breathe

NEW RESEARCH

The unused holiday & burnout epidemic

Breathe's 2024 holiday report

81% of workers are burned out

Only 35% use all their holiday

Introduction

The last few years have been a tough time for employers and employees alike. From Brexit to Covid and the Great Resignation, from record inflation to rising labour costs – employers and employees are certainly feeling the strain.

That's why we commissioned this report. We wanted to find out just how influential the volatility of the last few years has been on the amount of holiday people take, and the extent to which they disconnect when they do.

We asked 1000 UK employees a series of questions to understand just how much holiday employees are taking. We also wanted to get into the mind of the UK workforce and understand the reasons why they choose to take holiday and, perhaps more importantly, why they don't.

Here's what we found...

Key findings

1. Workers feel **too busy, understaffed, and worried about their jobs** to take time off

2. UK workers think that lack of time off causes **anxiety, burnout, and poor mental health**

3. **Staff shortages** are overwhelmingly the biggest contributing factor of unclaimed holiday

4. A majority of UK workers **work on annual leave**

5. Employees **don't feel encouraged to disconnect** from work while on holiday

6. **Gen Z are the least likely to take holiday** and the most likely to **work when they do**

7. The lowest-paid workers felt the **least encouraged to take time off**

8. Employees are interested in taking additional **unpaid holiday**

1. The unused holiday epidemic

The majority of UK workers don't use all their holiday

The vast majority of UK employees are entitled to a state-enforced minimum holiday allowance of 28 days per year, or 5.6 weeks. Some employers choose to offer more and others have experimented with unlimited holiday, meaning no allowance is needed.
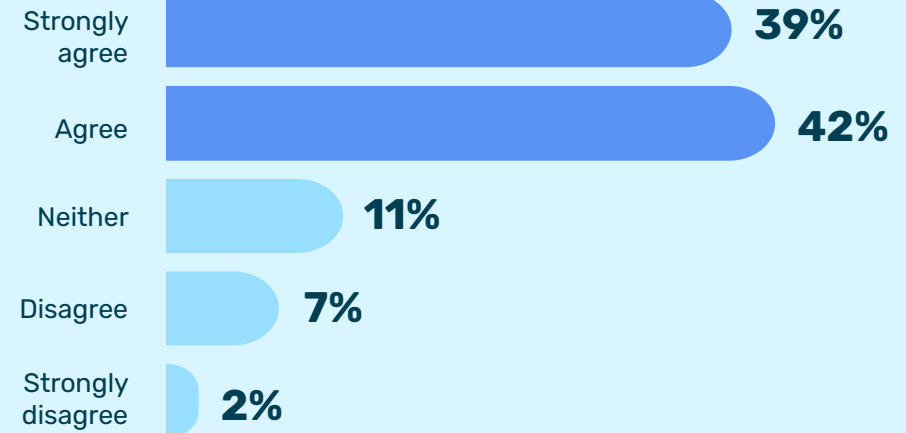
And yet we now know that most UK workers don't use the whole allowance. In fact, **only 35%** of respondents said they have 0 days unused holiday days a year.

2/3
of UK workers don't use their full leave allowance

But when you look deeper into the data, some more worrying trends begin to emerge. Most importantly, almost a fifth of UK workers (17%) are leaving **more than five days unclaimed** at the end of the year.

This is leading to employees becoming stressed and burned out. **81%** of UK employees agree or strongly agree that they notice 'feelings of burnout, exhaustion, or poor mental health when they can't take time off work or haven't done in several months'.

Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	39%
Agree	42%
Neither	11%
Disagree	7%
Strongly disagree	2%

This overwhelmingly vindicates the view that taking time off is important for **both the employee and the employer**. Ultimately, nobody benefits from a tired, stressed, and unengaged workforce. To understand the reasons **why** employees aren't taking time off, read the full report.

Discover the **4 key signs of burnout** & practical solutions for managers to support employee mental health
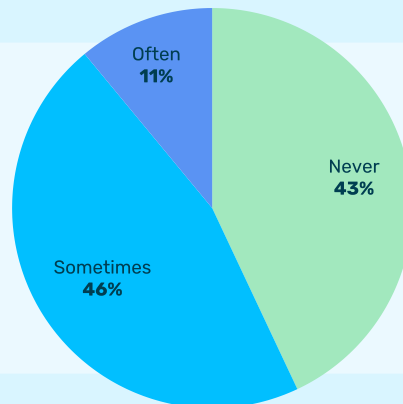
Download infographic

2. The Disconnect Deficit

A majority of UK employees work during annual leave

Burnout, exhaustion, and stress aren't just caused by unclaimed holiday. In this 'work from anywhere' world, it's easier than ever to take your work on holiday with you. But with fewer clear boundaries between work and the rest of your life, it can be difficult to properly **disconnect**.

We're calling this phenomenon the Disconnect Deficit – and our research has uncovered just how widespread it really is:

57% of employees admit to doing work on annual leave either '**sometimes**' or '**often**'.

Often
11%

Never
43%

Sometimes
46%

We went on to ask the 57% of employees who admitted to working on holiday to list the reasons why.

The results painted a worrying picture of overworking, anxiety & stress:

I want to avoid a work backlog when I return
29%

I worry I'll get behind on my work
25%

Other team members aren't able to cover my work in my absence
19%

Managers send messages and I feel pressured to respond
17%

I worry it will reflect badly if I don't work
9%

Other
2%

To find out more, we also asked all respondents to gauge how much their company encourages them to disconnect during annual leave. The results were, again, surprising. **Only 37% of employees** feel encouraged to disconnect during annual leave. The rest felt either actively discouraged – or felt their employers were ambivalent either way.

Our research also suggests another clear trend: The more someone earns, the more likely they are to disconnect on holiday.' Read the full report for more details.
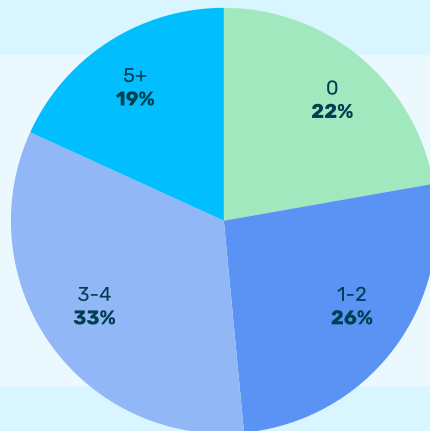
Full report

3. The generational holiday divide

Gen Z are taking less holiday than all other generations

When we asked employees of all ages how many unused holiday days they had per year, the results were surprising, with only 35% using all their days. But when we restrict this to just 18-24 year olds, that number drops to only 22%.

That means that Gen Z respondents are a full 12 percentage points less likely to use all their holiday days than the average UK employee.

How many **unused holiday days** do you have on average each year? (18-24 only)

5+
19%
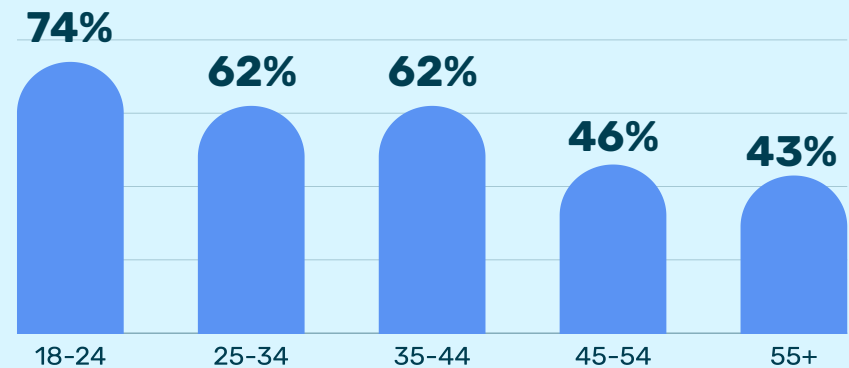
0
22%

3-4
33%

1-2
26%

The trend isn't just restricted to how many days off young employees are taking. In fact, they're also much more likely than their older colleagues to work on holiday as well.

74%
of 18-24 year olds admit to working on annual leave

Again, this finding shows a clear trend, and the number of people working on annual leave gradually decreases with age:

74% 18-24
62% 25-34
62% 35-44
46% 45-54
43% 55+

Curiously, this trend remains the case even when we focus on the **lowest-paid workers**. If we restrict our answers to only those who earn less than £30,000 a year, **a similar trend begins to emerge.**
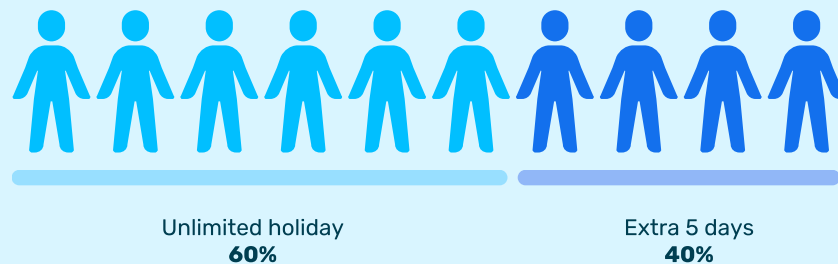
Full report

4. The wishlist

Unlimited holiday

While unlimited holiday has become increasingly popular in recent years, it remains controversial as there's a risk people will end up taking less holiday. If you remove the official allowance, people won't know how much holiday is acceptable to take. The risk, therefore, is that they'll end up taking less.

We asked employees which they'd prefer; unlimited holiday or 5 extra days added on to their paid leave allowance each year. The results were fairly split:

| Unlimited holiday **60%** | Extra 5 days **40%** |

Unclaimed holiday

We asked employees to imagine that they had 5 days of unclaimed holiday at the end of the year. Would they prefer to add the days on to the following year's allowance, or reclaim the time as additional payment? Again, the results here were fairly mixed.

Nonetheless, a small majority preferred to carry the days over vs. reclaiming as payment – 56% vs. 44%.

| Reclaim as payment | **44%** |
| Carry over to next year | **56%** |

Unpaid holiday

Surprisingly, employees would also be interested in taking additional unpaid holiday if given the option.

58%

are 'likely' or 'highly likely' to take an additional 5 days of unpaid leave

Understandably, those most in favour earned the highest incomes (£75,000+), however, 56% of respondents who earned less than £30,000 would be likely or highly likely to take the offer.

Ultimatley you have a considerable amount of choice over what holiday policies you offer. For more detail on the different types of holiday policies, read the full report.

The Breathe view

We believe that the vast majority of employers understand why a healthy attitude to time off is important. Nobody wants tired and stressed employees who eventually quit their jobs. So how do proactive, engaged employers avoid these issues?

Here's some advice from us

Write clear holiday policies to govern how many people can take time off at the same time

Have a [staff holiday planner](#) where staff can easily book holiday, have visibility of their leave allowance and when others in their team are off

Lead by example. Leaders and managers should also disconnect as much as possible

Create a [Right to Disconnect policy](#). This gives workers the right to reclaim their personal time as their own, endorsed by the business

Consider running an **Employee NPS** to better understand your team's needs & wants

There's more we can do to support our people. For a full list of **practical actions & advice for employers,** read the full report

Take me to the full report