



BREAK WEEK

Implementation Guide & Resources



Created by:

[R&R: The Rest of our Lives](#), in partnership with
Hulnick Impact Consulting

A note from R&R: The Rest of Our Lives

[R&R: The Rest of our Lives](#) is a nonprofit organization focused on building and inspiring the future-of-work. We believe that investing in leaders, improving policies and practices within our workplaces, and inspiring culture change related to the rest and rejuvenation of workers will result in stronger organizations, retention and recruitment of top leaders, and far more sustainable, strategic and creative work environments. Our [guiding values](#) are core to setting our priorities and help ensure our work is focused on a healthier, thriving future-of-work for all, not only a lucky few.

What is BREAKWEEK?

BREAKWEEK is an organizational-wide closure where staff take time-off at the same time, providing everyone on a team with a *synchronized vacation*.

[Organizational-wide closures](#), such as BREAKWEEK, are a proven practice that have been utilized across sectors to promote habits of wellbeing, retention and productivity, and combat burn-out, attrition and exhaustion. Rest-based interventions, such as this, are a critical part of equity work, defining organizational culture and giving all team members agency to help make their day-to-day feel sustainable. BREAKWEEK aims to allow you and your team to fully disengage from work responsibilities for an extended period, giving your mind a chance to reset.

We have created this implementation guide for the nonprofit sector and we believe it contains best practices that are easily transferable to other sectors.

Have additional ideas as you read through it? We'd love to hear from you at rachel@restofourlives.org

How to use this guide

This implementation guide provides step-by-step resources for BREAKWEEK, including case-making, planning, implementation and assessment. We suggest reading through the entire guide to start, and if you and your team are new to synchronized vacations, we encourage you to start with a one-time experiment for your organization. Ultimately, the R&R team hopes the concept of BREAKWEEK continues to normalize within the nonprofit sector and beyond, and become a sustained organizational habit within successful workplaces.

Getting Started

Start to make the case for your team/board/funders.

In order to have a successful break week and allow employees to truly unplug from work, the entire organization, and particularly the leadership team and board, must fully commit to shutting down. To some, it is obvious how an organization-wide break week would benefit an organization, but others may need more convincing.

A few great reasons why break weeks work:

- **Enables your team to fully disconnect.** Even when employees take vacation, they often feel the need to check email and other communication channels to avoid missing critical information or urgent issues. A full shutdown means that nobody is communicating with you (or anyone else for that matter) which allows employees to completely unplug without fear of missing anything.
- **Improves mental health.** Chronic stress from overwork has been linked to depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. A break can help the whole organization recharge mentally and emotionally, particularly at times of high stress or collective burnout.
- **Boosts productivity.** Studies show that after a shut down, employees return to work more productive, creative, and energized. A fun example from Lin-Manuel Miranda “It’s no accident that the best idea I ever had in my life — perhaps maybe the best one I’ll ever have in my life — came to me on vacation,” he shared. “The moment my brain got a moment’s rest, Hamilton walked into it.” (from Harvard Business Review Article below)
- **Supports recruitment and retention.** An organization that provides break weeks for the purpose of collective rest signals to employees that they value work-life balance and wellbeing, which in turn helps to attract and retain talent.

BREAKWEEK TIP

Organization A was considering instituting a break week directly following a large event that required very long hours from most staff. Upon closer review they realized that several key event staff had to be available directly following the event for bill reconciliation and clean-up making it challenging to take off that week. The organization opted for a different week.

Great articles to share around:

- [How Taking a Vacation Improves Your Well-Being](#) (Harvard Business Review)
- [Company-wide leave time - Why every business should do it](#) (The J Molner Company)
- [The disconnect disconnect: Aligning culture and policy to mend the rift between needing time off and taking it](#) (Deloitte Insights)

Find the right timing for your break week.

Identifying an optimal timeframe for a company-wide break requires thoughtful consideration. While soliciting feedback from employees and team leaders can provide valuable insights, it's important to recognize that accommodating everyone's preferences may not be feasible. A key factor to evaluate is the proximity of the proposed break to any critical organizational deadlines or major projects. Scheduling a break too close before or after a significant event or initiative could inadvertently create additional stress and strain, counteracting the intended benefits of the time off. We also encourage organizations to learn if staff have significant childcare or caregiving responsibilities, for example. If so, would they find benefit to a break week falling during a week when school or other childcare is available? The same is true in identifying if your staff is connected to specific religious or cultural events/holidays. If so, these may not have the same ROI on rest and rejuvenation as you might hope. Again, every choice will represent some trade-off, but making an information-rich decision will help you have better results by conducting a short survey, or staff listening session.

Strongly limit any exceptions to org-wide participation.

While it is tempting to identify critical roles or functions that must happen during your break week, making exceptions - even just a few - will ultimately take away from the benefit of a true organization-wide shutdown. There are many operational processes like paying bills, running payroll, or processing invoices that can be handled proactively with proper planning and early notification to partners.

If after exhausting all alternatives, the organization determines there is still a critical need to have a staff member or two "on-call" or working during the break, it's important to be very selective about these exceptions. Develop and communicate a clear on-call plan well in advance and provide sufficient notice to those who may need to be available so they can prepare accordingly. Consider what you offer "on-call" staff to make up for not participating (ie: their own break week where individuals cover for them).

Lastly, If you have "sister organizations" in your space, strongly consider if you could help each other during break weeks where any urgent business could be directed - just like a doctor might have a colleague from a different practice on-call in their absence. This could be reciprocal if both organizations are doing break weeks and, as a result, a very low to no cost solution.

BREAKWEEK TIP

Organization B decided 2 weeks ahead of Thanksgiving that they would give the entire week off. Given the short notice, staff were upset that they had already booked flights and/or hotels and could not easily make adjustments to their plans. Despite being well-intentioned, the effort ended up causing significant staff frustration rather than improving staff well-being. Ensure you give staff enough notice for BREAKWEEK to be successful.

Give plenty of advance notice.

While there is always some excitement around receiving a last-minute vacation day, staff do need (and appreciate!) time to plan ahead in order to make use of the time in the ways that suit them best - planning a vacation, learning a new skill, visiting family, etc... In the announcement process to your organization (see below for sample emails), consider sharing a pre-read to set the stage for a truly restful and rejuvenating week off. Below are two of our favorites:

- [Give Me A Break: How to Get More Out of Your Time Off](#) (R&R: Rest of Our Lives)
- [How to Take the Stress Out of Taking Time Off](#) (Harvard Business Review)

Implementation Timeline

1 Month Before BREAKWEEK

Review key processes, adjust timing where necessary, and notify key stakeholders.

Identify any critical processes that are typically run weekly or at a specific time that coincides with the planned break week. For instance, if bills are typically processed during the break week, collaborate with the relevant team to create an alternative plan, such as cutting checks early or notifying key stakeholders that this process will be postponed until after the break (assuming it still meets requirements).

Review deadlines with staff.

Returning to work after a break when pressing deadlines are looming can be incredibly stressful. Encourage managers to review upcoming deadlines and priorities with each staff member well in advance of the break. By reviewing deadlines a month or more ahead of time, employees and managers can adjust timing if necessary, ensuring that staff can fully disengage and enjoy their time off without worrying about imminent deadlines upon their return.

Consider what the return to work will look and feel like.

After a break, staff often face an [influx of emails](#), voicemails, and other communications that need their attention. Take a thoughtful approach to the return to office by considering implementing a no-meeting day (or half day!) immediately upon return for employees to regroup and respond to these communications. At the very least, ensure that critical deadlines are not scheduled immediately upon return, allowing employees to ease back into their work gradually. These practical approaches can also lower staff temptation to “catch up” the day before the break week ends and/or work on projects throughout the week off. Encouragement to have managers connect with staff on how to separate important vs. urgent work, so that what might initially feel overwhelming can be achieved in a planful catch-up period following the time off.

1 Week Before BREAKWEEK

Send reminder and final instructions to staff and stakeholders.

By thoroughly preparing the week before, an organization can ensure all bases are covered to allow for a smooth, stress-free shutdown period for everyone. Below are a couple of items to consider:

- Create a universal “Out of Office” note and voicemail script for distribution
- Send all staff a reminder email with instructions and any special procedures for the week
- Notify and/or remind key stakeholders outside of the organization
- Confirm emergency staffing plans (if absolutely needed)

During BREAKWEEK

Relax. Yes, Everyone!

The break week is intended for you and your employees to completely disconnect from work. During this time, the organization should set expectations among staff (and particularly the leadership team who must model for their teams) that they should refrain from:

- Sending work related communications
- Checking email, Slack, Teams, and other work communication channels
- Attending meetings or conduct any work activities during the day or evening

For senior staff who may struggle with these parameters, consider pairing them with an executive coach (or scheduling an additional session or two with your optional BREAKWEEK coach!) to help them model the week well for their teams, and gain the maximum benefits themselves.

After BREAKWEEK

Assess and share the results.

An important step with any pilot is to assess the impact. We recommend you develop and disseminate a survey or some other tool to help you gauge impact and satisfaction. We then encourage you to find ways to share the findings with both your staff and board and consider what other partners or funding organizations of yours may benefit from your findings. If you would like to receive sample survey questions from R&R's BREAKWEEK initiative and/or be part of R&R's nationwide data gathering project on the impact of implementing a BREAKWEEK, please contact rachel@restofourlives.org and to discuss further.

BREAKWEEK TIP

As a way to celebrate the break week, model excellent rest practices, and give staff ideas for future breaks, Organization C had a variety of staff share out what they did on their break during at the first all staff meeting. In addition to its intended purpose, it also showcased for staff and leadership just how impactful the week had been.

Create new or updated organizational habits.

Assuming that break week was a success for your organization, consider adding a break week permanently into the calendar of organization-wide closures. You may also want to consider reflecting your organization's commitment to well-being on recruitment materials as well as job postings. Make sure to bring along staff in this process by communicating clearly that the organization is permanently adding this, signing on for a second test or, if not, why. If the impacts of break week were clear in either direction, but, for example, the length of time or time of year was found to be hard, consider simply editing the next pilot to reflect the needs of the organization rather than letting it go completely. Organizational habits are critical for the growth and sustainability of the culture, and we encourage you to continue including 'breaks' in some way, shape or form as part of yours!

Sample Communication Templates

- Sample Announcement Note
- Sample 1-Week Before Note
- Sample Out-of-Office Note and Voicemail Script

Sample Announcement Note: BREAKWEEK Staff Team

SUBJECT: Announcing Organization-Wide BREAKWEEK

I'm excited to share that [Organization Name] is going to implement a BREAKWEEK during X DATES. A BREAKWEEK is an organizational-wide closure where we all take time-off at the same time.

We are asking everyone to take this time to truly unplug from work. Get out and enjoy activities you're passionate about, travel, spend time with family and friends, or simply relax and recharge your batteries. As you think about how to use this time, consider reviewing the article "[Give Me A Break: How to Get More Out of Your Time Off](#)".

I want to express my sincere appreciation for your hard work and dedication. Your commitment to excellence is what drives [Organization Name]'s mission forward, and taking time for well-being is crucial in

sustaining our collective efforts. More details are forthcoming, but most importantly, start getting excited about this well-deserved break! You've earned it.

Sample 1-Week-Before Note:

SUBJECT: Reminder: One Week Until BREAKWEEK

This is a friendly reminder that next week (the week of INSERT WEEK) is our organization-wide break week. We hope you are all looking forward to enjoying the time off!

As we head into break week, below are a few important reminders:

- Set up your out-of-office messages on email and any other forms of communication (see sample note and voicemail script below)
- Remind clients and/or key partners about our break dates to manage their expectations and provide any necessary support beforehand
- Ensure that all key processes that would have normally happened during the break week have been adequately adjusted
- Please refrain from the following activities throughout the week so that our entire organization can unplug:
 - Sending work-related communications
 - Checking email and any other work communication channels
 - Attending meetings or conduct work activities

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to either me or your manager. We hope everyone is able to disconnect, recharge, and enjoy this well-deserved break!

[INSERT EMAIL AND VOICEMAIL OUT-OF-OFFICE SCRIPT]

Sample Out of Office Note and Voicemail Script:

SUBJECT: Out of Office - Organization-Wide Break

Thank you for reaching out to [Organization's Name]!

Our entire organization is taking a company-wide break this week to allow employees to disconnect, recharge, and rejuvenate. We believe that taking breaks is essential for maintaining productivity, creativity, and overall well-being.

During this period, we won't be actively monitoring emails or responding to inquiries. However, we will be sure to respond to you after we return to the office [Date of Return]. *If needed, add the following:* For emergencies that cannot wait until we return on [Date of Return], please contact [Emergency Contact Name] at [Email/Phone].

We appreciate your understanding and support as we take this opportunity to rest and come back refreshed, ready to serve you better. We look forward to reconnecting with you soon.

Hello, you've reached [Organization's Name]. Thank you for your call.

Our entire team is taking a company-wide break from [start date] to [end date] to allow employees to disconnect, recharge, and rejuvenate. During this break period, we will not be actively monitoring emails or voicemails. However, we look forward to responding to all inquiries when we return to the office on [date of return].

If you have an emergency that cannot wait until our return on [date], please contact [emergency contact name] at [email/phone number]. Otherwise, we appreciate your patience and look forward to reconnecting with you after our refreshing break.

Thank you for your understanding, and have a wonderful day.

With thanks...

Gratitude to [Jill Hulnick, Managing Partner at Hulnick Impact Consulting](#), for partnering with Rachel Zieleniec, Chief Program Officer and Josh Feldman, CEO/Founder of [R&R: The Rest of our Lives](#) on the research and creation of this document.

Gratitude to the inaugural **2024 R&R BREAKWEEK Grantees** (organizations listed in left side image) who inspired this guide and R&R to think as creatively as possible in supporting nonprofits in this work.

The spirit of this document is to support leaders in creating and executing successful break weeks for their teams. If you wish to publish parts or all of this document or if you have any feedback on ways to strengthen this resource, please be in touch with the R&R team at rachel@restofourlives.org. We'll continue to add to this document as new ideas, information or helpful recommendations come to light.



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