



Understanding Employees' Unused Vacation Days: Insights from a Social Cognitive Approach

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Introduction

The article explores why many employees fail to use all their paid vacation days despite the benefits of vacations for health and well-being. It uses social cognitive theory to explain this behavior, suggesting employees are less likely to use vacation days if:

- *They lack confidence in detaching from work (low detachment self-efficacy).*
- *They expect negative outcomes (e.g., stress, financial strain) from taking vacations.*
- *They do not expect positive outcomes (e.g., relaxation, better relationships) from vacations.*

The research includes four studies validating these psychological factors and highlights the need for future research on workplace policies and recovery from work stress.

Key findings include the importance of detachment self-efficacy and the role of outcome expectations in unused vacation days.

The study contributes to both recovery and work–life balance literature by explaining barriers to using vacation policies.

The Effect of Vacations on Health and Well-Being

Vacations help reduce work-related strain and promote recovery, improving health and well-being.

- According to the effort–recovery model, breaks from work reduce short-term stress and prevent long-term negative health outcomes.
- Studies show that vacations lead to short-term improvements in life satisfaction and reduced exhaustion. Long-term effects include a lower risk of heart disease and mortality, particularly among individuals who take more vacation days.
- Research highlights that regular vacation-taking is essential for long-term health, even after controlling for factors like income and health behaviors.

Understanding Unused Vacation Days

Despite the health benefits of vacations, many employees do not use all their vacation days or use them for non-recovery activities, missing out on well-being improvements.

- Research shows that demographic factors such as being older, female, married, having children, and higher socioeconomic status are associated with better vacation day usage.
- Job-related factors like longer working hours reduce vacation usage, while longer job tenure increases it.

However, the reasons why employees fail to use their vacation days remain unclear, and more research is needed to understand these behaviors.

Social Cognitive Theory as an Underlying Framework

Social cognitive theory is used to explain why employees do not fully utilize their paid vacation days. This theory highlights two key cognitive factors that influence behavior:

- Self-efficacy, which refers to one's confidence in their ability to perform actions, and
- Outcome expectations, or beliefs about the positive or negative consequences of their actions.



Together, these factors determine domain-specific behavior, such as how employees manage their vacation time, based on their confidence and expected outcomes.

A Social Cognitive Perspective on Unused Vacation Days

This article explores the role of social cognitive theory in understanding why employees do not fully use their vacation days. The key factors include:

- *Detachment self-efficacy: Employees are less likely to take vacations if they do not believe they can fully detach from work while on vacation. This belief is crucial in motivating employees to take time off.*
- *Outcome expectations: Employees are influenced by expectations about the consequences of taking a vacation. Negative outcomes, such as workplace disapproval or financial concerns, reduce the likelihood of using vacation days.*
- *Interpersonal and self-evaluative concerns: Employees may worry about how their absence will impact their work performance or how peers will perceive them. Additionally, family-related positive expectations can encourage vacation-taking.*

Summary of Present Studies

This research explores how employees' detachment self-efficacy and expectations of vacation outcomes influence their use of paid vacation days.

Through four studies, the researchers developed and validated measures for these constructs, with Study 4 confirming that these social cognitive factors predict unused vacation days using two waves of data.

Study 1

Studies 1–3 is for Developing Measures

Study 1 aimed to identify common outcome expectations employees have about taking vacations.

- Full-time employees from various industries were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants, who had paid vacation days, were asked to list both positive and negative expectations about vacations. A total of 658 responses were collected, consisting of 353 positive and 305 negative expectations.
- Key positive outcomes included relaxation, feeling refreshed, fun, gaining perspective, connecting with loved ones, and progress on personal projects.
- Negative expectations included stress during planning and the vacation itself, being seen as less committed by supervisors, burdening coworkers, falling behind at work and home, and financial strain.

To analyze responses, independent parallel coding was used to categorize these outcomes, and item pools were generated to reflect each category. The study resulted in 11 items for detachment self-efficacy, 66 for positive expectations, and 72 for negative expectations, with content validity analysis refining the items.

Study 2

- 379 participants were recruited via MTurk to examine the structure of vacation-related outcome expectations. After applying attention checks, 316 valid responses were retained.
- Participants completed 11 self-efficacy items and 66 positive and 72 negative outcome expectation items.
- Exploratory factor analysis revealed 18 factors, with the “feeling refreshed” dimension merging with “being relaxed.” Iterative removal of low-loading and cross-loading items resulted in a 13-factor solution, including detachment self-efficacy, five positive outcome expectations, and seven negative outcome expectations.
- Further item reduction based on internal and judgmental qualities led to a final set of 57 items, all demonstrating good reliability ($\alpha \geq .89$).

Study 3

- 372 participants were recruited via MTurk to confirm the factor structure of measures developed in previous studies.
- Participants provided responses on detachment self-efficacy (6 items), positive outcome expectations (20 items), and negative outcome expectations (31 items) using a 7-point Likert scale.
- Confirmatory factor analysis showed that a two-dimensional solution for emotional expectations (positive and negative) provided a better fit. The final model included five positive and seven negative outcome expectations, with all standardized item loadings above 0.60.
- Overall, the final measures demonstrated good psychometric properties, including high reliability ($\alpha \geq .84$).

Study 4

Study 4 aimed to test social cognitive factors predicting employees' unused vacation days. Researchers hypothesized that low detachment self-efficacy (confidence in detaching from work) and negative expectations about vacation outcomes would explain unused vacation days. Additional goals were to assess convergent and discriminant validity of the measures and evaluate their psychometric properties.

- *The study involved 1,400 U.S. employees across industries, with data collected in two waves.*
- *Detachment self-efficacy, positive and negative outcome expectations, and control variables were measured at Time 1,*
- *while vacation usage was measured at Time 2.*

Results showed that detachment self-efficacy was negatively correlated with work addiction and work-related rumination.

The study also evaluated the impact of company policies, such as “use it or lose it,” on employees' likelihood to use their vacation days. After data cleaning, the final sample included 660 participants, with detailed reliability ($\alpha \geq .90$) and validity checks confirming the measures' robustness.

Study 4 - Results

Summary of Results from the Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Regression Analyses

- 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA): The 13-factor model (Detachment Self-Efficacy, five positive outcome expectations, and seven negative outcome expectations) replicated well in another sample with strong fit indices (CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.05).*
- 2. Convergent and Discriminant Validity: Detachment self-efficacy negatively correlated with work addiction and work-related rumination, while only weakly correlating with job self-efficacy. Positive and negative outcome expectations aligned with positive and negative affectivity, confirming distinct constructs.*
- 3. Unused Vacation Days (Negative Binomial Regression):*
 - More vacation days led to more unused days.*
 - A "use it or lose it" policy resulted in fewer unused days.*
 - Higher detachment self-efficacy predicted a 6% decrease in unused vacation days, while expectations of relaxation decreased unused days by 12%. Conversely, negative financial expectations increased unused days by 10%.*

Supplementary Analyses: Social cognitive predictors were more impactful for employees with fewer vacation days, suggesting these constructs are less relevant for those with more vacation days.

General Discussion

This research explored why employees leave vacation days unused and found that domain-specific social cognitive factors like detachment self-efficacy, expectations of relaxation, and concerns about negative financial impacts play a role.

Key Points:

- 1.** Recovery Literature Contribution: The study shows that individual factors, like detachment self-efficacy, influence whether employees use their vacation days, contributing to recovery literature.
- 2.** Detachment Self-Efficacy: Employees' belief in their ability to mentally detach from work predicts whether they engage in recovery activities like taking vacations.
- 3.** Outcome Expectations: Low expectations of relaxation and concerns about financial costs were key factors in unused vacation days.
- 4.** Work-Life Policy Use: The study suggests expanding the understanding of why work-life policies (e.g., parental leave) are underused by adopting a social cognitive approach to uncover psychological barriers.

This research highlights the importance of targeting detachment self-efficacy and outcome expectations to increase vacation usage and improve well-being.

Demographic and Job-Related Predictors of Unused Vacation Days

Past research has shown that demographic and job-related factors predict employees' use of vacation days, but this study found no significant associations.

The inclusion of the organization's vacation policy, particularly "use it or lose it" policies, was the strongest predictor, explaining why other variables did not significantly influence unused vacation days.

Future Research and Limitations

Future research should explore social cognitive predictors of unused vacation days across different industries and break activities. Supervisor encouragement plays a key role in shaping employees' detachment self-efficacy, which influences vacation use.

- A limitation is the lack of focus on moderators like role identification and industry-specific barriers.
- Additionally, research should investigate how many vacation days are required to improve health and well-being, as using all vacation days may not always be necessary for positive effects.

Practical Implications

Preliminary practical implications suggest that supervisors can promote employee vacation use by modeling and encouraging detachment, improving self-efficacy, and normalizing practices that facilitate detachment.

Organizational policies like “use it or lose it” and “paid, paid vacations” may also reduce financial barriers and encourage vacation usage.

However, research is needed to explore the broader impacts of these policies, as their effectiveness may depend on the organizational climate and employee demographics.

Conclusion

The article develops a social cognitive framework explaining why employees avoid using all their paid vacation days.

Key factors include a lack of belief in fully detaching from work, low expectations of relaxation, and fears of negative financial outcomes.

Addressing these factors could increase vacation use and improve employee health and well-being.



Thank you!
