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## **Sabbaticals recharge workers**

By Laura Raines

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Who knew that sabbaticals weren't just for college professors anymore? Barbara and Elizabeth Pagano did. Business authors, coaches and experts in talent and leadership development, this mother/daughter team founded [yourSABBATICAL](#) last year to help workers and companies explore the idea of sabbaticals.

The two had learned the benefits of a planned, focused pause from work firsthand. In 2001-02, they spent six months sailing a 43-foot sloop-rigged Benetau 2,000 miles, starting in Florida and ending in the Caribbean's Northern Antilles.

"It changed us, gave us a chance to learn new skills, discover things about ourselves, and experience powerful lessons in teamwork," Barbara Pagano said.

In recent years, they've encountered more clients who were working long and intensely, feeling overwhelmed and thought they needed a new job.

"They didn't need a new job; what they needed was a break," she said. The partners began researching sabbaticals and "learned that companies had had them for a long time and loved them," Elizabeth Pagano said. "McDonald's started a sabbatical program in the 1960s."

Strong advocates for planned, purposeful business leave, the Paganos say sabbaticals benefit all sizes of companies and levels of workers. The idea fits well with workplace trends for flexibility and life/work balance.

"I think the concept is growing. Last year there were 15 companies on Fortune's 100 Best Companies to Work For that sponsored sabbatical programs. This year there are 19," Elizabeth Pagano said.

The Families and Work Institute's 2008 National Study of Employers found that 24 percent of small businesses and 14 percent of large companies allow employees to take sabbaticals (paid or unpaid of six months or more).

Initially, companies often fear the cost or that workers will not return.

"There's little evidence to support that," Barbara Pagano said. "Companies with sabbatical programs have seen employees come back reinvigorated, with increased commitment and new perspectives. The benefit helps attract and retain top talent across all generations."

There are multiple ways to design a program, including paid, partially paid and unpaid leave of anywhere from four weeks to six months. Objectives can include personal or corporate goals. General Mills offers two sabbatical programs to employees with seven years of service — a personal, four- to 12-week, unpaid leave for any reason, and an innovation sabbatical whose

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goal is to foster new ideas and innovation within the organization. High-potential and high-performing employees must apply for this paid, six-month leave.

“Companies are looking for unique, low-cost ways to keep employees motivated and productive. If designed right, a sabbatical is that,” Elizabeth Pagano said. “With so many companies facing layoffs, offering employees an unpaid or partially paid sabbatical could be a creative option that makes sense. It could save the company money, while allowing it to hang on to talent and be ready when the economy cycles back up.”

For their forward-thinking, Barbara and Elizabeth Pagano were awarded the 2009 Moving into the Future award by the Conference Board’s Work Life Leadership Council. Their Web site is a one-stop resource for companies or individuals considering sabbaticals, and it offers workable models.

**Hotel Equities**, an Atlanta hotel-management corporation, has had a sabbatical program for 11 years.

“Our CEO, **Fred Cerrone**, was in a life-threatening situation on a mission trip to India. He realized that he hadn’t spent enough time with his family,” said **Elizabeth Derby**, director of sales and marketing. Upon his safe return, he started a program that would allow his corporate staff and general [hotel] managers to get away.

“The hotel business is a 24/7, 365-days-a-year business,” Derby said. “The company expects us to give 150 percent when working, but then it rewards us with three months of paid leave every five years.”

In 2003, Derby took her kids to Alaska and relaxed at home. She saved more money for her second leave last year and took her kids to Europe for three weeks, to visit relatives, and worked on her home.

**Hotel Equities** has a very low turnover rate.

Those left behind benefit as well because they have to step up and assume added responsibilities.

“This allows us to train people and gives us a good idea of their strengths and weaknesses,” Derby said. “It helps us promote from within, as well as build staff loyalty.” ###