



WHY A LUNCH BREAK WILL INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

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Here's a way to increase productivity and reduce stress in the workplace in one easy step. Well, it's not that easy but it's effective. Ensure your employees take a lunch break. Organizations around the world are recognizing the connection between productivity, stress reduction, and the lunch break, or a break of any kind for that matter. Simply defined, the lunch break is an opportunity to eat and *break* from the work day. Recent studies in North America reported that more than one third of employees eat lunch at their desk while a further one in four employees do not take a lunch break at all. From a health perspective, sitting time is touted as the new smoking, linked to chronic physical pain, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and mortality.¹

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I. WHY IS THE MID-DAY BREAK SO IMPORTANT?

A growing body of research over the past decade has made a direct link between breaks and increased energy, productivity, and performance. Breaks are also directly linked to energy recovery. To put it simply, *energy in equals energy out* but even without food consumption, the ability to take a break to stretch the body, or get outside for fresh air is linked to increased concentration, mental wellbeing, and stress reduction. It is not uncommon to hear the echo of overworked, stressed out public servants in the face of declining public dollars and increasing pressure. Most employers recognize that stress is prevalent in many of today’s workplaces. Look around your offices and you will find workers slumped over in droves staring at screens. In almost all human resource departments, professionals can demonstrate the connection between work-related stress, absent employees and low productivity. The cost to the bottom line is staggering and continues to increase.

Here in Canada stress related issues are costing the Canadian economy an estimated \$33 billion a year in lost productivity, as well as billions more in medical costs.² According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, chronic stress negatively impacts our mental health. Mental health issues are the leading cause of both short and long term disability claims while people in their early and prime working years are among the hardest hit by mental health problems and illnesses which describes the bulk of our work force. At 24.1% in 2013, the public sector is the largest employer in Canada. Besides the concern for the bottom line, public institutions also have a responsibility to address the multifaceted and complex issues associated with stress. It affects individuals, families, and our larger society.

II. SO WHY AREN’T EMPLOYEES TAKING BREAKS?

Let’s start by examining why employees aren’t taking breaks. It’s not like they aren’t built in to our collective agreements and contracts. In a 2008 study, Tavares and Plotnikoff found that lack of time due to deadlines, longer work days, lack of flexibility, work stress/load, and workplace norms such as being expected to be at your desk during lunch significantly impacted healthy behaviours. The combination of being chronically attached to work and the demanding nature of modern work life contribute to workplace cultures where lunch breaks are actually frowned upon. In today’s fiscally precarious work environment what employee wants to fall outside the norm? And so they sit.

In *Lunch Breaks Unpacked*, co-author John Trougakos even went so far as to suggest that continuing to work during the lunch break may indicate a negative psychological mindset - employees are feeling like they do not have enough time in their day to complete tasks which in turn leads to underlying feelings of incompetence among employees. Some employees report that they feel guilty getting up and leaving their work even though they

know they should. They fear being seen as unproductive or not pulling their weight. Human beings are strongly influenced by social norms and the culture of one's particular workplace has a significant impact on how employees behave. Each social situation entails its own particular set of expectations about the "appropriate" way to act and there is considerable pressure to conform to the norm. We are sheep wrapped in our complex selves.

III. WHAT ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRODUCTIVITY AND NUMBER OF HOURS WORKED?

One of the biggest productivity myths is that productivity increases with the number of hours worked. In actual fact, hunched over a desk all day and confining the body and brain to artificial light and stale air is a great way to turn output onto 'power save' mode for the afternoon. A Stanford University study actually made the link between *decreased* work performance as the number of hours worked increased. Furthermore, the study suggested that workplace fatigue because of longer hours worked can lead to more mistakes and oversights and those mistakes and oversights often take more time to fix. One step forward, two steps back.

Recently, the [Draugiem Group](#), an international social networking company, conducted an experiment with their 200 employees to look at what habits set their most productive workers apart from everyone else. They found that the 10% of employees with the highest productivity didn't put in longer hours than the rest. In fact, they didn't even work full eight-hour days. What they did do was take regular breaks. Specifically, they took 17-minute breaks for every 52 minutes of work. What were they doing with those breaks? "Those 17 minutes were spent completely away from the computer—not checking email, not going on YouTube" says communications director, Julia Gifford. [Taking a walk](#), chatting with co-workers (not about work), or relaxing reading a book were some common activities the most productive employees did while taking a break. While this might seem counterintuitive, the results prove the point. Breaks are good for productivity.

Looking to the social sciences, lunch breaks have very recently gained research attention. John Trougakos, associate professor of Organizational Behavior & HR Management at University of Toronto co-authored a 2014 study that demonstrated that engaging in relaxing activities during lunch breaks is associated with less end-of-workday fatigue. This leaves energy for life outside of the workplace whether that is physical activity or family time. Another Canadian research team proposed that the lunch break plays a sizeable role in energy recovery. Breaks build and restore our energy levels which are directly related to performance. And a recent Finnish study suggested that energy management strategies like getting outside and breaking away from the daily norms helps employees to stay energized and engaged throughout the working day. Disengaging completely from the work environment gives us an opportunity to recharge while increasing mental acuity, reducing fatigue, relieving joint or muscle pain, and increasing overall alertness. And those are only the short term benefits.

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IV. HOW CAN EMPLOYERS HELP?

Let's not forget that in today's society health is also a valuable aspect of company identity and it plays a key role in employee attraction, engagement, and retention. As a society, we have never been as conscientious of the correlation between our health and wellbeing and the work environment, yet only 13% of senior executives have a strong awareness of the impact of mental health on their workplaces. Commitment at the managerial level is not optional. Critical to success is the attitude of those in leadership roles. Even when managers may have awareness they don't necessarily know where to start to make positive changes.

A [2009 study by the Society for Human Resource Management](#) even went so far as to propose making time off and away from the office mandatory for employees because of the substantial productivity gains it nets. While individual employees clearly have a responsibility for their own healthy behaviours, comprehensive workplace interventions are needed that target both individual responses and organisational factors. These interventions do not have to be complicated.

V. DO YOU TAKE YOUR LUNCH BREAK?

At the level of workplace culture, it is important to cultivate supportive workplace norms in relation to healthy behaviours like breaking for lunch. A workplace culture can actually change when and if peers take breaks. It's not good enough to send a memo, although that's a start. It comes down to the long-standing adage – you have to lead by example.

Education: It all starts here. Make your first lunch and learn about the benefits of a lunch break. Occupational Health and Safety committees could be tasked with the creation of regular events that keep the issue topical in the work place. There are many readymade campaigns on-line that can be launched in the workplace without too much cost or effort.

Consider: Walking meetings; Exercise programs; Buddy breaks to emphasize accountability; Booster Breaks™; Lunch and Learns; Incentives; Good old fashioned competition; and Office rules - Break time is away from the desk.

In many business environments employees reported that being “busy” at work was perceived to preclude eating properly or eating at all. Consider the language of your workplace; can you influence the narrative to reflect the importance and value of breaks?

Lunch time: Stop scheduling lunch meetings now. Create a workplace policy to not program important business between 1200 and 2:00pm or whatever reflects a normal break time in your work environment. You need to let employees know that they have the flexibility and the right to take breaks by demonstrating such in your daily work practices. If your overt message says take lunch, yet you covertly continue to schedule important meetings during the normal break, you are a part of the problem. Be a part of the solution.

Engagement: Ask staff for ideas. Most employees recognize the importance of getting up from their desks but cite guilt as why they don't. Ask your employees to be involved in finding ways to shake up the culture. Listen to what they have to say. A culture of listening and acting on good ideas cultivates engagement.

Consistency: One-off emails or campaigns is just the beginning. The connection between breaks and productivity is too important to not pay attention to. This notion is critical to

not only productivity but also the long term health and wellbeing of your employees. Show that you are paying attention by creating and maintaining strategies for the long term. Efficiencies are on every manager's agenda. Taking a break is an easy, cost effective way of not only making your resources go further, but making employees healthier and happier.

Tips on how to make the best of your lunch

- Make friends in the office who are break-takers. That is, identify the people who regularly take breaks and get to know them.
- Set a timer for your lunch break. That can include even telling colleagues that you have to step outside for an important meeting (with yourself).
- Plan ahead and make healthy lunch choices, which means avoiding the vending machine and the high-caloric garbage inside.
- Your lunch break isn't only for eating. Use the afternoon break to run errands, go grocery shopping or head to the gym. You have the liberty to use your break as you see fit.
- Finally, don't feel guilty about leaving the office for your break. Sure, your work is valued, but you're not *that* important and the office will survive without you.

The lunch break serves parallel interests – business and health. Ultimately it's about helping your employees reclaim the lunch break which leads to healthier habits and increased productivity.

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¹ De Cocker et al. et al., International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity, 2015.

² General Social Survey, 2010.