Annual leave anxiety – majority of UK professionals not making the most of their time off

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78% of UK professionals report feeling anxious upon returning to work after taking annual leave, with 51% admitting implementing firefighting tactics to reduce the backlog of work they'll return to.

The Month of May often sees a spike in employee annual leave yet new findings from a survey by global talent solutions provider Robert Walters highlights how many UK professionals are having their periods of leave overshadowed due to experiencing 'annual leave anxiety'.

Chris Eldridge, CEO of Robert Walters UK&I comments: "Professionals suffering with annual leave anxiety not only threaten to lower already historically low engagement rates, but our research suggests that it could have major implications for productivity rates in workplaces."

Firefighting inbox backlogs

The anxiety surrounding work emails is so widespread that many professionals' resort to "firefighting" tactics. In fact, 51% of UK professionals check their work emails during annual leave to reduce the backlog they'll face upon returning, while 43% do so to stay on top of urgent matters.

Further Robert Walters research shows how being able to fully 'switch off' from work is a key part of maintaining both a satisfactory work-life balance as well as productivity levels.

Although the UK Government initially proposed a legal "Right to Switch Off" under the Employment Rights Bill, it was ultimately removed due to the perceived burden it would place on businesses.

Chris comments: "Apps such as Slack and MS Teams help to put work right at our fingertips 24/7 – whilst useful, it can result in professionals feeling obligated to 'check in' during their time off."

The anxious end to annual leave

Findings from Robert Walters reveal that back-to-work anxiety significantly impacts professionals as they return to work, with only 15% of UK professionals feeling refreshed and ready to work after a long holiday.

Chris comments: "Returning to work can trigger many anxieties for professionals, falling behind on important projects, missing major updates or even being handed much heavier workloads. Annual leave should provide professionals respite and a chance to reset – it shouldn't cause them to become more stressed than before they went away."

From FOMO to FOFB

Enter FOFB, the fear of falling behind, a new phenomenon that seems to be rife in workplaces. Resoundingly, 67% of professionals across the UK state that it's much easier to relax on annual leave when their teams are also off.

A study by [NatWest](link) showed that in 2024, 45% of employees in the UK failed to take all their allotted annual leave. With trends such as 'guilt-tripping' leading some professionals to feel pressured into holding off from booking annual leave due to not wanting to look like a 'bad worker' compared to their colleagues.

Chris comments: "Not only are professionals resorting to inbox-watching during annual leave, but some are even putting off booking it all together due to fears of how it may make them look at work."

Collective leave as a solution?

Across Europe many countries such as Spain and France, businesses often close for part of July and August. Reasons for these 'summer shutdowns' include hot weather, scheduled maintenance, and accommodating staff leave.

45% of UK professionals noted that they'd be interested in testing out fixed periods of leave in their company.

However, a further half (51%) of UK professionals expressed concerns that adopting such shutdowns could limit their overall flexibility. 54% of UK employers agreed, stating that implementing such periods would be too disruptive e.g. too costly or hampering productivity.

Chris comments: "To boost productivity, employers need to help staff truly disconnect during annual leave, so they come back reset and ready to dive into their work. Business operations won't halt just because someone is on holiday, so it's crucial for employers to reinforce and value the right to switch off within their company culture.

"There isn't a one-size-fits-all solution for annual leave or holiday policies. Instead, strategies should be customised to prioritise employee wellbeing, engagement, and productivity."

Chris shares his top tips on how leaders can help staff optimise their annual leave:

1.   Communicate, Don't Compare: Advise teams to share holiday schedules to keep each other in-the-loop. Reinforcing that the amount of annual leave taken doesn't reflect an employee's capability or commitment.

2.   Flexible Leave Policies: Offer adaptable leave arrangements that accommodate individual needs. If a summer shutdown doesn't suit some employees, consider allowing them to work remotely during that period.

3.   Mandatory Handovers: Ensure all staff complete thorough handovers before taking leave to minimise the need for them to log in during their time off.

4.   Support Out-of-Office Adherence: Once out-of-office messages are set, strengthen them by signposting appropriate secondary contacts for any urgent issues.

5.   Encourage Pre-Leave To-Do Lists: Advise employees to create detailed to-do lists before their leave. This will help them prioritise tasks upon return, making it easier to manage their workload effectively.

6.   Strengthen company-wide messaging around the right to switch off – create a culture which supports employees right to switch-off during holidays, this will help create a more refreshed, engaged returning workforce.