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A Life Between Jobs

By [ANNA BAHNEY](#)

TAYLOR AIKIN'S new job is across the street from his current one, but he loves to tell people he'll be taking the long way getting there.

Next Wednesday, on his last day as a senior designer at a Manhattan architecture firm, he will roll out of work early on his 2006 Ducati Monster S2R 1000 motorcycle and not stop until he reaches the Virginia state line. Before starting his new position three and a half weeks later, he'll cruise through the South, head to the Rocky Mountains and return across the Great Plains.

Mr. Aikin, 28, who has been with his firm for three years, said this is the first time he is taking a real vacation.

"Talking to the guys who take care of my bike," Mr. Aikin said, "they're jealous, because you can really only do this when you quit your job."

Many young people in the workplace are finding that quitting their job is becoming the satisfying new alternative to the standard, entry-level benefit for vacation. As they found out, the two weeks allowed to most young employees is barely enough time to visit their parents for Christmas, go to a friend's wedding and take a long weekend.

"Normal life," Mr. Aikin said, "maintaining relationships with people who don't live nearby, requires at least two weeks of your life a year."

For others like him, the solution is simple: Stop jockeying with senior employees for the prime vacation weeks. Quit and start again — but first, get away.

"The transition between jobs is just about me," Mr. Aikin said. "It is a trip that I've wanted to do, not something that is going to benefit a bunch of people."

Generations before them, studies have shown, valued tenure and career advancement. But this group sees the chutes in the world as interesting as the ladders.

There are no recent studies of the employment patterns of Generations X and Y by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But it reports that even those born at the tail end of the baby boom held an average of 10.2 jobs between age 18 and 38, from 1978 to 2002. A 2004 study by the Families and Work Institute, a nonprofit research group, polled Generation Y employees and found they were significantly more likely to leave their job than employees who were their comparable ages in 1977 — 70 percent, compared with 52 percent.

Some use quitting as an opportunity for a good, long visit back home, or to spend time with a dying grandparent. Others want the time to embark on real vacations or adventures.

And what's wrong with taking all that ambition and putting it into a bus trip through India? A climb up Kilimanjaro? A month studying Russian in Moscow?

The trend, career experts said, is an outgrowth of today's nomadic job culture, as well as an attitude among many young people open to adventure and big experiences — and, yes, a bit of indulgence.

Why not walk away when you are young, energetic and have the opportunity to camp at the Grand Canyon? Or to visit all the national parks?

That was Jesse Keller's big ambition.

After 10 years as a software engineer for a company in San Diego, Mr. Keller, 32, was ready for a break. He rarely used all of his vacation days. But last year he quit to pursue his goal: to visit all 58 national parks.

On the phone from Montana after crossing off Grand Teton National Park (No. 38), he said there is more than whim behind his expedition.

"As the retirement age pushes farther back and the finances for that time of life are less and less certain, it was almost unconscionable to not take advantage of the opportunity to travel now when I had the money and the health," he said.

He is not afraid of finding another job — believing his skills are in demand — and he is not tied down to any location. What worries him more is keeping from burning out again.

"The trick is finding a job that has the balance built in so that I don't have to go off on a grand adventure to recover from work," he said.

There are some risks to dropping out, career counselors said.

"Gaps in the résumé are still a red flag," said Carol R. Anderson, director of career development and placement at Milano the New School for Management and Urban Policy. But for those who are not following rigid career paths, "the cross-cultural competency that is best gained from living in a different country," for instance, can be a résumé builder, she said.

Employers are more or less at the mercy of those alternative ambitions.

"Gen-X'ers have demographics working for them: there aren't a lot of them," said Judith Gerberg, who has run her own career counseling company in Manhattan since 1985. That's particularly true as baby boomers begin to retire.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Gerberg said, young people "are used to creating wonderful opportunities for themselves."

A study done by the Society for Human Resource Management found that when human resource professionals were asked to select character traits from a list to describe age groups, baby boomers were characterized as "results driven," and "plan to stay with the organization over the long term." Generation X, though, was described as "like informality," and "seeking work/life balance."

So younger professionals, unlike older workers, are more willing to chuck it all away whenever things get to be too much, optimistic that they'll be able to start over.

Valerie Karasz, 33, had been working as a bankruptcy lawyer in New York for three years when she quit last November. After spending a leisurely holiday with family in Washington and Florida, she went to a wedding in New Zealand, then spent four months traveling in Australia, Southeast Asia and central Europe.

She started a new job at a law firm doing compliance work in the alcoholic beverage industry last Monday.

"I'm excited to go back to work and start in this new industry," she said. "I feel cleansed."

And maybe that's what the younger generation gets that their parents didn't: There's always another job. Having grown up in an era of relative prosperity and upward mobility, it's easy to come to that conclusion.

"Less employer loyalty is a product of this age group — watching their parents' lives turned upside down by layoffs, downsizings, plant closings," Ms. Anderson of the New School said. "The children of these parents understand that the 'employment contract' that existed only from the end of World War II has been broken."

So quitting is not such a big deal, as surveys show. While overall worker loyalty has improved slightly in recent years, young people are still highly mobile. According to a 2005 survey by Walker Information, which conducts research on customer and employee loyalty, 50 percent of employees 18 to 24, and 39 percent of employees 25 to 29, reported having a neutral or negative attitude about the employer and did not plan to stay. The study terms this group "high risk."

"The younger group weren't always negative about the company, they may be neutral, but it was clear that they didn't plan to stay for the next two years," said Chris Woolard a research consultant at Walker. "They weren't all that attached to the company and they don't really plan to stick around."

Kimberly Thrush, 35, never thought she was the type to quit and run. But when it all got to be too constricting, she left her job in Japan as a vice president at a large American bank, after working in banking for 13 years, and headed home.

"I am the type of person who would never think of quitting a job without having one to go to," she said, expressing misgivings about finding her next job. In the meantime, she has ambitious plans. "I'm going to look for travel specials and go somewhere different," she said. "Maybe Africa."

J. R. Briggs and his wife, Megan, had six weeks off between jobs. Mr. Briggs, 27, a nondenominational evangelical pastor and Mrs. Briggs, 26, a ministry coordinator and a counselor, recently left their posts at a 5,000-member church in Colorado Springs. Both have jobs at a church in suburban Philadelphia. But before they started last week, they visited family members in Chicago and Ann Arbor, Mich., and also spent 10 days in Costa Rica.

"To be unemployed for six weeks is a healthy thing to help you say 'I am not defined by what I do,' " he said. "It helps to understand who I am, who my wife is, and that our identity is more important than anything we do."

Todd Harvey, 32, found it almost impossible to take vacation time from his job caring for the homeless as director of housing development at a faith-based nonprofit in Berkeley, Calif. He finally quit last July and traveled the country until he stumbled upon the Appalachian Trail and started walking all 2,200 miles from Georgia to Maine with his dog, Soren Kierkegaard.

By renting out a duplex he owns in California, he is able to finance his backpacking adventure until he needs to report for graduate school in San Francisco on Aug. 28.

Others sock away money for months or give up expensive apartments so they can, at least temporarily, leave their paycheck behind.

In the end, timing is everything.


"Why now when I'm 28?" said Mr. Aikin, the architect, about his coming motorcycle trip. "Retirement is too far away. And I was too broke in college."

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