



# TIPS ON HOW WORKERS CAN MAKE THE MOST OF AN UNPAID FURLOUGH

By Laura Petrecca / USA TODAY - February 2009

Whether employees have a day off a week, or one week a quarter, there are constructive ways to make the most of the time. Some guidance:

## BEFORE THE LEAVE

- **Slice spending.** Furloughed employees should have a cash reserve to help supplement lighter paychecks. “Stop spending money,” says Lewis Maltby, president of The National Workrights Institute. While it might seem tempting, he cautions that furloughed workers shouldn’t look at the time off as an opportunity to plan an expensive vacation to an exotic island. “You should be putting the money in the bank,” he says.
- **Buddy up to HR.** All furloughs are not equal. For example, rules for exempt salaried employees and non-exempt hourly employees vary. Workers should check in with company human resources representatives to determine how the furlough will affect them — and their paycheck — personally. HR staffers, as well as a local labor department, should be able to provide guidance about unemployment benefits during a furlough.
- **Become a master negotiator.** Some creditors, such as landlords and child care providers, could be sympathetic to the furloughed worker’s plight and reduce fees. If there seems to be wiggle room, ask for a discount.

With the economic crunch, “It’s not business as usual,” says **Joseph Schumacher**, chief operating officer of the child care franchise company Goddard Systems. “Things that might have been out of line or not subject to discussion last year are now subject to discussion.”

## DURING THE FURLOUGH

- **Plan a personal bailout.** Use the time off to spruce up a résumé, network with other professionals and look for a more stable employer, says Maltby. “The company didn’t lay you off for the week because they’re doing well,” he says. “In most, cases, furloughs happen because the company is in financial trouble.” Case in point: This week, RV-maker Monaco Coach said it would permanently lay off workers who had been on furlough since mid-December.
- **Explore new fields.** Shelley Cox, a county planning director in North Carolina, is using her furlough days get a jump-start on a career change. “We have been required to take one day a month unpaid leave since January — and now there is talk that layoffs of county employees may begin soon,” she says. “Because of the uncertainty in my current job, I have begun taking (online) classes for elementary education licensure. My furlough days are spent completing the observation hours that are required for my classes.”

- **Make yourself useful.** Volunteer work not only expands a potential network of professional contacts, it often also makes the volunteers feel more positive about their own workplace situation, says Joseph Ferrari, a psychology professor at DePaul University in Chicago. People often like to compare themselves to those less fortunate because “it makes us feel better,” he says.

“By volunteering, we get to see how better off we are,” he says. “It’s a good reality check.”

For the more adventurous who have some money in the bank, a furlough is the “perfect time” to bring up the idea of a long-desired sabbatical to senior management, says Julie Gebauer, managing director at human resources consulting firm Towers Perrin. If done with proper planning, and a position of helping others, management might approve the leave and guarantee that the job will be there upon return.

“There is a lot of focus on corporate social responsibly,” she says. “This could present someone with the opportunity to say ‘I’m going to do a volunteer stint for six months in Guatemala.’”

- **Have some fun.** Among the stress-reducing plans of USA TODAY readers: fishing and travel to national parks. Rebecca Evans will spend a few days of her furlough week remodeling her bathroom — then she’s “escaping for a couple of days with my sister, a few bottles of wine and her boat” for a trip off the coast of Wilmington, N.C.

“I’ve never taken a true vacation or time off in which I don’t constantly check e-mail or take work calls, neither of which are to be exercised during this unpaid time off,” she writes in an interview — over e-mail. “I’ll probably be tossing myself overboard (after) being so disconnected, but this short furlough may be the cure for this workaholic.”

## AFTER THE RETURN TO WORK

- **Know your limits.** Most furloughs require that the employee do absolutely no work during the time off. Workers who feel overwhelmed upon return should “have a discussion with your manager” about the best ways to manage the load, says Gebauer.
- **Keep pounding the pavement.** Once back at work, don’t stop the outside networking and interviewing, says Maltby.

“People think that when the furlough is over, everything will be rosy,” he says. “Well, there’s a very good chance it won’t be.”