Getting staff to consume leave

Q: Like many other companies, we see some difficulty in getting our employees to consume all their annual leave. Then there are those who have to forfeit some leave after already accumulating them for over two years. What are the causes and how can we resolve this?

A: The tendency for employees not to consume their annual leave is fairly common here in Singapore, in my opinion. This phenomenon might be due to several factors. First, I believe it might be more common among the professional, managerial, and executive ranks. These individuals simply might not be able to get their work done or feel pressured to be at work in order to fulfil their job responsibilities, and just don’t feel they can get away.

Second, there might be some cultural aspects that somehow discourage employees from taking all their leave. For instance, employees might feel that they will be judged unfavourably if they utilise all of it. A third possibility is that employees see their managers as role models, so if managers do not take leave, employees perceive that “we shouldn’t either”.

Another, perhaps darker, possibility is that companies really do not want employees to be gone too long anyway – and wish to utilise employee labour as much as possible.

There could also be too much leave time given and employees simply do not desire these long periods of down time. There are substantial differences across cultures with regard to how much leave time employees have. For example, some countries in Europe have very long leave arrangements, whereas in Asia, the leave time given is usually much less.

How can employers encourage their employees to consume all their annual leave? One way is simply to communicate that the company feels it is important, and that it helps employees refresh and devote time to their family and other interests. Also, managers should take their own annual leave as well.

On a related matter, I observed that employees will often stay at work for long hours and only go home when their bosses leave. This is somewhat culturally specific – it is a phenomenon I observed frequently in Japan.

– Richard Arvey,
Department of Management & Organisation