

# Buddy, Can You Spare the Time?

## A look at the bright side of furloughs

By Genevieve Zook

A popular song from the Great Depression, “Buddy Can You Spare a Dime,” comforted Americans living through one of our country’s worst economic crisis. The song still resonates, but let’s hope in the aftermath of the recession, this generation is able to do more than stand in line, waiting for bread. Perhaps we can more wisely use the time we have been given. Specifically, those of us who have been furloughed—ordered to take unpaid time off from our jobs—should consider our newfound freedom. Although we may not recognize it as such, we’ve been given a rare gift for the working class—the gift of leisure.

I don’t mean to take our furloughs lightly. There are definite costs associated with being furloughed, financial burdens many of us are ill-prepared to handle. Certainly no one asked for this time, although some furloughs are called “voluntary.” Some are attempting to fight the furlough mandate, and labor unions in several states are actively pursuing action in the courts.

But despite protests and baffling statements sent to us from human resource departments regarding the guidelines for our furlough leave, for better or worse, we the furloughed are the newest of the new leisure class.

## The Lucky Ones

So far, 25 state governments have implemented furloughs for their employees, and others states are considering furloughs, wage freezes, or both, all in a valiant effort to reduce soaring budget deficits. As for those in the private sector, Watson Wyatt released a survey of human resources executives in April 2009 from 141 U.S.-based companies finding that 17 percent of respondents have mandatory furloughs and 11 percent have voluntary furloughs.

Ironically, those furloughed employees are the lucky ones. Unlike their unemployed brothers and sisters, they still have a job; in fact, furloughs appear to be a means of reducing layoffs, and it’s reported to be working. So despite the pay cut, it’s no wonder that those who have been furloughed count themselves among the economic survivors.

A frequent comment repeated by people who are furloughed is, “I understand the necessity.” They admit this is a shared pain and understand that it helps to prevent more layoffs. If they protest at all, it’s ordinarily against the sillier rules and odd details of the furlough. But even those who work in traditionally stable positions rarely affected by a recession, such as the faculty of an academic institution, know what the bottom of a barrel looks like, and they appear for the most part to accept that the economic barrel is emptier than it has been since the Great Depression. A few of us even remember those times.

## The New Leisure Class

It has been a while since the American worker has been offered leisure as an alternative to money, perhaps as far back as the Great Depression when W. K. Kellogg instituted the six-hour day in Battle Creek, Michigan. Now, once again, the American workforce has been granted the opportunity to take a breather and re-evaluate its work habits. Time is money, so says common wisdom, but before the recession, we spent every second of that as well.

Ironically, it was not so long ago that the media was filled with life/balance advice for overworked professionals overwhelmed with stress and showing signs of fatigue and burnout. The advice experts gave us tips on how to balance the demands of our jobs and families, usually by asking us to either take some “me time” (so we happily indulged our inner child) or by organizing our stuff into neatly arranged piles. We were told to “un-clutter,” because this would free us for important tasks. So we labeled our office folders and put our files in brightly colored boxes. We took yoga for relaxation and focus, breathing in and

breathing out. Then, in a gasp, came the recession.

Belatedly, the overworked American has been handed that valuable commodity, “time.” Time minus money, but nothing’s perfect.

## What Do You Do with Your Furlough Days?

A May 2009 article in *Redbook*, “10 Good Things About Our Bad Economy” by Jennifer Brown Conroy, lists a few ideas that I believe can apply to the furloughed employee:

**Be Creative.** Focus on your creativity in work and play. Take a look at your life. This may be a great time to start a new adventure. Find the courage to do something you always thought was out of reach because you had other commitments.

**Spend Time with Loved Ones.** When is that ever a bad idea?

**Volunteer.** Renew your dedication to community service at such places as your local library, school, or humane society. (Your library may be especially in need of your help; in the 1930s, in Battle Creek, Michigan, library patronage skyrocketed with the institution of Kellogg’s six-hour day.) Last year, Utah established the 10-hour, four-day workweek and, since then, volunteering has increase statewide. Remember when we all had time to volunteer to help with our child’s school play? Me neither, but now we may have the opportunity to do so.

**Healthier You.** Extra leisure and less money could make us healthier. Discover the cost-saving advantage of purchasing nutrient-rich foods at the grocery store compared to eating out, and use some of your time to exercise. Many now bike to work to save on gas and parking, and to “go green.” But even if you can’t bike, taking the bus to work means walking a little more, and that can make you healthier.

**Be Proactive.** It takes courage to make changes, to innovate, and to take charge. Always wanted to teach a class? Now may be that time. Think about your career goals and try using your time to do something new.

**Remember.** As our parents told us every summer vacation (when we told them for the umpteenth time how bored we were), “Find a constructive use for your time.”

Don’t just sit there—find the fun. This recession won’t last forever but we may learn something valuable before it is done. Fortunately, we have choices, and that alone is empowering. ■

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