

- Home/search
- Advanced Search
- Sectors
- Graduate jobs
- Recruitment directory
- Salary surveys
- UK immigration
- Migration to Australia
- Migration to New Zealand
- Job search guidance
- Managing your career**
 - Starting a new job
 - Managing stress
 - Skills analysis tool
 - Negotiate a pay rise
- Taking a sabbatical**
 - Resigning
- Job Profiles
- Career case studies

Taking a sabbatical

What, more holidays? If you're thinking about taking a sabbatical, it's like asking to take a blissfully long holiday with your employers' blessing - and you might expect a pretty frosty response. But in reality, are companies warming to the idea? It's not unheard of, and can prove beneficial to both employee and employer. Discover how a sabbatical might not be as disruptive as it sounds.

What actually is it?

A sabbatical is a mutual agreement between you and the employer, whereby you are granted extended leave, either paid or unpaid, outside of the normal holiday entitlement.

It's often granted as a reward for long service, traditionally seven years. Your employer might stipulate that it is used specifically for development purposes, e.g. training in new skills, in which case they may continue to pay a proportion of salary. If you've got a strong personal reason to request it, you should expect that it is likely to be unpaid, should it be granted.

The inspiration?

You might be surprised at the number of your peers who have seriously considered taking a sabbatical. Many of us struggle to ask for an extra half-hour to get the dry cleaners, so why do people make the radical decision to temporarily up sticks?

When a holiday is not enough. Travelling is one of the most common reasons people go, and they often use the time to travel to distant places, or at least spend more time in a country where a couple of weeks is not enough.

Although scarce in reality, you might find that your employer actually offers this option to you as a reward for long service. In which case, you won't need to worry about your employer's peace of mind.

Productivity - many HR experts believe that taking time to balance the demands of work and personal life can lead to you being more productive in the workplace.

At your company: will it work?

Business Week reported in July 2001 that employees are keener than ever to take the option of unpaid leave. Where companies offer it as an option, many people who have never previously considered it take up the offer. Smaller companies may find it harder to offer sabbaticals, given the practicalities of arranging cover.

Many companies who are taking on the idea of flexible working practices, or at least investigating the idea of it. You should have a plan of what to do if you're refused time off for sabbatical - will you leave, reconsider, reschedule or cancel altogether?

In 1996 the Finnish government launched an experimental 'job alternation' which introduced sabbaticals as a statutory employment right. In the scheme (which is still only a pilot) an employee with one year's continuous service can opt to take three to nine months leave while an unemployed person is recruited in their place for the duration. The employee is paid a percentage of unemployment allowance during the leave, and in it's second year, almost 11,000 employees had taken advantage of the scheme. The scheme has received positive feedback, and in November 2000, the government approved a further two years extension of the experiment.

Your employment rights

If the idea of taking a sabbatical sounds like the brightest idea you've had in ages, take a few moments to consider these issues:

Will the period of the sabbatical be considered as a break from continuous service? (in which case some benefits might be affected on your return).

Can you afford for the leave to be unpaid? (as is often the case)

Can your work to be covered during your absence?

Will your long-term absence affect clients or suppliers?

Can you to commit to returning to work for your employer?

Speaking from experience

Richard Kenyon is a partner at Field Fisher Waterhouse and, as a previous deputy head of the Employment group, he certainly knows about the employment particulars of going on sabbatical. In 1998, he took a travel sabbatical after "the desire to put on a backpack and head off to west Africa" became more important than any thoughts about work or career.

"My twenties had slipped by while working, and the day before my thirtieth birthday my



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girlfriend and I finally decided that it was now or never. Our employer did not have a sabbatical policy as such. Any request for time off was considered and balanced against the needs of the business - but the response was genuinely positive. My colleague Andrew had also taken a sabbatical back in the nineties to be part of the first British ascent of Makalu, the fifth highest mountain in the world.

"Sabbaticals can be disruptive and unsettling for those who remain behind. In our case, we agreed to continue working for six months which gave the firm time to recruit replacements and manage the transition for our clients.

"I discussed the possibility of returning after one year, and was asked to write to confirm after six months. Having considered the matter carefully I wrote to say that I wanted to spend a further year in South America, and that I didn't feel I could be fully committed if I came back without doing it. The firm faxed their response to me in Ghana: 'If you came back without going to South America, we'd have you committed.'

"Travelling can be incompatible with working. My employers were flexible in allowing me to take three weeks holiday, but this was never quite long enough to visit the countries where the infrastructure is so underdeveloped. Also, after three weeks in Mali or India, I felt in need of a holiday! The extended travelling that we did during our sabbatical was simply unmissable!"

The support of his employer in achieving his ambition to travel saw Richard return to work after his South America trip, and he is now a partner in the firm.