

School is back in session in Ankeny, and things are finally starting to quiet down a little bit around the Friedman household. Our summers are always busy between traveling to basketball tournaments, little league baseball and various weddings and trips. And even though it seems like we are in and out of town a lot, none of it really feels like a vacation. That is until we spend a few days at the Iowa Great Lakes.

We are very lucky that Joanne's brother has a time share at Village West on West Lake Okoboji. This is the same location where Joanne and her family would spend a week at Vacation Village and have many years of great memories of swimming and fishing in the lake, spending time at the clubhouse and making new friends from all around the region. We are lucky that her brother has an open invitation to all his siblings and their families to join him for some or all of the time he has available at the lake.

Sometimes the tiny cabin is so crowded that people have slept on every available inch of floor space, people have had to eat in shifts and the annual poker game has had more spectators than participants. This is a time that everyone in our family has enjoyed and come to define "vacation". This year was a little different in that while it was a little crowded, the crowd was certainly manageable. When we were getting ready to leave for Okoboji, I read a cartoon in the morning paper. It was a simple quote: "A vacation is having nothing to do and all day to do it in." - Robert Orben.

I took this as my motto for my limited time on vacation. As a matter of fact, I shared this with my brother-in-law and believe he took it to heart as well. In writing this column, I did some research and found that Expedia.com commissioned a survey last fall to ask people in 20 different countries about their vacation habits. On average, Americans earn 14 days of vacation each year, but only take 12 of them. Japan and South Korea are the only other countries that allow and take fewer days.

Prior to vacation is a stressful time because we know that the work fairy doesn't stop by and finish our work for us. Our co-workers pick up for us and we do the same for them when they are gone. So when we are gone, we have to make the most of our time. It is important to clear our minds so that we can come back more creative, more refreshed and ready to make a difference.

As small business owners and managers we need to make sure that we and our employees have time off. Find a way to make it happen and find a way to support everyone to take time off and relax without thinking about work, even if it is only for a few days. It will pay off in higher productivity and morale.

In all we spent 3½ days at Okoboji and had a very relaxing and enjoyable time. Going back to the bank on Monday, I felt refreshed and ready to take on all the challenges that came my way. Vacation accomplished!

*Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.*