves “The Sabbatical Sisters,” the book shares the tales of hundreds of employees across a range of industries who’ve benefited by taking a timeout.

“There are a lot of reasons why people need a reboot break,” says co-author Jaye Smith, a TriBeCa-based executive coach. “More often than not, it’s because their batteries have worn down. They lose their ambition, focus and direction, and they’re not able to produce.”

A sabbatical — whether it’s spent globe-trotting, taking career-enhancing classes, volunteering or simply healing from a personal loss — “recharges their batteries,” she says. And not only do workers benefit, so do their employers, say the authors.

“You’re going to be more creative, more innovative, and refreshed to be a better employee,” says co-author Rita Foley, a retired corporate president who now works for the NYC-based career-advisory firm Crenshaw Associates.

That philosophy has been embraced by a number of major employers, including Intel, American Express, AARP and eBay, where paid sabbaticals of varying lengths are available to employees who’ve served a certain number of years. Smith notes that such sabbaticals are offered at 21 of Fortune’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” — a number she expects to see rise as the economy continues to recover.

A clean slate

While working for a firm with a sabbatical program undeniably makes it easier to cut yourself a break, plenty of workers do as Atwood did, and blaze their own trail.

Among them is Ashley Castle, 29, who put her career in cosmetics sales on hold for five months in the spring of 2009. The West Village resident was newly divorced, emotionally spent and “wanted a clean slate.”

“I knew taking five months off isn’t the best thing for business,” says Castle, who operates her own franchise from home. Still, “I figured I could always build back anything that I lost, but I only had this time in life once.”

So after notifying clients and colleagues, she packed her bags for Europe and Hawaii, then embarked on a “life-changing” journey through India, where she spent time volunteering at an orphanage near Nepal.

“It was a spiritual time of searching and renewal,” says Castle, who ditched her cellphone and checked e-mail only sporadically. “It’s amazing how much you can change in just a few months.”

She returned re-energized, she says, and pleasantly surprised to find out how much colleagues who normally relied on her had blossomed in her absence.

Smith notes that this is a common side benefit of sabbaticals, which can “create new experiences and opportunities” for the workers asked to step up and fill the departed person’s shoes.

“That creates resilience throughout the organization,” she says.

A sabbatical can also create resilience in workers who’ve been given an involuntary break, say the authors, who argue that taking a breather after an unexpected layoff can be a lifesaver.

“If you’re let go on a Friday and put your papers out on a Monday, it’s the worst thing you can do,” says Foley. “You’re not emotionally in a state to put your best foot forward.”

A breather, she says, can allow you to heal and reassess your goals, leaving you ready to take your next step with renewed purpose.

When a restructuring left Barbara Friedman, 57, out of work in 2007, the former fashion executive initially assumed she’d

take one of the CEO and president positions for which she was being courted. Instead, a career coach encouraged her to step out of the rat race and reconnect with her professional goals and passions.

"I hadn't not worked in 30-some-odd years," says Friedman. So "I gave myself a break and decided I wouldn't make a decision about doing anything for a year."

Self-reflecting during months of visiting friends, traveling, taking care of her elderly mother and coaching entrepreneurs, Friedman realized she was ambivalent about stepping back into a high-powered job. Status and money had become less important than finding something "fulfilling emotionally and spiritually."

After careful consideration, she signed on as a part-time industry-relations consultant for LIM College, where she's leveraging her experience and contacts to help nurture the next generation of the fashion business. She enjoys the work — and says she'd never have considered it had she not taken time to reflect.

risky Business?

If there are undeniable benefits to taking time off, there can be risks as well, both perceived and real.

"The most common fears are 'I'll step off the career ladder and people will forget me' and 'Isn't this self-indulgent?'" says Foley.

How significant those risks are varies depending on your situation — and also whom you ask. Roy Cohen, career coach and author of "The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide," is among those who believe it's risky business to even ask for a break during a bum economy. Even if your employer goes for it, by taking five, you risk being viewed as "irrelevant" and uncommitted, he says, adding that if there's downsizing in your absence, you'll be a prime target.

Such concerns are common — but overblown, say the "Reboot" authors, who contend that with careful planning and plenty of communication, it's possible to pull off a break without putting your career in jeopardy.

"Every person we spoke to had those fears," says Foley. "But they all said they came back better off personally and professionally."

That was the case for Atwood, the New Zealand voyager. In between hiking the Goblin Forest, sand-boarding the beach dunes and learning to drive on the left side of the road, she had time to reflect on her work.

"Because I wasn't bogged down in the everyday details of the job, I was able to think about it from a removed perspective, and really see it for what it was and what it could be," she says.

As a result, when she returned to work, she brought with her both newfound vigor and valuable insights about how she could change things for the better.

"I was hoping a month would be enough time to reset and remember why I liked the job," she says.

Apparently, it was.

"I found I was really excited to get back to it," she says.