

Start planning now and you could be taking a year off by 2009. For inspiration, we've tracked down four sabbatical veterans – four different fields, four different kinds of sabbaticals . . . four fabulous examples of why you should start planning one of your own



time

Off

»» by Lori Bamber

with

new behavior

It's called burnout.

For some, it may be the sense that it shouldn't be quite so hard to get out of bed in the morning. Or that life is moving too fast – and there truly must be more to it than this. Chances are, you're among them – the many hard-working, capable British Columbians who wonder where they lost their edge – and more importantly, wonder how to get it back.



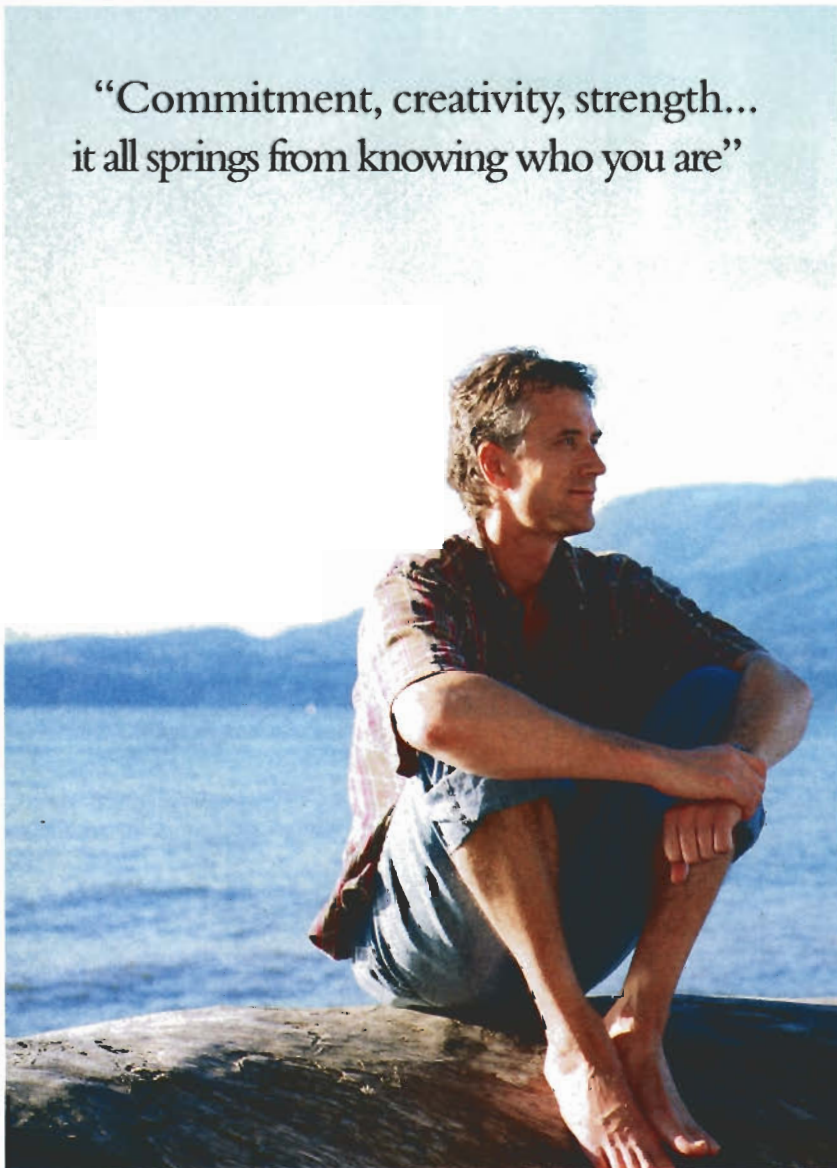
In fact, in *Six Months Off*, authors and sabbatical devotees, Hope Dlugozima, James Scott and David Sharp cite research that found 70 per cent of people between 35 and 49 dream about taking an extended period of time off work. One in five people dream about it every single day.

As the pace of business accelerates, cell phones, the internet and wireless handhelds transform work into a round-the-clock endeavor. In turn, burnout – from chronic dissatisfaction to the fatal-heart-attack variety – has become an ever present risk for both people and the companies that employ them.

Sustained profitability depends on highly creative, committed, engaged and energized people, and employees suffering from burnout don't fit that description. For every one of them that flickers and fades, the company loses.

Sabbaticals, or extended leaves of absence, are becoming an alternative cure for a problem once seen to have only two solutions: early retirement or a new job.

“Commitment, creativity, strength...
it all springs from knowing who you are”



Not all sabbaticals are the realization of a long-held dream, but some planning will ensure you get the most out of your time off and preclude the worst-case scenario: six months on the sofa, out of action, possibly fired, brooding about work.

Just ask Nigel Brown of *lifeplanningmatters.com*, a Kelowna-based retirement planning expert. Of late, he's finding his services are in demand for those in need of a less permanent period of time off: "With the pace of business and the difficulty of maintaining a life balance, [sabbaticals] should be seen as a necessity – for employee retention, continued work excellence and preventive health measure."

Brown recommends the planning process begin with identifying why you want or need to take a sabbatical, perhaps with the help of a life coach who can ask the right questions without imposing his or her own fears and agendas. Start a journal, says Brown, to document and clarify the proposition and to plan and document eventual experiences.

Remember that the goal is to free up your mind from schedules and tasks. Don't plan too much. Brown suggests having a plan for 30 per cent of the time, leaving the balance open for what he calls "Aha! opportunities."

Leaving room for the unexpected may also be the key to discovering your next, best life. For example, *BCBusiness* contributor Pam Withers had to quit work for her husband's last overseas sabbatical. "I decided to write a novel to keep myself out of trouble," she says, "and it totally, totally changed my life – as it's become a best-selling series of novels. A sabbatical will shake you out of your routine – new opportunities open up, new ways of thinking about things. New doors open for you."

Danny Guillaume

CEO of Historical Xperiences,

Creator of Storyeum,

Tunnels of Moose Jaw; founder of Petcoetera and West Coast Video

Serial entrepreneur Danny Guillaume founded West Coast Video, one of the first large-format video store chains in Vancouver, while still in his 20s. After selling to Blockbuster, he took a sabbatical before founding Petcoetera. After selling Petcoetera to a major U.S. chain, he took another sabbatical prior to launching The Tunnels of Moose Jaw, a very successful attraction in Moose Jaw's formerly dilapidated downtown. Guillaume then set his sights on Vancouver's Gastown, but "put the idea on the shelf" for almost a year before he began

That's what some employers fear: the employee will step through that open door, taste freedom and never come back. But Brown notes that if employees discover that it is truly time to move on, that is also a long-term benefit to the employer.

Funding the Sabbatical

More companies now offer paid sabbatical programs. However, if yours doesn't, there are alternatives:

A deferred salary leave plan (DSLPL) allows Canadian employees to defer a portion of income – and the related income tax – to provide for a “self-funded leave of absence.” You can save a substantial portion of your gross income while feeling much less pain on the net side. If you are a single B.C. resident with \$90,000 in employment income, for example, you'll pay about \$25,000 in tax in a given year, for a net income of about \$65,000. If your employer agrees to defer 25 per cent of your annual salary for each of the next four years within a DSLPL, reducing your gross pay to \$67,500, you'll pay \$16,187 in tax. Your net income, then, is \$51,313 – an annual reduction of only \$13,810. (If you've just received a raise, this might be an interesting option to consider. You won't miss it when it doesn't appear in your bank account until that fifth, felicitous year.)

If your employer doesn't offer a DSLPL program, and you have lots of unused RRSP contribution room, consider using the RRSP hidey hole to save and then fund a leave of absence. And remember – a sabbatical needn't be expensive. It's about discovering yourself, not necessarily mapping the globe.

In either case, you can save a year's income within four years. □

work on the project. Yes, another sabbatical.

BCB: Why take an extended period of leave prior to moving on to a new project?

Danny Guillaume: It is really tempting, when you let go of a business, to rush into something else. There is a real sense of emptiness, even of loss, and the tendency is to grab hold of something else to fill that emptiness. It's really quite frivolous, with something as important as your work, to jump in just because you're inspired in that moment.

Taking time is really about learning to understand yourself on a deeper level. Everything else comes out of that – the commitment, inspiration, creativity, passion, the strength to grow – it all springs from knowing who you are: what you love, what you want to contribute to, what you're good at, how to compensate for your weaknesses. It's a

challenge to allow yourself that time, but it's vital. I can build a much bigger, better business in four years if I take a year [off] than if I rushed in and worked for five.

BCB: What did you do during your last sabbatical?

DG: As we were building The Tunnels of Moose Jaw, I got the idea we could bring the same kind of revitalization to Gastown, but nobody believed we could find this kind of space here. After we opened there, I spent some time driving through B.C., getting more of a connection with our geography and history. And I spent a lot of time roller-blading.

One day I looked up and there it was. 'It' was the old Woodwards multi-storey parking lot, now home to Storyeum's 104,000-square-foot facility. Somebody said it was

condemned, and when I started to get a sense of how big it was, as I paced it off, I just knew. But I still took time. I surrounded myself with big sticky notes, playing with the ideas, writing out the ideals. Every business I create has to be profitable, but it also has to contribute to the community and to economic development. I wanted the satisfaction of making people happy, of moving them. That takes design, and it won't happen if you're in a hurry.

I walked in Pacific Spirit Park. Nature slows us down to a different speed. If we live at a rate of 10, nature is living at about one or two. If you spend enough time there, you begin to think and move to that slower beat and it's there you begin to get back to yourself, to a real sense of who you are. When I'm out in the world, moving at the world's pace, I begin to feel smaller – coming back to myself

reminds me how great our potential really is. The walls and restrictions start to disappear.

Taking time has always been part of who I am. I took a year off to travel after I finished high school and I realized then how much differently – better – I learned at that pace. So much more awareness, just being present.

BCB: What's next?

DG: We want to be the best in the world at this business. And I'm looking forward to my next time off. I spend the first few weeks in gratitude. I reflect on what has just happened to me. A lot of lessons come at you, and it takes time to really absorb everything there is to learn. The second half of a sabbatical is about what's next – what new adventure is in store for me? I'm looking forward to doing something extraordinary. □

Jon McComb

Co-host of the *World Today* on CKNW; took a six-month sabbatical that ended in August

BCB: How did you plan for this sabbatical?

Jon McComb: If you had told me in January that I would be leaving work for six months, starting in *February*, I would have said you were crazy. I didn't even consider it as a possibility – there was no way I could take six months off, not with this kind of job. But my mind and body finally just said 'Stop. It's time to stop.' And the people at Corus Radio in Vancouver have been completely supportive.

Management sometimes gets a bad rap, and it can't be easy to have one of your key on-air people disappear for six months, but I've been amazed. Nothing is impossible.

BCB: What did you focus on during your leave?

JM: Reacquainting myself with myself.

Four months of decent sleep. From the simple standpoint of just taking a rest, I feel so much more alive. I have an over-devel-

oped sense of responsibility – it's been about putting that down, lifting my nose from the grindstone and taking a look around at my life. As Einstein said, 'You can't solve a problem on the level at which it exists'. What was once just a creeping dissatisfaction had become the focus of my life, and I couldn't solve it at work.

I took a lot of walks on the seawall. Spent time with the trees. I learned some new ways to perceive life – a process called 'somatic experiencing' that allows one to get out of the mind, the gerbil cage. And I learned to ride a motorcycle.

BCB: What do you learn during the process?

JM: It's all about perception. If you asked [my co-host] Philip Till about the stress of being on air, he'd laugh at you. 'What stress? What do you mean, stress?' It's about not getting stuck in the story – if you can slow everything down, you can let that go.



“I've learned how important it is to stop being so serious; to have some fun”

BCB: Is it important to do something entirely outside of your realm of experience?

JM: Absolutely – if only to ensure you don't sit on your couch for six months. Learning to ride a motorcycle was a challenge for me; taking the B.C. Safety Council course, getting my licence. And there are times, oh, how to put this delicately, when one is perhaps slightly above the speed limit, when you are absolutely, completely focused. All of your energy and attention is in the moment – you're thinking about nothing except keeping yourself from getting killed. You're hanging on. You're not thinking about the past, or about the future. And it was fun. One thing that I've learned from all of this is how important it is to stop being so serious; to have some fun. □

Dr. Robert Krider

Associate Professor of Marketing,
Faculty of Business Administration,
on sabbatical from Simon Fraser University

The benefits of the traditional, academic sabbatical – a period of study and research as well as renewal – are now influencing the way businesses view sabbaticals for their employees. At its best it's a way of revitalizing the business by revitalizing the individual employees: carving away the distractions and obligations of a normal office schedule creates an island of time in which new learning, thinking and creating can take place.

BCB: What are the primary benefits of the academic sabbatical to the employee?

Dr. Robert Krider: Uninterrupted time to focus intensely on interesting and difficult problems. Increased control over my life, both in what I do, and even more importantly, when I do it. If I'm inspired to work at 3 a.m., I do. If I'm not working efficiently at 11 a.m., I don't waste time spinning my wheels – I go do some chores or get some exercise to recharge. Improved health: Many of the minor aches and pains of a

50-year-old disappeared.

My patience with my family and pleasure in their company increased dramatically. The physical and mental difference was obvious to people around me, who commented on it. I was able to get caught up with the recent developments in my field. Even if I'm not working right at the cutting edge, at least I know where it is again. As an academic, my life is about constant learning, and this process simply means having the time to learn intensely again.

BCB: The value to the employer – will you return to work renewed and recommitted?

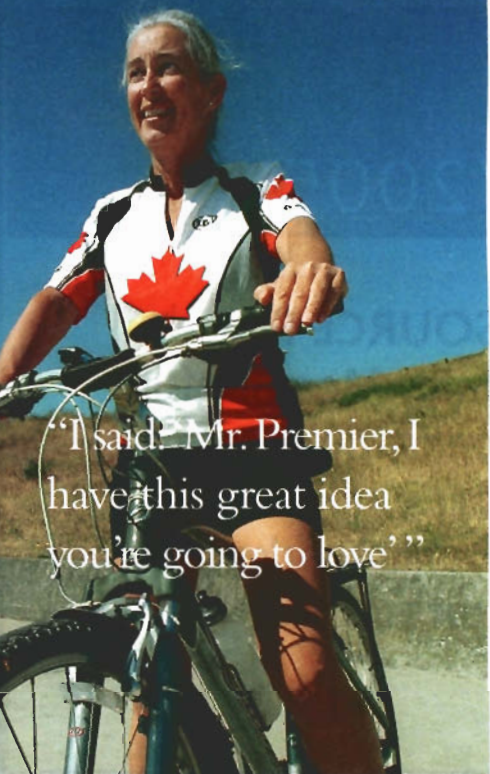
RK: That's a pretty safe bet. I found that by about three months into the leave, I was thinking ahead on how to take control of my life when I return to SFU. I also get to see how things are done elsewhere, and to bring good ideas back to my employer.

BCB: What do you feel might be important to an employer designing an employee-leave program?

RK: I and many of my colleagues in B-schools would love to do an internship in a corporation. Whether a couple of weeks, a term, or a year, such an exchange would be very valuable for us – and might even have some impact on the bottom line of the host corporation. □

“It's meant increased control over my life, what I do, and even more importantly, when I do it”





“I said: ‘Mr. Premier, I have this great idea you’re going to love’ ”

Brenda Eaton

Deputy Minister to the Premier
of British Columbia

Recently returned from an eight-month sabbatical, a cycling trip through Spain, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tasmania/Australia, New Zealand and Uruguay, with her long-time partner Brent Beach.

BCB: At what moment did you know you wanted – or needed – this sabbatical?

Brenda Eaton: This was my second sabbatical. In 2003 we had just been through an intensive core-services review – restructuring our Crown corporations – and it seemed like a natural time to go again. About a year before we left on this trip, I went down to the Premier’s office and said “Mr. Premier, I have this great idea you’re going to love.” (She laughs.) He was quiet for a while and then he said, “Well, if this is something you really want to do, I think we should find a way to make it happen.” You have to give your employer lots of notice and find a time that works for them, too.

BCB: What was your primary purpose in taking the time off?

BE: My husband asked ‘What are your objectives for this sabbatical?’ I thought, ‘Are you crazy? I just want to go away.’ But as I thought about it, I knew I wanted to get fit again, to have a break from work and rejuvenate my batteries, and I wanted to see other parts of the world.

BCB: What were the most memorable moments?

BE: There were so many. Spain was a highlight. We followed a pilgrimage trail (Santiago de Compostela Camino). I have never met so many people before at such momentous times of their lives. Sri Lanka – we had been there before, five years ago, when it was so war-ravaged. It is a poor country, with no tourist infrastructure but it has evolved so much, after only two years of peace. South Africa – we went on safari and drove down the coast, all the way from the north to Cape Town; it is an extremely beautiful country. New Zealand – stunning, stunning natural beauty.

BCB: Did it change you?

BE: No. I mean, I learned a lot, yes. But the change all happened before I went. You change when you make the decision to go. You become clear on what you want from life, what is important.

BCB: What should other people know about sabbaticals?

BE: That it is possible, with a little planning. But don't overplan; enjoy the luxury of letting events unfold. There is so much sheer pleasure in riding to the end of a lane and deciding to turn right instead of left, to stay there for a couple of days. The freedom is fantastic.

There is a certain amount of confidence involved. I was disturbed by the number of people who came up to me and said 'I admire you so much for doing this.' Why admire? I thought. As I talked to people, I found that they were afraid that if they left, they might not have a job to come back to. These were extremely talented people and I wanted to say 'You'd be hired back in a flash.'

BCB: Are there benefits for an employer when an employee takes a sabbatical?

BE: This kind of experience helps give you a solid grounding in yourself. To be strong at work, you need to be grounded in your own values and principles. I came back full of energy, and I know that with this government, I'm going to need it. Energy and enthusiasm, more of that can-do feeling.

BCB: The most important lessons learned on this trip?

BE: How incredibly kind and thoughtful people are, around the world – how proud they are of their countries, many of which don't have a patch on B.C. I came back with an undying appreciation [for this province]. It's so safe here, so clean. So beautiful. Our systems work. We have democracy. There's no fear.

And it helped me as a manager; planning a sabbatical really reinforces good management practices. Practices like delegation, team-building, succession planning – principle-based decision making – you won't be there, so decision must come from principle. The organization becomes stronger. ■