

Tried-and-true ways to reduce the stress of busy season

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By Dawn Wotapka

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Accountants know there's no way to avoid long hours and increased stress during busy season. But bosses can do many things to reduce pressure on valued staff members.

The goal, of course, is to keep employees sharp in order to reduce mistakes and to avoid the high-pressure atmosphere that fuels turnover. "Busy season is what it is. You're going to work some longer hours, and there's no avoiding that," said John Broadfoot, CPA, director of recruiting and business development for Thomas, Judy & Tucker in Raleigh, N.C. But "you have to find different ways to break it up, and you have to find ways to keep it fresh for everybody."

Food remains the top offering, and experts say that isn't going to change. Games are popular, as is ditching the suits for more comfortable clothing. Want to try something a little different? Try experimenting with latte delivery, car detailing, or even offering house cleanings to employees—anything that makes life a little easier during such a stressful time. Here are some other, tried-and-true ways CPA firms prepare for and help employees unwind during busy season:

Starting early. Sound Accounting in Chickamauga, Ga., keeps busy season in mind when selecting clients. "A lot of the stress that comes up during the busy season is from bad clients," said Scott Goble, CPA, the firm's founder and managing partner.

The firm opts to accept business accounts whose owners are upfront and realistic about what they need and who are willing to work well in advance of the big deadline. It rejects clients who want to do a lot of work themselves to cut costs but seem unlikely to deliver.

It also keeps its existing clients on the ball. By Jan. 15—or sooner—the firm distributes letters reminding clients about the upcoming tax season and urging them to get information in as soon as possible.

Being flexible. Accounting firms are increasingly allowing employees to break free from their cubicles. Many staffers can work anywhere from their couch to the local coffee shop, provided the work gets done on time and accurately. Some bosses even encourage staffers to leave early for family dinners and then finish up remotely if needed. While this is now an opportunity year-round, it is particularly encouraged as a way to relieve stress and prevent burnout during busy season. "The technology's there, so why not take advantage of it?" asked Howard Rosen, CPA, J.D., a director of business development at Schmidt Westergard in St. Louis.

Thomas, Judy & Tucker is one of the firms that tries to encourage work/life balance. For much of the year, the standard workweek is 38 hours. During busy season, the firm limits hours to 60 a week—no more than 12 in a day and no more

than six days a week. Staffers can put in several 12-hour days and take it easier when needed. This flexibility not only keeps employees fresh and reduces errors, but it also helps prevent turnover.

Nourishing the troops. Companies have long known that full stomachs make for happier employees. But satisfying today's sophisticated foodie palates means a simple pizza delivery may no longer cut it. Plus, more employees are requesting more healthful meal options. Conner Ash offers the occasional made-to-order omelet, while **Haskell & White in Irvine, Calif., allows employees to select dinner from a variety of local fast-casual restaurants.**

Broadfoot's firm splurges on ice cream sundaes, allows employees to bring in firm-sponsored breakfast treats including French toast casserole and pancakes on Fridays, and picks up the tab for Saturday breakfasts. In exchange, it asks staffers to squeeze in some socialization. "They need to get away from their computer screen for a while and go interact with other human beings," he said.

Making work comfortable. More firms are allowing employees to ditch stuffy suits in favor of comfortable clothes—even flip-flops and shorts, in some cases. "I think people are happier not being dressed up. It's more comfortable, it's a relaxed state of mind," said Wayne Pinnell, CPA, managing partner of Haskell & White, which allows comfy clothes for eight weeks a year, ending in mid-April. There's one rule: "Please don't wear something that would embarrass us or your mother."

Having fun and relaxing. Haskell & White recently debuted a pingpong table that will see its first busy season use this year. The firm plans a bracketed tournament that will award winners gift certificates and trophies.

Massages also provide a welcome break. This year, Goble's firm plans to, for the first time, bring in a massage therapist every other week from February until April. For several years, Broadfoot's company has given staffers 15-to-20-minute massage sessions, a perk that has become quite popular. After employees have been "hunched over a computer for 12 hours" getting a massage "really takes some stress out," he said. "I think it's really good to get the tension out of the muscles in our back and hands."

Thomas, Judy & Tucker has a social committee to research and organize fun ideas. Popular activities include themed dress-up days, trivia contests with questions about employees, and a mock shooting range using a Nerf gun that is set up in a break room. These little extras "help provide a little levity to all the hours we spend working during busy season," said Jared Plummer, CPA, an audit supervisor at the firm. "They help us stay connected on a familial level with our colleagues, as otherwise we can go long periods of time talking about work and nothing else."

Celebrating the deadline. Many firms pay for a round of booze or beer—or several—to commemorate the end of another successful busy season. Goble's firm takes it to the next level by declaring a day or two around April 16 a paid holiday. "It shows that we care," Goble explained.



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