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Take leave? Not likely. I don't have the time

By: Theresa Tan

USE it or lose it. When it comes to taking annual leave, lawyer Adrian Tan has lost it, year after year.

To be precise, the 40-year-old has not taken a full-day's leave in the past three years. And he is entitled to 30 days of leave each year.

The most he has taken was a half-day off in July, to run urgent errands that included paying his road tax.

Mr Tan, who is married with no children, said: "It's just not possible to take leave, with all the court hearings and deadlines.

"It's not possible for someone else to step in halfway. You can't send a replacement to court."

He is an extreme example from the pool of Singapore executives who do not take all their annual leave each year.

While there are no local studies on the extent of the phenomenon, other countries have decided it is a problem that people go to work when they should be out of the office.

In Japan, less than half of the average paid leave of 18 days a year gets used, going by data from its Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

It said last year that it was considering a new law to force companies to draw up leave schedules and ensure staff go on leave.

In Japan, long working hours and a lack of time out are being blamed for a host of social ailments, from the falling birth rates, to death from overwork.

In Britain, surveys on the issue have been carried out. One such study found that a third of British workers did not take all their leave in 2005.

Another showed that almost nine in 10 managers were so resigned to working through their holidays that they were prepared to swop leave for other benefits, such as cash and even gym membership.

And in Australia, a survey of 300,000 employees found that nearly six in 10 do not use all their leave.

To boost tourism revenue, Tourism Australia launched a campaign last year to persuade Australians who have been stockpiling leave to take a holiday in their own country.

In Singapore, what is known is that more employees are entitled to more days of leave now.

This is because there are more high-skilled workers who usually enjoy more favourable leave benefits, said a Manpower Ministry survey released last month.

Last year, a third of the full-time employees surveyed were entitled to between 15 and 21 days of annual leave, up from one quarter in 1992.

The majority of workers here, or 60per cent, receive 14 or fewer days of leave each year.

But do people take all their leave? A check with 13 companies from various industries showed mixed results.

At a top law firm with more than 100 lawyers, more than half the lawyers did not use up their annual leave and, on average, they forfeited eight leave days. The firm declined to be named.

The National Healthcare Group (NHG), which runs four hospitals among other medical centres, said that none of its doctors had their leave forfeited in 2005.

"All our doctors were able to carry forward or encash their 2005 leave entitlements," said its spokesman.

At DBS Bank, 3per cent of its staff did not use their entire leave in 2005. The bank employs almost 6,400 people now.

Within the Civil Service, about 6per cent of its officers had not exhausted their vacation time by the end of the year in 2005. The Civil Service hires more than 60,000 officers.

WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

"Vacation time is sacred in the States. When you are on leave, people don't bother you with work matters. In Singapore, I find that very few people are able to switch off during weekends and while on leave."

MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT TAN XIN YING, 29, who spent two years working in Chicago

When asked why they do not take all of their leave, people cite deadlines, heavy workloads and how hard it is to get someone else to cover their duties.

Human resources experts think that some employees fear taking frequent leave - even leave they are entitled to - may be interpreted as their having a poor work attitude and may put their jobs at risk.

Increasingly too, globalisation and high-tech communications have resulted in people continuing to work even when they do take leave.

ALWAYS ON HAND FOR CLIENTS

"My clients need me. If you are facing matrimonial problems, you want your lawyer to be around for you."

LAWYER FOO SIEW FONG, 40, who checks and replies to e-mail and supervises her staff on cases, even while holidaying

Lawyer Foo Siew Fong, 40, says she has no problem taking time off, but she never stops working.

"My clients need me," she said. "If you are facing matrimonial problems, you want your lawyer to be around for you."

So she checks and replies to e-mail and supervises her staff - while holidaying.

On a recent family trip to Italy, the mother of a teenager checked her e-mails twice a day on her BlackBerry mobile organiser. She was also glued to her BlackBerry while cruising down the Nile in Egypt.

"If I don't clear my work, I can't enjoy myself," she said.

Management consultant Tan Xin Ying, 29, who spent two years working in Chicago, feels that people here need to respect the value of time away from work.

"Vacation time is sacred in the States," she said. "When you are on leave, people don't bother you with work matters."

"In Singapore, I find that very few people are able to switch off during weekends and while on leave."

Psychiatrists interviewed say that working people need regular time out to unwind and spend time with loved ones.

Said psychiatrist Brian Yeo: "Leave is like sleep. It's time to recharge and refocus. Your mind needs to switch off after a while."

Dr Tan Chue Tin, also a psychiatrist, warned of the increasing stress of surviving today's rat race, where change is the only constant.

"Many of us know that our stress levels are going up, but we don't know when we will cross that line until we actually break down," he said.

Without regular breaks from work, the risks of burnout, and mental and psychosomatic illnesses are very real, he added.

But it's not all bleak.

More companies are now encouraging staff to consume all their leave because unconsumed leave is considered a cost and affects the balance sheet, say human resource experts.

They feel it is not a good practice to let employees convert unused leave into cash because leave should not be seen as a potential source of income, but as a time to relax and recharge.

And if they had their way, they would discourage people from working while on leave.

One reason is that a break should be a break. Another reason, said Madam Annie Yap, chief executive officer of recruitment firm GMP Group, is that others may be deterred from taking leave if they see their colleagues work while on leave.

As Mr Peter Lee, managing consultant of Remuneration Data Specialists, puts it: "Some people work when they are on leave to make themselves feel important. Most of the time, their work can be covered by someone else.

"No one is indispensable."