

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 8, 2008 - VOL. CCLI NO. 6

## MANAGING YOUR CAREER

### How One Executive Used a Sabbatical To Fix His Career

ONE MORNING in 2005, Daniel H. Marcus awoke in a pitch-black hotel room. The executive-pay consultant knew he needed to see a corporate client, his third in three days in three far-flung cities. But for several minutes, he didn't know where he was or who awaited him.

"That doesn't bode well for my work," Mr. Marcus thought to himself. His memory lapse proved a blessing in disguise. With constant travel and 60-hour weeks pushing him close to burnout, the veteran partner at Mercer, a major human-resource consultant, decided he needed a sabbatical.

Mr. Marcus pursued an elaborate self-improvement scheme and sharpened his professional focus during an eight-month break, which ended in November 2006. "I'm a better consultant today because I bring a more balanced perspective to my work," he says. The 51-year-old adviser now toils about 40 hours a week for Semler Brossy Consulting Group in Los Angeles.

A sabbatical can enhance your career, especially if you acquire valuable skills, experience and insights. Extended breaks allow for personal goals, such as travel, study or research. A look at Mr. Marcus's playbook offers helpful moves to follow—and missteps to avoid.

By Joann S. Lublin

Sabbaticals are attracting greater attention these days from the nation's frazzled and disengaged workforce, according to Dan Clements, who co-wrote "Escape 101: Sabbaticals Made Simple." He took five in 15 years. About 16% of U.S. employers offered unpaid sabbaticals and 4% gave paid ones in 2007, the Society for Human Resource Management reports.

At management consultancy Accenture, based in Hamilton, Bermuda, for example, more than 150 U.S. staffers already have participated in its Future Leave program, launched early last year. Professionals with three years' service may take three months off without pay. They get benefits and guaranteed re-employment.

Sabbatical coaches, in general, are seeing increased demand for their services.

A successful sabbatical requires thoughtful planning. "You are taking a courageous risk," notes Stefanie Smith, a New York executive coach. "Make sure the return on that risk is worth it."

MR. MARCUS SPENT months preparing to temporarily abandon his stressful job. Working hard was nothing new. He had accumulated more than 25 weeks of unused vacation by 2001, when Mercer bought SCA Consulting, his small employer. But Mr. Marcus disliked the big-company environment at Mercer. "The number of clients I had to maintain to 'meet the numbers' didn't allow me to be as deeply involved as I felt was needed," he explains.

Suddenly busier serving 22 companies, he reduced his exercise regimen and regained half of the 30 pounds he had recently shed from his 5-foot-9-inch frame.

In late 2005, Mr. Marcus informed associates and clients about his unpaid sabbatical, set to start the following March. He was unsure how long he would be gone and even if he would return. "Was my problem consulting or where I was doing the consulting?" he wondered. "How do I get that passion back?"

He felt ready to relinquish a profession practiced for 26 years. Yet he couldn't let go entirely; he occasionally advised two concerns during his break.

Mr. Marcus drafted a "Sabbatical Framework." It was a one-page blueprint that described four ideal states (calm, comfort, sharing, enjoyment) followed by intended actions and outcomes for his body, mind and soul. Actions ranged from exploring teaching, to getting involved in new businesses, to playing competitive poker.

TO IMPROVE HIS body, Mr. Marcus spent a week at a Mexican health spa, where he learned yoga, drawing and jewelry-making. Later, he worked out almost every day and took his new puppy for long beach walks near his Marina del Rey home. He lost 10 pounds.

Professionally, he explored teaching part time at UCLA's business school, invested \$125,000 in two young unprofitable businesses ("I wanted to put myself in an uncomfortable position and try new things," he says), and played in the World Series of Poker. He says the Las Vegas event helped him realize he should focus on what he did best—advising corporate boards. He also vowed to work only 30 hours a week, leaving room for teaching.

He negotiated his re-entry with Mercer, which accepted his demands. But the day he regained his corner office, he had a rude awakening. "Within five minutes, I had to run to the bathroom. I had stomach problems," he recalls.

Ms. Smith believes Mr. Marcus failed to prepare adequately for his return. "He didn't make a substantive, written evaluation of what he wanted from his job, his colleagues and his work environment," the coach says.

Mr. Clements warns sabbatical returnees of potential letdowns: "Your job may seem unimportant, unstimulating, overstimulating or just plain hard," his book says. "It'll pass (or you'll find another job if it doesn't)."

Mr. Marcus found the other job. He joined Semler Brossy, a tiny pay consultancy, in August. He credits the sabbatical. "I corrected my misjudgment about sticking with Mercer quicker than I would have before," he notes. A small firm "is where I should be."

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