

Clocking up the hours



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 Australians are stockpiling their annual leave at a cost to their health, wellbeing and family life, writes ALEXANDRA TREDREA.

A BOOMING economy and demands on workers mean Australians are holding on to the equivalent of 70 million days of annual leave. While full-time employees are usually entitled to at least four weeks' annual leave each year, research suggests some people are struggling to achieve a work-life balance.

A survey by Tourism Australia, released in 2006, found that Australian workers had stockpiled 70 million days of annual leave.

This equated to \$11 billion of holiday pay. As a result of the findings, Tourism Australia and the Australian Human Resources Institute launched the No Leave, No Life campaign to encourage people to take holidays - for their wellbeing and to ensure greater workplace productivity.

But experts say that despite the economic and health benefits associated with employees having annual leave, it is not always easy to get away from the office.

Nick Deligiannis, a director of recruitment firm Hays, believes Australia's strong economy is contributing to more employees stockpiling annual leave.

"With business activity high, a strong economy and a shortage of skills, it's no surprise some employees ... are working longer to cover increasing workloads," Mr Deligiannis says.

"Unemployment is low and despite most workplaces operating at staffing capacity, business growth is high and workloads are surging.

"This doesn't mean employers are stopping their employees from taking any leave. However, businesses are generally not en-

TIPS ON TAKING A BREAK, FROM NICK DELIGIANNIS

- Make clear arrangements with a trustworthy colleague who can monitor incoming emails and phone calls while you are away.

- Ensure messages are left on voicemail and email, letting people know you are on holiday, who they can contact in your absence and when you will be back.



- Check upcoming deadlines to make sure all tasks are covered before you leave.

- Only take your mobile or laptop with you on leave if you absolutely must.

- Don't schedule meetings for your first day back after leave.

couraging extended breaks of four weeks or more."

He also says some people struggle to switch off from work while on leave.

"While most of us look forward to taking a break and getting away from the daily routine, some just can't leave the office behind," Mr Deligiannis says. Psychologist and personal life coach Darryl Cross says time away from work is critical for people's health and wellbeing.

"When you are working, you have to be at a certain level of arousal to work effectively," Dr Cross says.

"To maintain that level and not, in a sense, come off that peak or off that high leads directly into burnout.

"Burnout is associated with increased anxiety and eventually depression and then your health starts to give out."

Overworked people may experience health complaints such as high blood pressure, general lethargy and fatigue.

"Australians work hard and over the past 30-odd years have needed to work faster and harder, so unfortunately they haven't learned how to kick back, how to relax and how to de-stress," Dr Cross says. "They are not being proactive and taking time out ... for recreation and social activities."

But he says all is not lost for those caught on the work treadmill.

"Be proactive and take some positive steps now before something happens that is rather major in your life," he says.

"Don't wait for the Mack truck."

Even members of the newly elected federal Labor Government have been urged to maintain a balanced life.

During last month's official swearing in of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his ministry, Governor-General Michael Jeffery said: "I encourage you all to try very hard to achieve a balance in life, a healthy lifestyle, reasonable rest and time with family and friends."

Talent2 state general manager Laura Mabikafola says it makes better economic sense for businesses to ensure employees take annual leave. "If an employee stockpiles their annual leave, the organisation may need to look at replacing the person for an extended period of time," she says. "From an employer's perspective, it's much easier to plan ahead if a person takes leave regularly throughout the year, so they can assign (their work) to different employees." Regular annual leave is also essential for the mental and physical health of employees, she says.

"We have often seen people who have not had a break for a while who are frustrated, tired, lack motivation and enthusiasm and can tend to focus on minor issues," she says. "There are emotional and mental pressures that can build up. This can lead to burnout and angst towards employers and families."

Adam Internet managing director Scott Hicks makes sure regular annual leave is booked for himself and his 100 employees.

"If anyone's building up their leave, we actually ask people about taking a holiday," he says. "We keep on top of those things."

Adam Internet employees are also made to take daily breaks.

"We force staff to take at least a one-hour lunch break," Mr Hicks says.

"We actually say 'Go away. Do something productive and fun'."