

Maintaining Appropriate Communication Boundaries: The Vacation Edition

By Jim Armillay

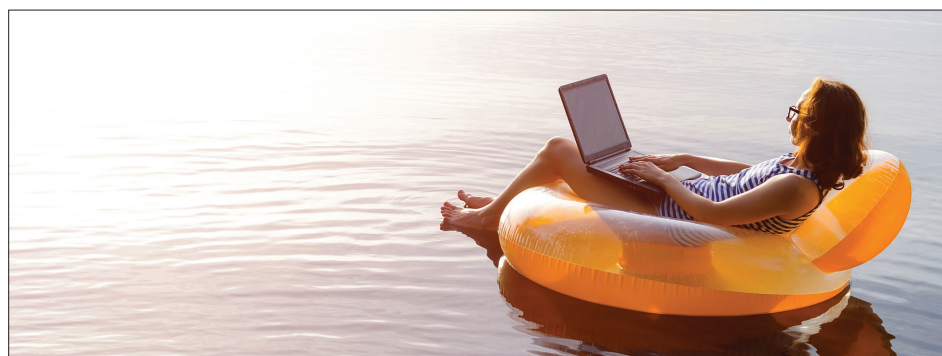
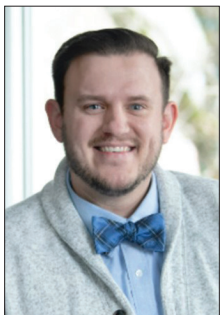
Picture this: You've just ordered a drink from the resort's pool bar. Your kids are safely preoccupied at the kids' club. You're lying near the beach, a gentle ocean breeze keeping you at the perfect temperature while still allowing you to get that much-needed dose of vitamin D. You're just about to open that book you bought six months ago but haven't had the time to read when you hear the unmistakable "ding" of a new email from your phone. The sound heralds both a return to reality and that unique twinge of anxiety only Microsoft Outlook notifications can provoke. Unable to think of anything else, you take a peek and, before you know it, you're answering work emails despite your out-of-office message.

If this scenario hits a little too close to home, you're not alone. Many lawyers struggle to maintain appropriate communication boundaries when they're away. Rather than guard that hard-earned time off, we often find our vacations reduced to simply working from a different (though sunnier) place. This article shares tips on establishing and maintaining boundaries to protect the out-of-office time you deserve.

Establish Boundaries Early

Effective communication in our profession often comes down to managing expectations. It's important to let clients, colleagues, and external parties know (1) when you'll be unavailable and (2) who they should contact until you return. A helpful practice is adding a note to your email signature in the weeks leading up to your vacation to inform people of your absence and share your point person's contact information. This not only manages expectations but also gives clients a chance to raise any questions before you leave, reducing the risk of last-minute surprises.

For the more cynical among us who worry that giving opposing counsel advance notice of your vacation invites strategic filings to interfere with your plans, I refer you to the NHBA's Litigation Guidelines, Part 3(A). That kind of conduct isn't



just unprofessional – it's harmful to the Bar as a whole.

Lastly, respect the boundary from your end. If someone receives your out-of-office reply but also hears back from you directly, your availability becomes unclear. Before you leave, set up internal processes for handling communications. If you must respond during vacation, keep it brief and restate your unavailability at the end of the communication to re-establish that boundary.

Plan Ahead as Much as Possible

I would hazard a guess that for many, the days of whimsically spontaneous jet-setting for an extended vacation are probably (read: tragically) behind us. If that is true for you, then spending a little extra time in the weeks leading up to your vacation planning for and managing the anticipated workflow is the best way to ensure a peaceful vacation of limited interruptions.

About two weeks before your vacation, spend a little time looking over upcoming tasks and deadlines that will occur during the time you are out and a week or so after your return. Nothing tempts us more to jump back onto that work computer while away than the sudden realization that something is due as soon as we get back. Where possible, try to take care of the work product necessary to accomplish each task in advance, or delegate tasks to someone in your office to ensure that the work is being managed without interrupting your time. Set clear expectations with collaborators as to when you need drafts for review and allow yourself enough time to sort through any revisions before you leave. The goals here are twofold: (1) identify what needs to be done while you're gone or immediately upon your return, and (2) accomplish as much of it as possible before you even activate that out-of-office message.

Designate someone in your office to

manage communications and workflow during your absence. For routine communications, it is a good practice to have a legal assistant or paralegal acknowledge the communication and remind the individual that you are out of the office and will respond to them upon your return. For substantive workflow management that needs to be addressed while you're out, identify a colleague or associate who can assist on the case and be the point person during this time. It is best practice to loop this person in early enough so that they can become familiar with the matter and the expectations.

Anticipate the Inevitable Unexpected

The operative word in the preceding section is *anticipated*. It is highly likely that something will pop up while you're gone that will pull at your attention. When this occurs, bear a few things in mind:

1. Can it be delegated? If so, trust your colleague to handle it with the expecta-

tion that you will return the same courtesy next time they're on vacation.

2. Can it wait? Clients may label something as "urgent" when it isn't. At minimum, acknowledge the communication. If the matter can wait, explain that this task is on your radar and that you will turn to it upon your return.

3. Limit engagement. In the rare circumstance where something comes up that truly cannot be effectively delegated or wait until your return, make every effort to limit the communications and tasks to those necessary to resolve the issue. Emergencies happen, but once handled, re-establish the boundary and remind people that other matters can wait until you're back at your desk.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this article is the reminder that vacation time is essential to maintaining positive mental wellness and overall health. Spending time outside the office, building memories with family and friends, taking time to indulge in hobbies and experiences, and focusing on the other components of our identity allow us to guard against burnout, reduce stress, and be our best selves.

Safe travels! ♦

Jim Armillay is an attorney with Bernstein Shur, practicing in labor and employment and litigation out of the firm's Manchester office. He is a regular contributor to the Bar News and a member of the NHBA's Special Committee on Attorney Wellness.

NATIONAL REPUTATION.
LOCAL EXPERTISE.



Specializing in forensic
assessments for criminal
and civil courts in
New Hampshire and Vermont.

SILVERLAKE
PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATES

slforensic.com • drbader@slforensic.com
P.O. Box 3351 • Concord, NH 03302

GUIDING YOU
THROUGH LIFE'S
CHALLENGES

FAMILY LAW | CRIMINAL DEFENSE | DWI DEFENSE

N NARO LAW

NAROLAW.COM