

Sabbaticals: Mental Health, Talent and Rest as a Business Strategy

HR Executive | Mike Nemeth | May 27, 2026

Workplace stress has become one of the biggest challenges facing employees and employers today. Whether during Mental Health Awareness Month or the the rest of the year, it's important that we move beyond simply acknowledging the issue and start looking at practical ways companies can build healthier, more sustainable careers.

According to the American Institute of Stress, 83% of U.S. workers experience work-related stress. For employers, that stress shows up in turnover, absenteeism, disengagement and lost productivity. Many companies have responded with wellness tools like meditation apps, hotlines or the occasional mental health day. Those resources can be helpful, but they often address stress only after it has already built up.

A sabbatical is a structured investment in your people and your organization. When well-planned and supported by the company's culture, it can be a meaningful reset for employees and a smart investment for the business. It gives people time to step away, recharge, reflect on where they are in their career and life, and return with more clarity and energy.

For companies, it sends an important message: We trust our people, and we want them to build careers that are sustainable over the long term.

Making sabbaticals work for employees and companies

A sabbatical can be incredibly valuable, but it does require planning. It should not feel like someone disappearing from the business overnight. In most cases, companies and employees should begin preparing at least three months in advance. That gives teams time to map out responsibilities, share knowledge and make sure day-to-day work can continue without unnecessary stress.

This is especially important in fast-growing companies, startups and small or mid-sized businesses where people often wear many hats. The pressure to always be available, always be needed and never step back is often highest in these environments. That pressure is also exactly where burnout takes root. When one person steps away, the impact can be felt quickly if there is not enough visibility or preparation, but the cost of never stepping away can be far greater.

But that is also where the benefit comes in. A well-run sabbatical program forces a company to build stronger systems. It encourages better documentation, clearer ownership, more collaboration and less reliance on one person being the only keeper of critical knowledge.

Managers play a big role here. They need to talk about sabbaticals in a positive way, not as a sign that someone is checked out or less committed. The message should be the opposite: taking time to recharge can be part of a healthy, high-performing career.

The reality is that any team may need to adapt when someone is away for an extended period, whether that is for a sabbatical, parental leave, illness or another life event. Building that flexibility is not just an operational decision; it's a cultural one. Organizations that normalize time away and prepare thoughtfully for it are building environments where people feel psychologically safe enough to say they need a break. That kind of safety does not just benefit individuals. It makes the whole organization more resilient, more honest and more human.

Returning from a sabbatical also requires care. A thoughtful re-onboarding plan can help employees ease back in, understand what changed while they were away and reconnect with the team without feeling overwhelmed.

Sabbaticals are an organizational mental health strategy—not just a perk

This is the part that often gets overlooked: Sabbaticals are not only a benefit to the individual taking them; they are a structural investment in organizational mental health.

Burnout is not just a personal challenge, it's a systemic one. When employees are pushed past sustainable limits, especially in environments where success depends on a small number of high-performing people, the consequences ripple outward. Productivity drops, engagement erodes, turnover rises and institutional knowledge walks out the door. Replacing a burned-out employee costs far more than supporting one who stays.

A formal sabbatical program signals something important to everyone in the organization, not just those who use it. It communicates that the company does not see rest and performance as opposing forces. That belief, when embedded in company culture, shifts behavior at every level. People are less likely to glorify overwork. Managers are less likely to reward unsustainable output. Teams are more likely to build the kind of shared ownership that protects everyone—not just those who happened to take time off.

According to research analyzing more than 250 leaders' sabbatical experiences, the strongest predictor of whether someone will take a sabbatical is simply knowing someone who has taken one. When leaders model this behavior, it normalizes it and the culture of sustainable work begins to take hold at every level of the organization.

This is ultimately what a mental health strategy looks like in practice. A pattern of behavior that tells every employee their capacity to sustain themselves matters as much as their output.

Using the time intentionally

From the employee's side, the most important thing is to use the time intentionally. A sabbatical should not only be a last resort after burnout has already happened. Ideally, it becomes a preventive tool—a chance to pause and ask, "Where am I in my career and my life?" and "What do I need in order to come back feeling restored and motivated?"

That answer will look different for everyone, but the goal is the same: to use the time as a genuine reset, so that returning to work feels like a choice made from a place of clarity and energy, not obligation.