

For July 4 week, workers head for hills

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It seemed simple enough. The assignment was to check with employers about worker productivity during the Fourth of July holiday week. So we made a list of major companies based in the Richmond area and dialed 15 phone numbers.

But it seems the Fourth of July holiday actually began June 29.

"It's funny that you ask, because right now I am, in fact, on vacation," Tom Topinka, spokesman for Genworth Financial, said when reached by phone. Topinka was at home, packing and getting ready for a trip to New Hampshire.

By the end of the day, only five people called back. One of them was with a consulting and research group that developed a worker-productivity report.

The report, by Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc., said businesses can expect a drop in productivity because the Fourth falls at midweek this year. More employees are wrapping their vacation days around the holiday to get an extra day off without taking away from their vacation allowance.

Voice-mail messages at some companies

directed the caller to other contacts — some of whom had voice-mail messages telling the caller to try someone else.

One spokeswoman's voice mail directed calls to an outside consultant who assists the company's human-resources department. So where was the spokeswoman?

"I think on vacation," the consultant said.

Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc. said that it's better to let employees take the time off. Keeping them in a cubicle will just lower morale and long-term productivity. Besides, Americans are overworked anyway, the firm said.

"Business operations for the most part slow down in the summer, and this week in particular is slow across the board," said Challenger spokesman James Pedderson. "So this is a great time for this to happen."

Companies that answered the phone Friday and yesterday seemed to be in agreement: Even though a lot of people are gone, the work still will get done.

"We have plenty of people around to continue to keep the lights on," said Jim Norvelle, a spokesman for Dominion Virginia Power.

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