



Feel the Rhythm: the French Calendar

How do French companies function when everyone is 'always' on vacation? If you have to ask this question, it's because you haven't learned yet about the French Calendar. Nathalie Kleinschmit explains how you too can take time off and get things done in France.

Sam was dismayed when only three prospective distributors turned up at his product launch in Paris on May 5th. He'd had his marketing package translated and invested in a central venue in the hopes of attracting a crowd. François, a French distributor who made it to the launch explained: "It's not that people aren't interested, it's just that they're not here. May 1st was a holiday and with May 8th off, people have taken 4 days off to enjoy a 10-day break." Heading back to Chicago, Sam's frustration was apparent: "What's wrong the French? Don't they understand that business never stops? It's impossible to do business in France."

For many Anglo-Saxons used to a 24/7/365 schedule, the fact that any period of the year can be so quiet may not be only disturbing but downright frightening. They panic because they assume that the office exodus equates with a loss of productivity and efficiency.

But, in a French context, this judgment is flawed. If you want to work in or do business in France, you need to get in the rhythm of the French Calendar.

This is not simply about the official list of holidays. It's about learning to 'feel for' the time cycles that feel natural to the French and working with them instead of against them.

So, for those who have always wondered how the French manage growing multinational empires while enjoying regular holidays, take note: this is what the calendar looks like to a French person.

September – 2 months (as measured in actual work)

This period hails the Rentrée, the unofficial beginning of the year. Children go back to school and employees, back from their holiday break, are ready to get to work! Refreshed minds are open to new ideas, hence the launches of new business products, publications and trends. Renewed energy accounts for a certain buzz in the workplace.

October – 2,5 months

This is a heavy month of work and the fiscal year-end looms ahead and results begin to be measured. Employees are focused on their tasks and getting things done. This is the only month that never includes a major holiday.

November – 1 month

November begins with a day off and continues with a public holiday on the 11th. Add the first of the key two-week school holidays and you'll understand that the pace shifts down a gear. Even if not all employees can take a vacation with their children, there is a general need to recuperate after the previous two month's workload.

December – 0,5 month

France tends to slow down as the festive season arrives. The first two weeks are usually taken with finalizing projects. Except in the retail industry, where commercial activity hits a frenzied state of being, very little is done in the workplace after the 15th. Many companies even force holidays between Christmas and New Year's.

January – 1 month

While its first days are a write-off, January sees a jump in energy when employees return for a lighter version of the Rentrée. With new budgets available, funding of new projects or ventures is possible. Optimism and resolutions are part of the general ambiance.

February – 0,5 month

In the second half of February, the lure of snow-capped mountains and winter fresh air are irresistible to many employees who join their school kids for a 'Winter Vacation'. The three school zones stagger their February holidays—this is supposed to reduce traffic congestion on the roads and on the slopes—but it means the actual nation-wide slow-down can span four weeks!

March – 2 months

Unless the Easter holidays fall in March, this is usually a month without a major holiday: it's entirely focused on work. Projects approved in December should now be deployed if they hope to take place in first part of the year. Inclement weather and tight deadlines make this a cheerless yet productive time in companies.

April – 0,5 month

With Easter Monday off for everybody and another two-week school break, April sees the holiday spirit blossom. Though few employees can afford to take the full time off with their kids, there is a general sense of release after the intense month of March. Longer days, the first breath of spring weather and imminent holidays may mean that the employees' attention may not be entirely focused on computer screens and work plans.

May – 0 months

En mai, fais ce qui te plait! Nothing sums it up better than this proverb: "In May, do what pleases you!" With a record number of public holidays in May, most employees spend good portions of the month out of their offices and on long week-ends (which they call *faisant le pont* or "making a bridge" by extending their week-ends with holidays and vacation time). This can be shocking for outsiders who interpret this wide-scale abandonment of their posts as a lack of accountability. But most French employees are legally required to use up their holiday time before the end of the month. Unless you have your own business or work in a very small team, taking a break is expected and understood to be beneficial in a global sense. May is associated with balmy weather, short nights, enjoying life.

June – 2 months

Sandwiched between May days and summer break, June stands out as a workhorse of a month! Employees attack their to-do lists and finish up their projects. Vertical filing helps them clean off their desks: files are either dealt with or thrown out. The massive spring clean-up brings projects forward and drives prosperous activity. Things get done or get prepared for the return of summer holidays.

July – 0,5 month

Before the 15th, June activity continues albeit at a decreasing rate. After the 15th, it grinds to a halt as millions of people change locations to return to family roots in the country, mountain cabins, ocean-side resorts and travel abroad. In offices around the country, service is reduced to the minimum. Don't expect to get any work done around the house either as the building trades also take their vacations when everyone else does.

August – 0 months

Holidays continue and large cities are emptied of their residents. Some companies even close down for a few weeks. French people generally don't spend their vacations on their cell phones or email; in August, there is a sense of peace as employees focus on other facets of their life and simply forget about their jobs. Slowly, starting the last week of August, they return to their offices. Tanned, relaxed and happy, they feel ready to tackle new challenges and explore new ideas!

And so our year finishes with a healthy workforce ready to move forward... and the cycle beginning with the Rentrée once again!

That's right: the math for this French calendar adds up to 12 and a half months of productivity. It is a mistake to equate the loss of productivity in May and August with laziness or disorganization.

Some might cringe at and be tempted to try and recapture some of that time-off in May and August for 'full productivity', but you'll only end up frustrated. The French government learned this lesson when it tried to cancel the Pentecost holiday starting in 2005; it was largely reinstated in 2006.

Globalization has forced this calendar to evolve over the past twenty years yet France remains extremely attached to its own sense of time. This 'working to live' mentality may feel uncomfortable for many expatriates, even those who salute it in theory.

But amongst the French, May and August are not problems that need to be fixed; the gains of their holidays are measured during the entire rest of the year.

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