# PTO 101 for Employees

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PTO - three little letters that carry so much meaning. After health insurance and more flexible hours, paid time off is one of the most important benefits to job seekers, according to a recent study from Fractl. It shouldn't sound surprising since a decent paid time off policy contributes heavily to employees' work-life balance. There are a lot of questions that surround your paid vacation days, from whether you should take off at all to the best time to request PTO. So whether your organization has an unlimited PTO policy, or you're counting your accrued days each month, here are some basics for making the most out of your paid time off - while still being a good employee. **To take or not to take, that is the question** Calm down, Hamlet - the answer's simpler than you think. (Hint: take time off!) So why take time off? The number one answer is your mental health. Constant and consistent days, weeks, and months of working in a row can frequently lead to burn out - mentally, emotionally, and even physically. Thankfully, taking some time off from work to recharge ourselves can have several beneficial effects:

## 1. Recharge your productivity

Burnout means decreased productivity, poor performance, and high stress. Our productivity comes from our mental energy, which also determines how focused and organized our brains are. When our mental energy is regularly depleted, there's a simple solution - recharge! 64 percent of people are "refreshed and excited to get back to my job" after a vacation. Unplugging - and I mean unplugging, not checking your work email hourly - lets you rest and recharge. While you're on vacation, whether in the Caribbean or only in your house, your brain works in different ways that allow it to reset - so you can come back to work ready to succeed.

## 2. Reset your mental state

Beyond burnout, working without a break can also lead to heightened levels of stress and anxiety. Even if it's not a full vacation, one mental health day - maybe even a regularly scheduled day once a quarter - can help lower stress and re-energize your outlook toward work. So either way, you choose to take your time off, make sure you're planning enjoyable activities that will help you either work out stress or relax it away - not increase it further! **Related: Is Unlimited PTO Right for Your Company?**

## 3. Improve your work-life balance

Taking some time off work can help you refocus on elements of your personal life - your relationships, your hobbies, your dogs. Who you are as a person is made up of many elements, both in your work life and your personal life. If you've been overly obsessed with work lately, take a step back from your job to take it all in and re-energize your pursuits. You'll feel more balanced, in control, and ready to attack your work with renewed vigor when you return. Decision made - you're going to use your vacation days! Break out the margaritas! But before you book that plane ticket, let's talk about some best practices for planning and requesting time off. **"Etiquette means behaving yourself a little better than is absolutely essential." - Will Cuppy** While different organizations may vary in terms of their specific protocol, there's an etiquette to requesting time off that you can apply in most situations.

## 1. Take cues from your company culture

This one comes up in particular whenever you're starting a new job with a new company. Every organization has its official vacation policy, of course - but it will also have its attitude towards actually taking time off, which may or may not align with the official policy. It's important to take some time to gauge your new company's culture and understand the best (and worst) times to take your PTO.

## 2. Ask, don't just take

Technically, according to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), companies are not legally required to offer paid time off or vacation. Obviously, if your benefits include a certain amount of paid time off, it's your right to take it - but let's approach this with a little grace, shall we? Present your time off request as an actual *request*, rather than a demand. It's possible the days you're requesting may present a huge problem for your team, or that your manager needs you in the office on one of those days. Recognize that requesting time off is a conversation, not an edict - and choose a good time to approach your manager with the request, with enough time in advance to adequately plan for your time out of the office.

## 3. Plan with your manager

This goes along with the previous piece of advice. Work with your manager when requesting approval for time off to make sure all bases are covered while you're gone. Is an important deliverable due that day? Will you potentially miss a huge meeting? Discuss your plans with your manager to make sure that your requested days are a good time for you to take off. Plan to get ahead on projects and have everything lined up before you go, and make sure that you have a backup plan in place for a coworker to cover you if something comes up.

## 4. Be considerate of coworkers

Everyone earns their time off, but no one likes that person that consistently leaves their coworkers in a lurch. Do you always request time off at the busiest times of the year? Are you the one who always takes a vacation on the same holidays, leaving your coworkers to work? This point comes down to common courtesy - don't regularly leave your coworkers in a situation to pick up the slack at bad times. Working with your manager will help avoid this, too! *Can't get enough PTO talk? Check out our podcast for more discussion on vacation policies and PTO etiquette with HR Director Rebecca McCormick and the Viventium Voices crew!*

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