

Financial Times: How a sabbatical can benefit you — and your employer

Level: Intermediate (B1–B2)

Time: 60–90 minutes

Business topics: work/life balance, taking time off work, employer/employee relationship

Business language focus: language associated with the benefits of taking time off work

Activities: In this lesson, students will:

- read a business article first published in the *Financial Times* and look at the language necessary to understand and talk about the article;
- learn or revise some business collocations;
- discuss aspects of the article in greater depth;
- research sabbatical activities and their benefits and report back to the class.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student, possible internet access for Exercise 6

Group size: All of the tasks can be completed in pairs or groups, so that as much communication as possible takes place in the class. However, this lesson plan can also be used in a one-to-one teaching situation.



This lesson is based on an authentic article from the *Financial Times*, republished here with its full, original text.

The article discusses the pros and cons of taking a sabbatical.

1. Warmer

Students decide which of the benefits are the most important and which are the least important by ranking them from one to six. They should be prepared to give reasons for their choice. They can also be asked to think of further benefits that would be attractive to prospective employees.

2. Key words and expressions

Students search for words and expressions in the text and write them next to the definitions while noticing how the words are used in context.

Key:

1. *work/life balance*
2. *sabbatical*
3. *recharge batteries*
4. *seek out*
5. *misconception*
6. *initiative*
7. *stress-test*
8. *raring to go*
9. *downside*
10. *frugally*
11. *impetus*
12. *take someone up on something*

3. Understanding the article

Students work in pairs and decide if the statements are true or false. They correct the false statements.

Key:

1. *True.*
2. *False. She left a job she hated.*
3. *True.*
4. *False. Employees at Deloitte can take breaks of up to two years after working at the company for three years or more.*
5. *True.*
6. *True.*
7. *False. The downside for employees is loss of income. The downside for employers is the loss of an employee for a time.*
8. *False. Organisations and employees both benefit from sabbaticals.*

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4. Business language – Two-word phrases

Students match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text. They then check their answers by looking in the text and seeing the phrases in context.

Key:

- | | |
|------|------|
| 1. e | 5. a |
| 2. d | 6. g |
| 3. h | 7. b |
| 4. f | 8. c |

5. Discussion

In small groups, students discuss the questions which pick up on and expand on topics and quotes from the article. Hold a short whole-group feedback session and compare and contrast each group's answers and input.

6. Wider business theme – Taking unpaid leave

Ask students to open a search on their computer or on their smartphone. Ask them to search for 'things to do on a sabbatical' (or similar) and make a list of the suggestions they find. Then ask them to search for 'the benefits of taking a sabbatical' and find out the ways in which taking a break from their job can help employees.

They then compare their findings with the rest of the class. Ask students to decide which suggestion for a sabbatical activity is the best.



One-to-one teaching

This task can be adapted so that the student does the above as homework and then reports back (to you) in the next lesson.

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1 Warmer

Rank these benefits that some companies offer their employees in order from 1 (the most important) to 6 (the least important). Give reasons for your choice.

- _____ free medical insurance
- _____ the opportunity to take unpaid leave whenever you want it
- _____ paid travel to and from work
- _____ recreational facilities available for all staff
- _____ membership of a private pension scheme
- _____ four weeks' paid holiday a year

2 Key words and expressions

Find the words or phrases in the article that match the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. the relationship between the amount of time and effort that someone gives to work and the amount they give to other aspects of life, such as their family (three words, para 1)

2. a period away from work without pay when someone can rest, travel or engage in another activity (para 1) _____
3. to rest after being very busy so that you will be ready to start working again (2 words, para 1)

4. to find something by looking for it in a determined way (two words, para 7)

5. a wrong belief or opinion as a result of not understanding something (para 8)

6. the ability to decide in an independent way what to do and when to do it (para 9)

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7. to evaluate the strength of a business and find out how it could respond to extreme situations

(two words, para 17) _____

8. excited about something and impatient to begin it (three words, para 19)

9. the disadvantage or negative aspect of something (para 20) _____

10. in a way that involves spending very little money and only on things that are really necessary

(two words, para 21) _____

11. a force that helps something to happen or develop more quickly (para 23)

12. to accept an offer or invitation that someone has made (five words, para 24)

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How a sabbatical can benefit you — and your employer

Extended time off refreshes workers and allows employers to stress-test their teams

BY JANINA CONBOYE

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'How a sabbatical can benefit you — and your employer', Janina Conboye, 21 February 2019, © The Financial Times Ltd

- 1 In the pursuit of a good work/life balance, employees are increasingly opting for sabbaticals. They are taking unpaid leave — for weeks or even months — to recharge batteries, pursue a project or even change careers. And despite knowing that some staff will not return, a growing number of companies now offer opportunities to take a break.
- 2 If you feel it is time to take a break, how do you decide what type of break you need; how do you prepare; and how do you get the best out of your time off?
- 3 Emma Rosen, 26, is author of the *Radical Sabbatical: The Millennial Handbook to the Quarter-life Crisis*. She left a job she hated and used a sabbatical to try out 25 potential new career options.
- 4 Before leaving her job she still thought carefully about how she was going to spend her time and what she aimed to get out of it. "For me, going to a yoga retreat wasn't going to solve the problem," she says.
- 5 If you are considering time out because you are unhappy then it is important not to make any snap decisions, adds Ms Rosen, as it can be "quite hard to pick apart these feelings". She advocates taking a week or a month to write a note at the end of each day. "Then you can have a more objective view."
- 6 This will help you decide whether you just need a change of job or a new industry altogether.
- 7 If you want to take a "work"-based approach to your sabbatical, Ms Rosen suggests setting out what you enjoy doing and what sort of working environment you want, without any particular jobs in mind. Then you can use these criteria to help you seek out possible work options.

In Ms Rosen's case, she also had to think about how she would sell her career break to a new employer. She believes there is a misconception that a sabbatical is a big holiday, so it is important to make it clear to employers what you have learnt, she says. It is easier to sell the hard skills and focus less on the soft.

"I learnt about social media, marketing and advertising. I'd learnt to work in an environment of constant change. I showed I had initiative and could challenge norms," Ms Rosen adds. Following her experience, she is now a writer and speaker advocating for alternative ways of working.

Others just want a break and then to return to their original roles — but perhaps with different working arrangements.

Deloitte, the professional services firm, offers both unpaid leave and longer career breaks of up to two years to employees who have served three years or more. Emma Codd, the UK managing partner for talent, says some may think about what their next move might be once they are back in their job but quite often it is more a case of people wanting more flexibility on their return.

Liz Neate, an assistant director in financial advisory at Deloitte, took four months off to do volunteer work for The Land and Equity Movement of Uganda. She had been involved with the organisation — which helps to support Uganda's poor to claim their land rights — since 2012 and had ambitions to live and work overseas.

"The only way to do that was to put a pause on my career," she says.

As in the case of Ms Rosen, preparation is key. Ms Neate informed her team and started planning for the break six months before. "The projects I was working on were very long-term ... so I had to give a lot of notice to my team," she adds.

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15 On returning to work, Ms Neate says one of the main benefits was renewed energy and perspective. “Stepping away for four months ... I think it definitely refreshed my approach to my projects,” she says. The feeling of coming back to projects almost with new eyes “was really beneficial”.

16 There were also other unintended but positive consequences. Her colleagues and clients were interested in what she had been doing. She also started an arrangement with Deloitte that allows her to work 80 per cent of the year for the firm and the other 20 per cent working for Lemu.

17 Research suggests that companies also benefit. David Burkus, author and associate professor of leadership and innovation at Oral Roberts University, says sabbaticals allow employers to stress-test the company. Many organisations attempt to operate in as lean a way as possible in terms of headcount, he adds, and “a brief sabbatical allows an organisation to see if it could survive a more unexpected employee departure”.

18 And when managers and senior leaders take sabbaticals, Prof Burkus says “a company can try new talent in temporary leadership roles”.

19 Ms Codd says the benefit for the company is that people return feeling “raring to go”. “Employees come back really engaged with the firm and in a great place,” she says.

The downside to taking a sabbatical is loss of income. Even if you do not leave your job, extended time off is generally unpaid so you will need to have funding in place to support yourself.

Ms Rosen decided to leave her job completely, so had lived frugally and saved as much of her salary as she could in the months leading up to her sabbatical.

The downside for employers is the loss of an employee for a time, but, as Prof Burkus adds: “It would be better to know that in a temporary and reversible setting than to learn it the hard way should that employee depart permanently.”

Organisations and employees can clearly benefit from sabbaticals. Either they reconnect refreshed staff with their original companies, or are the impetus for a new direction for both parties: there might be a new corporate hire and a new job for the employee.

When employers realise the benefits of career breaks, they should create an environment where workers feel they can actually take time off. “People won’t take you up on it unless you have a culture that encourages people to feel able to do it,” Ms Codd says.

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3 Understanding the article

Are these statements true or false according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. More and more employees are choosing to take unpaid leave.
2. Emma Rosen left a job that she loved in order to try out some new career options.
3. She thinks people should think carefully before they decide to take time off.
4. Employees at Deloitte can take breaks of up to three years after working at the company for two years or more.
5. Liz Neate still works for Deloitte but spends some of her time doing volunteer work in Uganda.
6. David Burkus suggests that a brief sabbatical allows a company to see what would happen if an employee left unexpectedly.

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- The downside of a sabbatical for employers is loss of income.
- Employees benefit from sabbaticals but companies don't.

4 Business language – Two-word phrases

Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

- | | |
|---------------|-------------|
| 1. unpaid | a. work |
| 2. career | b. term |
| 3. snap | c. role |
| 4. soft | d. break |
| 5. volunteer | e. leave |
| 6. stress | f. skills |
| 7. long | g. test |
| 8. leadership | h. decision |

5 Discussion

- Should all companies have to offer sabbaticals to their employees? Why / Why not?
- The article describes some of the benefits that companies can get from offering sabbaticals to their employees. What are those benefits and are there any you can think of that could be added to the list?
- The article also refers to a “good work/life balance.” What, in your view, makes a good work/life balance? Give reasons for your answer.

6 Wider business theme – Taking unpaid leave

- Go online and search for ‘things to do on a sabbatical’. Make a list of the types of activities that people often do when they take unpaid leave from work. Then search for ‘benefits of taking a sabbatical’ and make a list of all the ways in which taking a break from your job can help you.
- Compare your findings with the class.