

Amicus Curious

Book highlights pros and cons of sabbaticals

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At a time when many lawyers find it difficult to take a long weekend without laptop, cell phone and pager in tow, one of their number has written a book encouraging her colleagues to leave work for months on end.

The book, "Rest Assured: The Sabbatical Solution for Lawyers," addresses the topic from both the individual and institutional perspectives. It offers insight into the various barriers — including lawyers' own fears — that keep people from taking time off even if their firms have sabbatical programs and gives tips for resolving many of those issues.

The book also counters several reasons firms give for not offering sabbatical programs and discusses many benefits firms can realize by letting lawyers take extended time off.

The author, Lori Simon Gordon, is a former partner in Latham & Watkins' Chicago office who took a sabbatical in 1995. She extended her original seven-month break to a year and ended up not returning to the firm. She said while doing research for the book, she found her case to be a rarity.

"When I asked managing partners whether [people not coming back to work is] an issue and a disadvantage of the program, they uniformly say no, that it doesn't happen very often and in the cases where it does, the person would have left anyway and it really is better for everyone," she said.

Gordon said that lawyers from all kinds of practices and all sizes of firms and law departments have found ways to take time off without damaging their careers. She said she found firms and companies around the nation with programs through which lawyers can take time off. Most programs are a partner benefit and are paid at least in part, Gordon said. Some are paid in full but some require lawyers to use their vacation time for at least part of their leave.

She acknowledged that because the pace of life and business has hastened, though, that the year-long sabbatical might not be as feasible as it once was. Rather, she said, two to four months off may be more manageable.

Lawyers used their time off primarily to do something they've wanted to do for a while but never had the time to devote to it. For instance, Gordon learned to design and create gold and silver jewelry, even participating in shows and selling some of her creations.

Others she talked to used time off to teach, travel, do long-planned home renovations or step up volunteer work. One woman, an avid gardener, arranged an internship with famous gardeners in England, Gordon said.

Before they manage to free themselves up, though, many lawyers — even those whose firms have sabbatical programs — must overcome their internal obstacles. Some of those hurdles include the fear of losing clients,

the belief that they are indispensable and a concern that they might not want to come back to work after getting a taste of freedom.

Gordon found many of those fears to be unfounded.

She said because the law has become pretty much a 'round-the-clock profession, attorneys must have someone able to step in even for short absences such as business trips or regular vacations.

Several women Gordon spoke with compared their sabbaticals to the time people take for maternity leave and said the same preparations were involved. They let their clients know about their absence well in advance, introduced them to the lawyers who would be handling their work load, brought the other lawyers up to speed and many checked in to ensure things were running smoothly.

"It's a more extended form of what people do to prepare to go on vacation," Gordon said.

The preparation time is well worth it, both for the lawyer and for the firm, Gordon said.

The individual benefits may seem obvious. They include having the chance to step away from their day-to-day work and pursue something they're passionate about but haven't been able to fit in. They then get perspective on themselves and their work, Gordon said.

"As a result, lawyers report they look forward to going back to work, they have more energy, they frequently say they think they're better lawyers and they participate in their practice in a renewed, energetic and sometimes more successful way."

But the lawyers are the only ones who can benefit from their time off. Their firms and companies also realize positive effects, including good morale fostered by simply offering such an opportunity, and loyalty and longevity among employees who foresee the chance to take time off in the near future and so don't look elsewhere.

Less senior lawyers also get a chance to take on more responsibility and have more client contact while filling in for a colleague on sabbatical, which gives the firm the opportunity to expose clients to more lawyers, which then increases the likelihood a company will keep more business with the firm should the partner decided to leave.

Some of the positive reasons a firm may offer its lawyers sabbatical, are also used in the negative by firms who reject the concept. For example, some firms fear clients will find the disruption unacceptable and other lawyers may feel resentful or overworked picking up the slack for the lawyer on sabbatical.

Gordon's book is aimed at mid-career professionals who don't have intentions of leaving their jobs. She said she wanted to offer an alternative to the all-or-nothing view of practicing law.

"I would just encourage people to consider

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the possibility for themselves and what the benefits might be rather than assuming it's just too difficult or not possible," she said. "Many people who were able to overcome that sense found it changed their lives in ways they found extremely beneficial."

The 140-page book, published by the American Bar Association is available for \$59.95 through the ABA Service Center. Call (800) 285-2221. The product code is V02RATB.