

For Stressed-Out Lawyers, Sabbaticals Offer a Chance to Breathe

Law firms and their employees alike say they benefit when lawyers are offered a break from work.

By **Brenda Sapino Jeffreys**
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Shook, Hardy & Bacon trial lawyer Peter Henk celebrated the first day of a three-month sabbatical with the delivery of a motorcycle.

“It’s a sport bike, a starter bike. I’m not doing anything crazy to begin with. I’m just going to learn,” says Henk, a partner in Houston who does products liability litigation and started his sabbatical in early May.

Shook Hardy is one of a small number of firms that provide lawyers, and in some cases staff, the opportunity to take a sabbatical so they can recharge and return ready to tackle the stresses of working as a lawyer. At a time when mental health is front and center in the legal profession, sabbaticals are one way firms help their partners and employees cope with the burdens of the job.

“To be resilient, it makes perfect sense to allow attorneys to take sabbaticals, and would probably make sense in regard to profitability. You would be able to have more production from that person, and quite frankly avoid terminal burnout where you lose very valued, skilled lawyers,” says Chris Ritter, director of the Texas Lawyers Assistance Program at the State Bar of Texas.

Jennise Stubbs, managing partner of Shook Hardy’s Houston office, says the profession needs to recognize how job pressures lead to suicide and substance abuse.

“I really think this [sabbaticals] would help with the ailments that are going on in our profession. It seems kind of like a no-brainer to me,” says Stubbs, who took her first sabbatical last summer.

While sabbaticals can relieve individuals’ stress, they also benefit firms by fostering teamwork, ease client succession planning, and aid in recruiting and retention.

Walter Cofer, a Shook Hardy partner in Kansas City, Missouri, who has taken four sabbaticals, including one last fall, says he talks with his clients well in advance of his leave so they know that other lawyers are available.



“You get out of the way to give younger lawyers the opportunity for client contact,” he says, “and to stretch.”

Shook Hardy instituted a policy of mandatory sabbaticals for partners back in 1986, at the behest of former chairman Bill Shinn, according to current chairwoman Madeleine McDonough. The firm strongly encourages all partners to take sabbaticals, which are available after a partner completes seven years at the firm, and then every sixth year.

“It’s just a huge benefit. It’s a wonderful recruiting tool, retention tool, and also prevents burnout,” McDonough says, adding that a partner’s compensation is not affected by the sabbatical, but they do have to promise to return to Shook Hardy for at least a year.

During two sabbaticals, McDonough traveled internationally and spent time with family and friends. But partners spend the time in many ways.

“People have written books, they taught classes, went back to school for a summer program,” McDonough says. “Most people tend to spend more time with their family. We have people who have taken their kids to every baseball park in the country. We’ve had people climb mountains.”

Stubbs says she came back to work relaxed after her sabbatical and with a clear mind, and she knew her partners would cover her work. She traveled with her husband and spent time at home with her three sons.

“I’m very happy to be a working mom and have a great job and a happy life, but it’s nice to just slow down,” Stubbs says.

Rebecca Hudson, a partner at Holland & Hart in Denver, says her firm’s sabbatical program dates back to the early 1970s, when the firm recognized that lawyers, as owners of the business, have additional levels of stress not alleviated by short vacations.

The biggest goal for a sabbatical is to provide a “period away from the office to really step away from your office for three months and get that rejuvenation and ability to check out,” Hudson says. “You come back from your sabbatical with your sleeves rolled up and ready to return to your practice.”

The firm’s policy calls for a three-month sabbatical for partners every five years. Hudson says it works smoothly because at least two lawyers are on each client engagement, so there are multiple touch points for each client.

Hudson’s advice to partners taking a sabbatical is to plan an immediate trip out of town. She spent time at home with her family during her two sabbaticals, traveled to Europe, trained for marathons, and spent time in Nantucket. Her family also welcomed a puppy during her last sabbatical, in 2015.

Holland & Hart clearly benefits in recruiting and retention, Hudson says. The firm in 2016 adopted a minisabbatical program for nonpartner lawyers and professionals that provides six weeks off every seven years after spending 12 years at the firm.

Hudson says lawyer stress levels are higher than in the past and are hard to address on a regular vacation.

“It is truly incumbent on the partners and firm management to make sure we preserve the health of our people, and the sabbatical is one of those things that helps,” she says.

Perkins Coie has offered sabbaticals to partners, senior lawyers and staff for many decades, managing partner John Devaney says. In addition to benefiting lawyers and staff, Devaney says it gives those who are covering for colleagues on leave time to develop new relationships and skill sets.

Devaney took a sabbatical in 1999, when his kids were young. “It allowed for five weeks of unforgettable travel,” he says. He plans to take a two-month sabbatical when he steps down at the end of June after five years as managing partner.

“We are going to the beach in South Carolina. I’m going to catch up on all of those books I haven’t read,” he says.



Shook, Hardy & Bacon’s Walt Cofer, right, on a sabbatical with his wife, Nicola, in the Douro Valley in Portugal.

Julia Markley, a litigation partner at Perkins Coie in Portland, Oregon, says a sabbatical has been in the back of her mind since she heard about it as a summer associate. She took three months beginning last November, and came back rejuvenated.

“I decided to travel for six weeks and I was a stay-at-home mom for six weeks of my sabbatical. I got to walk them to school every day and sit in a coffee shop and read three newspapers a day, and do decluttering and home projects, and cook dinner from scratch,” she says.

Henk, the Shook Hardy partner, who represents Phillip Morris USA and will start a trial after he returns to work later this summer, says he plans to do more than learn to ride a motorcycle on his leave.

With family, he will travel to Greece, but his other big goal is running an 800-meter race at the National Senior Games in June in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Being on sabbatical gives him time to train. He says sabbaticals work well because Shook Hardy values teamwork, and lawyers don’t worry they are shortchanging clients.

“We depend upon each other, and everyone’s happy, genuinely happy, for the person who is about to take their sabbatical. It’s not, ‘Oh my gosh, I wish it would be me,’” he says, “because they know their time is coming.”

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