Solve your problem with a wink

All I Need Before My Vacation Is Someone to Replace Me

How to Hand Over Your Responsibilities and Set Contact Rules Before Taking Time Off



Max Paradox

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PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

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INTRO

Your vacation is three days away. Your suitcase is standing in the hallway, the weather forecast looks promising, and your phone occasionally reminds you that you are about to become someone whose biggest problem should be choosing between a sun lounger and a walk. In theory, everything is ready. In practice, you have just discovered that half the company runs on information stored exclusively in your head, the other half has your phone number, and the person assigned to cover for you has just asked, "But what exactly am I supposed to do while you're away?" At that moment, your vacation peace of mind disappears faster than the plane for which you haven't even purchased extra baggage yet.

So you launch a frantic operation under the code name "Handover." You open a document, type in the first three tasks, and promptly remember another fourteen. Someone calls with a question about something that happened two months ago. Someone else wants to know whether something can be approved next week. Your manager assures you that you should relax, but adds, "If anything really important happens, we'll call." Naturally. All that remains is to establish whether "really important" means a system failure, the loss of a key customer, or someone being unable to access a presentation that could have been saved in the correct folder.

The most worrying part, however, is that this situation doesn't necessarily result from poor organization. You might be conscientious, well organized, and genuinely excellent at your job. In fact, that may be precisely why everyone has

grown accustomed to you knowing the answers, remembering deadlines, spotting mistakes, and solving problems before anyone has managed to assign them a ticket number. Gradually, your effectiveness has turned into the organization's dependence on your presence. Congratulations, you've become indispensable. It sounds like a compliment until you try to go away for ten days without your work laptop.

A peculiar belief has developed around vacations: a good employee should prepare their responsibilities so thoroughly that nobody even notices they're gone. It's an ambitious assumption, but often about as realistic as expecting a coffee machine to continue making coffee after you've switched it off. Some tasks require decisions, others require access to information, and still others depend on an understanding of the context that cannot be explained in a single sentence. If you've spent the entire year doing the work of several people or managing processes without adequate support, a week of preparation won't suddenly produce another specialist. What you can do, however, is organize responsibilities, reduce the risk of chaos, and clearly establish what people can reasonably expect while you're away.

That is exactly what this book is about.

You won't find instructions here on how to work sixteen-hour days before your vacation to earn the right to a week of rest. Nor will I try to convince you that simply activating an automatic "I'm out of the office" reply will make every problem obediently wait until you return. Unfortunately, professional life has a particular fondness for complications, especially when your calendar suggests you should already be thinking about packing. What you will learn instead is how

to prepare a handover that other people can understand, realistically carry out, and rely on even when the usual surprises appear.

We'll begin with an important distinction: handing over responsibilities doesn't mean listing absolutely everything you do each day. Such a list might be impressive in length, but to the person covering for you, it can be about as useful as handing an aircraft operating manual to a passenger during turbulence. What that person really needs to know is what must happen, when it must happen, what information is needed, and what decisions they're authorized to make. Equally important is establishing which matters can wait, which should be handled by somebody else, and which shouldn't be started at all while you're absent. This isn't a lack of commitment. It's the deliberate management of limited resources.

We'll pay particular attention to the person who is supposed to replace you. Perhaps they're an excellent specialist but unfamiliar with your projects. Perhaps they understand the processes but also have their own workload. Or perhaps the cover arrangement exists mainly in the calendar because nobody has checked whether the designated person has the necessary access, authority, and time. Simply putting someone's name in an email doesn't magically transfer competence. If a colleague is expected to approve orders, they need to understand the rules governing those approvals. If they're supposed to respond to customers, they should know about the latest agreements. If their role is limited to dealing with emergencies, it's worth clearly defining what counts as one. Otherwise, your replacement might spend the entire week professionally explaining to everyone that they have absolutely no idea.

Another challenge is communication during your vacation. At first glance, the question seems simple: will you answer your phone or not? In practice, there are various arrangements between complete unavailability and managing daily business from a hotel balcony, depending on the nature of your work, your actual responsibilities, and the arrangements made with your employer. The important thing is that these arrangements shouldn't happen by accident. The phrase "Call me if anything comes up" can open the door to an entire collection of situations that are urgent mainly because the person calling doesn't feel like looking for the answer. Good contact rules establish who makes decisions, where people should seek help first, and what to do in genuinely critical situations. They don't require pretending that problems will disappear, but neither do they turn your vacation into an on-call shift beneath a palm tree.

We'll also examine what's happening on the other side of your desk. Employees often worry that handing over tasks means losing control, being judged negatively, or returning to a complete disaster. A manager may be concerned about delays, while a colleague may be worried about taking on additional responsibility. Meanwhile, the customer is generally interested in the result, not your departure date. These needs cannot always be reconciled perfectly. It is possible, however, to discuss them specifically and constructively, without accusations, apologizing for taking a vacation, or making promises that nobody will be able to keep.

Perhaps you're wondering whether you really need this much preparation. After all, you've taken vacations before. The company survived, the projects didn't collapse, and when you returned, you only had a few hundred messages

and a slight twitch in your eyelid. That's precisely why it's worth looking at the situation differently. The fact that an organization survived your absence doesn't necessarily mean the cover arrangement worked well. Perhaps other people experienced unnecessary stress, decisions were left waiting, and you regularly interrupted your rest. The cost of this arrangement is scattered across different people and situations, making it easy to overlook. Repeated with every vacation, however, it becomes an invisible procedure that nobody ever officially approved.

You don't have to fix the entire organization before you leave. Nor do you have to prove that you're the only person capable of keeping it alive. It's enough to start with a sensible question: what genuinely needs to keep working without me, and what do other people need in order to manage it? The answer helps separate responsibility from habit, urgency from convenience, and genuine risk from ordinary anxiety.

A vacation isn't a test of your loyalty or a competition to produce the longest handover document. It's a normal part of professional life, and preparing for it deserves the same serious attention as preparing for an important project. Except that this time, the objective won't be an impressive report, a sales record, or another deadline met at the expense of your evening. The objective will be to close your laptop knowing that the right people understand what to do and that you don't need to personally supervise their every move.

And perhaps, once you're finally on vacation, your phone will vibrate only because somebody has sent you a picture of an exceptionally funny cat.

Now that's a message worth answering.

Chapter 1 - Are You Indispensable? That Might Be a Problem

An announcement about your vacation appears in the company calendar. Two weeks, approved by your manager, marked in the appropriate color, and entered so far in advance that even the busiest person should have enough time to prepare. Your colleagues' reactions, however, are interesting. One person says, "Great, you'll get some rest." Another asks, "But who's going to look after the project?" A third studies the dates and falls silent in a way that suggests they've just read a forecast announcing the end of the world. Finally, your manager smiles and says, "It'll be tough without you, but we'll manage somehow." It's meant kindly, of course, yet it's difficult not to notice that the organization is treating your departure like a minor natural disaster requiring the establishment of an emergency response team.

Being needed is satisfying. Knowing that your colleagues value your knowledge and your manager trusts your decisions feels good, and that's perfectly understandable. The problem begins when being needed turns into complete dependence. If you're the only person who knows why a customer received certain terms, where the latest version of a report is stored, and who can authorize an exception to the standard procedure, your presence becomes part of the company's infrastructure. The difference is that a server can be monitored and equipped with backup power, while a human being has the right to go on vacation, fall ill, or simply switch off their phone.

Many people only discover the extent of this dependence when they start preparing to leave. After all, everything looks

perfectly normal during an ordinary working day. You answer questions, rearrange deadlines, resolve conflicts, make small decisions, and pass on information. Some of these activities happen almost automatically. When a colleague asks why an order is still waiting to be processed, you immediately remember that the supplier promised confirmation on Thursday and that an earlier message contained the wrong product number. You don't need written instructions because the entire history of the matter is stored in your memory. For you, it's a thirty-second conversation. For the person covering for you, it could mean an hour searching through correspondence and another half hour wondering whether the information they've found is still accurate.

This is how invisible work develops. It doesn't appear in your official job description, it isn't recorded as a separate task in the system, and you often don't even notice how much time it consumes. Someone asks you to check a figure, someone needs confirmation, and someone else wants to know what was agreed previously. Each request seems insignificant. Only when you try to go away do you discover that dozens of small connections pass through your head, and without them, other people struggle to operate independently. The company doesn't necessarily need your extraordinary talents in these situations. Sometimes it simply needs information that nobody has ever bothered to write down.

When Competence Becomes a Trap

Imagine Marta, who coordinates relationships with several important customers. She's effective, understands their expectations, and can recognize a problem from the first three words of an email. Customers like contacting her

because they receive quick answers. Her colleagues feel the same way because Marta always knows what's happening. Over time, everyone starts bypassing the standard communication channels and directing their questions straight to her. Even matters that other people could easily resolve end up on her desk. Initially, Marta sees this as a sign of trust. Only when her vacation approaches does she realize that nobody else has a complete picture of the situation.

This isn't a story about an incompetent team. It's an example of a mechanism in which convenience gradually replaces organization. If asking Marta takes two minutes while finding the answer independently takes fifteen, most people will choose the faster option. Marta also prefers to provide the answer rather than explain where to find it. In the short term, everyone saves time. In the long term, they reinforce a system in which one person becomes a compulsory stop on the route to every decision. When she disappears from the office, it turns out that the company's traffic system depended on a person who was simultaneously the traffic lights, the navigation system, and the police officer directing the traffic.

Dependence can also develop because the organization lacks sufficient resources. If a team is understaffed and tasks have been distributed without allowing for cover arrangements, even the best documentation won't create additional working hours. This is worth remembering because employees often take personal responsibility for problems they cannot solve independently. You can prepare instructions and share your knowledge, but you cannot make someone who already has a full workload suddenly acquire eight spare hours a day. Such limitations need to be

identified and discussed with your manager rather than hidden beneath reassuring statements that "somehow it'll all work out."

There's another, less obvious reason why indispensability persists. Sometimes we're reluctant to give up control ourselves. We worry that someone will perform a task differently, make a mistake, or reach a decision we disagree with. Being the person who knows everything can also provide a sense of professional security. After all, if nobody can replace us, surely we must be incredibly valuable. Yet an employee's true value shouldn't depend on whether the organization can function without their daily involvement. A good specialist may be valuable precisely because they create transparent processes, share knowledge, and enable others to work effectively.

That doesn't mean you should make your own position unnecessary. Handing over responsibilities during your vacation isn't a training program for a successor who will occupy your desk tomorrow and take possession of your "Employee of the Month" mug. We're talking about a limited period and an appropriately defined scope of responsibility. Your replacement doesn't need to know every detail of your job or make every decision exactly as you would. They do, however, need to understand which actions are essential, where the necessary information can be found, and when they should seek assistance from someone with the appropriate expertise.

Find Out What Really Depends on Your Presence

Before you start preparing your handover, it's worth making a simple observation of your own working day. For several consecutive days, pay attention to situations in which someone needs your involvement. There's no need to

keep a detailed diary of every activity or measure time with laboratory precision. Just make a brief note of who approached you, what they needed, and why the matter ended up with you specifically. Questions whose answers could exist somewhere outside your memory are particularly interesting.

For example, you might notice that three people regularly ask you for current sales figures, even though the report is available in a shared system. Another colleague asks about a project's status because they don't have access to correspondence with the supplier. A manager expects you to confirm a decision they could formally make themselves. Each situation points to a different problem. The first may require showing people where to find information, the second may require organizing communication, and the third may call for clarification of decision-making authority. Putting all three into one category labeled "my responsibilities" makes it harder to identify the appropriate solution.

It's helpful to distinguish between three types of dependence. The first concerns knowledge: other people don't know something that you know. The second concerns decisions: even when they have the necessary information, they lack the authority or clear criteria to act. The third concerns execution: someone must actually perform a particular activity, and currently you're the only person doing it. These dependencies require different preparations. Knowledge can be transferred, decision-making authority can be appropriately assigned, but performing tasks requires available time and the necessary skills. A thirty-page document won't replace the person who needs to do the

work. At most, it will ensure that the absence of that person is described with exceptional professionalism.

Now consider your tasks from the perspective of consequences. What would happen if you didn't answer a single question for five days? Don't automatically assume disaster. Some matters would probably resolve themselves without your assistance. Others could wait without significant losses. Still others might genuinely cause delays, additional costs, or the loss of important agreements. This exercise helps you distinguish tasks that require arrangements for your absence from those that have simply accustomed everyone to your immediate availability.

Deadlines also matter. A task that is important during a normal working week doesn't necessarily need attention during your vacation if its next stage won't take place until after you return. Conversely, an apparently minor activity, such as confirming receipt of documents before a specified date, may have significant consequences. That's why you shouldn't evaluate responsibilities solely according to how long they take to complete. You also need to consider what happens if they're delayed, who will be affected, and whether a decision can safely be postponed.

Imagine that one of your responsibilities is updating a weekly report for several departments. You normally prepare it on Fridays because that's the established routine. During your observations, however, you discover that one department doesn't use the data until the following Tuesday, while another only needs the two most important indicators. Perhaps a simplified report prepared by a colleague would be sufficient during your vacation. Perhaps the deadline could be moved. Or perhaps the complete report really is essential. The important thing is that you're making the

decision based on what the recipients actually need, rather than simply because you've always performed the task in a particular way.

Not Everything You Do Needs to Be Handed Over

As your vacation approaches, it's easy to fall into the temptation of creating an enormous task list. You don't want to overlook anything, so you include secondary matters, repetitive activities, and things that could comfortably wait until your return. The result is a document resembling an inventory of equipment aboard a spacecraft. It contains absolutely everything except a straightforward explanation of what needs to happen on Monday morning. Excessive detail can be just as problematic as insufficient detail because it makes it difficult to distinguish critical issues from the ordinary background noise of daily work.

The first step, therefore, shouldn't be to hand over everything, but to establish what genuinely needs to continue. You can use three working categories: tasks that must be performed, tasks that can be reduced, and tasks that can safely wait until your return. This simple distinction helps prevent situations in which a colleague receives your entire workload despite having only a fraction of the time required to complete it. However, don't independently decide to suspend activities that affect other people. If a task is important to a customer or forms part of the organization's commitments, any reduction in scope should be agreed with those responsible.

Notice that "can wait" doesn't mean "unimportant." Some valuable activities don't have strict deadlines. Analyzing long-term trends, updating internal materials, or preparing future improvements may all be worthwhile, but a two-week break doesn't necessarily harm them. Problems arise when

we treat every task as equally urgent. In that situation, your colleague doesn't know whether to resolve a customer's problem first or improve the formatting of a presentation. And because formatting the presentation seems easier, there's a risk that it will receive the kind of priority normally reserved for an emergency rescue operation.

This is also where an important conversation with your manager comes in. Instead of vaguely asking who will take care of your responsibilities, present the main areas requiring attention and explain the limitations. You might say, "During my absence, we need to ensure that current orders are handled and decisions about complaints can be made. I can complete the monthly analyses when I return. We do, however, need to establish who will make decisions that fall outside the standard terms." Such a conversation is considerably more useful than promising to prepare everything and remain available by phone if problems arise.

If your manager expects every activity to continue but the available resources make that impossible, it's worth clearly explaining the consequences. You can indicate how much time particular tasks require and which priorities need to be established. This isn't about dramatically announcing that the company will collapse within three days of your departure. It's about honestly demonstrating what's possible. Responsibility for allocating resources cannot rest entirely with the person going on vacation, particularly when that person has no control over staffing levels, other employees' skills, or the scope of their formal authority.

Finally, consider your own reaction to the idea of someone performing your job differently for a few days. Perhaps they'll use a different table layout, suggest a solution you wouldn't have chosen, or reply to a customer

with a less elegant sentence. If the result is correct, safe, and consistent with the agreed rules, a difference in style doesn't necessarily indicate a problem. Vacation cover isn't a competition to produce the most convincing imitation of you. Its purpose is to maintain continuity of essential activities without recreating every one of your personal habits.

Being truly indispensable may be flattering to the ego, but it can be expensive for the owner of that ego. The more matters depend exclusively on you, the harder it becomes to rest, plan absences, and develop effective teamwork. The good news is that you don't have to stop being needed. You simply need to stop being the only available solution to every problem. And if the company manages perfectly well without daily consultations while you're on vacation, that won't prove you're unnecessary. It will prove that someone has finally taken work organization more seriously than the legend of the person who knows absolutely everything.

Chapter 2 - Why We Always Start the Handover Too Late

The most characteristic sound of the final working day before a vacation isn't the closing of a suitcase or the cheerful farewell of colleagues. It's the frantic tapping of a keyboard, interrupted by sentences such as "Just one more thing" and "I completely forgot I need to explain that." At some point, you begin typing information into the handover document at a speed that makes even the autocorrect function abandon all responsibility. Everything must be explained before the end of the day. Unfortunately, the number of things requiring explanation is increasing faster than the number of hours remaining before your vacation.

Why do we so often postpone preparations when we've known our departure date for ages? The simplest answer is that everyday work feels more urgent. Current tasks have specific deadlines, people waiting for results, and visible consequences if they're delayed. Preparing a handover, on the other hand, is a task whose results won't be needed until some point in the future. As long as you're in the office, nobody feels a particularly strong need to organize the information. Everything works because people can simply ask you. Preparing someone to cover for you therefore loses out to incoming messages, meetings, and problems demanding immediate attention.

This is the classic conflict between urgent matters and important but non-urgent ones. It doesn't require any extraordinary lack of discipline. If you receive more tasks every day than you can comfortably complete, you'll naturally choose those that produce immediate results. A

resolved complaint is no longer a problem. A submitted report disappears from the backlog. Preparing instructions for your replacement doesn't offer the same sense of relief because you won't discover how effective they are until you're absent. What's more, working on those instructions may reveal additional problems that also need solving. It's hardly surprising that people sometimes prefer to finish another presentation rather than discover how many things in their department operate according to the principle of "Krzysiek always remembers."

There's another mechanism at work: the illusion that because you know your own responsibilities so well, you'll have no difficulty handing them over when the time comes. After all, you perform these tasks every day. You know where the documents are, whom to contact, and what to do in a typical situation. The problem is that knowing how to perform an activity isn't the same as knowing how to explain it to another person. In your head, the information forms a coherent whole because you remember previous decisions and understand the unwritten rules. Your replacement can only see what you actually communicate. If you omit an important detail, they might not even realize there's something they don't know.

Consider a simple instruction: "Every Tuesday, check the orders and send confirmations." To its author, that sounds perfectly clear. The replacement, however, may need answers to several questions. Which system contains the orders? Which orders require confirmation? Can all of them be approved independently? What should happen if there's a price discrepancy? Who needs to be informed about a delay? Your sentence describes the task from the perspective of someone already familiar with the process.

Someone learning that process also needs the rules that will help them recognize the correct course of action. The difference usually becomes apparent when there's no longer enough time for a calm explanation.

Why the Last Day Is Never Enough

Preparing cover for your absence involves several activities that are difficult to complete simultaneously. You need to define the scope of responsibilities, gather information, agree on who is responsible for what, verify access permissions, and make sure the other person understands what's expected. Each of these elements may reveal additional dependencies. If your replacement cannot access a system, a request may have to be submitted to the relevant department. If they aren't authorized to approve decisions independently, someone with the necessary authority must be identified. If they're unfamiliar with a project, they should have the opportunity to ask questions after reviewing the materials. All of this cannot be handled effectively in a single meeting arranged fifteen minutes before you switch off your computer.

That doesn't mean every vacation requires a month of preparation. The amount of work involved should reflect its complexity and the risks associated with your absence. Someone responsible for a few repetitive tasks may need only a brief conversation and up-to-date instructions. A manager coordinating numerous projects, decisions, and external contacts will probably need a more extensive handover. The key is to begin early enough for any problems you discover to be genuinely solvable. If you discover that your replacement lacks access to a system an hour before your departure, that information will undoubtedly be fascinating, but its practical value may be rather limited.