

in the know

take a break

by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**

Workplaces should be more like basketball teams when it comes to breaks, professor John Trougakos of the University of Toronto-Scarborough believes.

“The coaches are continually planning when to rest their best players as much as they’re doing any other kind of game strategy,” Trougakos said. His research shows workplaces can accomplish similar benefits by planning time-outs from work, including lunch breaks.

In addition to providing sustenance for the body, the lunch break is an opportunity to nourish the brain. Time away from work allows employees to engage in ruminative thinking, which allows ideas to percolate and creative thinking to happen, said Kimberly Elsbach, a professor at the University of California-Davis, who also has researched the importance of breaks.

“It’s an opportunity for people to get out of their normal work environment, to engage in something—talking, eating, whatever—that doesn’t have to be on task and might let their mind wander and ideas to come to them,” she said. “It’s why people have great ideas in the shower or when they’re driving to work. It’s because they’re not thinking hard about work problems.”

Trougakos said people who take breaks are more productive than those who don’t. “As our energy decreases, our capacity to work and successfully perform decreases,” he said. Taking breaks allows people to detach from their work, stops the psychological demands and allows people to recharge.

But to reap these benefits, employees can’t be sitting at their desks for lunch or meeting with co-workers outside of the building to discuss a work project.

Creating a lunch break culture requires modeling by supervisors and managers, Elsbach suggested. “If the message is you can take lunch, but you still need to be at your desk eating your lunch, or you can take your lunch, but I’m not going to as the top manager, then the signal gets muddled. It really has to be modeled from the top that it’s not just something that’s OK, it’s something that we’re encouraging.”

Providing break rooms with healthy food choices, exercise rooms, nap rooms or access to nature is another good way to encourage people to take breaks, Trougakos said. Offering opportunities to walk or exercise over lunch also is desirable. And letting employees decide for themselves what they want to do rather than planning activities for them also is important.

“The payoff in the end, for the employees and the employer, is substantial in the form of more energy, higher productivity, less burnout and more long-term commitment,” he said.

