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SMALL BUSINESS

For the Self-Employed, It's an Endless Workweek

Recession Takes Away Vacations, Weekends as the Consequences of Missing a Business Opportunity Mount

BY SARAH E. NEEDLEMAN

Last summer, Richard Abels didn't think twice about leaving work behind for a four-day vacation in the Rocky Mountains with his two college-age daughters.

But a year later, the self-employed marketing and communications consultant isn't leaving town for anything other than business.

"Now is not the time to be taking off," says Mr. Abels, of Centennial, Colo., whose firm, **Abels Communication Co.**, doesn't have any employees. "I can't report losses the way big companies do."

Solo entrepreneurs, freelancers and other self-employed professionals have always struggled to take vacations, and the recession is making it even harder. Being out of pocket can mean missing one of a diminishing number of business leads, and the rising tide of unemployed

professionals has heightened competition for freelance work.

"If you don't get to the inquiries right away, they disappear," says Frank Natoli, one of two partners who make up the entire staff of **Lantern-Legal.com**, a legal-services provider in New York. "They'll call somebody else in a second."

While Mr. Natoli says his firm is seeing a steady flow of business, he's concerned it could quickly drop off if he or his partner were unavailable for too many days in a row.

"We're tied to the desk," says Mr. Natoli, whose idea of a day off has become working only a couple of hours on a Sunday morning. "When the phone rings, we have to be here to answer it."

Felicia Morgenstern, a freelance educational consultant, says she used to be so in de-

mand that she could reject assignments that conflicted with her vacation plans without worry. But now she says walking away from even one business opportunity could put her in a dangerous position.

"You say no to a job once, they may call you again," says Ms. Morgenstern, who works out of Baltimore and San Diego and can't remember her last day off. "But if you turn them down twice, they might start going to people who are more readily available."

Indeed, competition among freelancers is increasing. **Guru.com**, a freelance job site, saw its total membership grow to 906,979 in July, up 15% from the same month in 2008. And rival **Elnance.com** received 131,000 new applications from freelance professionals in the first half of

this year, a 40% increase compared with the same period in 2008. Applicants must pass an admissions test to join.

Some self-employed professionals may be able to stay connected to clients from afar using cellphones and other devices, but many say that defeats the purpose of taking time off.

"When I go on vacation, I want to go with a free mind," says Lawrence Rich, a real-estate broker in New York who works on commission. "The deals are closed. The checks are cashed."

But since the start of the mortgage crisis last year, Mr. Rich says he's been unable to get away, because transactions are more complex and take longer to complete.

"I'm babysitting my deals," says Mr. Rich, an independent contractor with **Prudential Douglas Elliman**. "Every time I make plans to go away, I have to cancel them, because another

deal is coming through. I'm not going to chance that there's going to be a problem."

Some entrepreneurs are finding a happy medium by keeping close enough to their businesses while on vacation to handle emergencies.

Laurie Halter, who runs media-relations firm **Charisma Communications** in Portland, Ore., with one part-time employee, is going camping with her family later this summer for three days. She only plans to check her BlackBerry occasionally.

"It's important for me to recharge," she says. "You come back with much fresher ideas."

Still, Ms. Halter won't leave any indication on her email or voicemail that she's on hiatus.

"It's almost seen as a weakness if you're going to be out," she says. "You want to be that go-to person for your clients."

In lieu of lengthy vacations, many self-employed profession-

als say they're taking a day or two off at a time to avoid burn-out, usually tacking them onto a weekend or holiday.

Gene Fairbrother, lead business consultant for the National Association for the Self-Employed, says at least occasional breaks from work are critical. People tend to perform poorly when overworked, and their personal and professional relationships can deteriorate.

"I don't want an electrician working his seventh day in a row wiring my house," he says.

Solo entrepreneurs may be able to take even more time off by enlisting trusted peers to temporarily fill in on their behalf, adds Sara Horowitz, founder and executive director of Freelancers Union, a national membership organization in Brooklyn, N.Y., for independent workers.

"Build your network and start having people who you can outsource work to," she suggests.



Lawrence Rich