

# When It Comes To Breaks, One Size Does Not Fit All

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Can we agree on one point right off the top? That working until we keel over from exhaustion is neither heroic nor sustainable? In fact, recurring cycles of crash and burn simply leave us sick and tired. It's not good for us individually; nor does it create vital, engaging, productive workplaces.

In today's workplace, breaks for renewal seem to be harder to come by than ever. Workloads are expanding. At the same time, the pool of available skilled hands is shrinking. With demands high, peer pressure to keep moving and keep producing is strong. Technology advances are helpful, but they create problems of their own. The good news about today's portable technology is that we can be connected anywhere, anytime. The bad news is that we can be reached anywhere, anytime. So much for taking a break!

In this kind of environment, breaks matter more than ever before. A growing body of research shows that people who step away from workplace demands to rest physically, renew mentally, reconnect emotionally, and refresh spiritually are not only healthier but they are more productive and more satisfied with both their work and their lives. From the organization's point of view, fresh, clear thinking and innovative problem solving are much more likely to come from those who know how to relax and recharge than from those who are mentally and emotionally exhausted.



So, why are breaks viewed as a waste of precious time? It's the old wiring of the organizational brain that says, "Nonstop work is the highway to productivity. You can only take a break when the work's all done." As a result, we keep waiting for the perfect time to take a break. We don't realize that the perfect time is now—in the midst of the madness—before overload morphs into overwhelm.

One of the ways of convincing yourself and your co-workers that breaks will pay their way is to experience their value first-hand. Traditional workplace breaks used to be 15-20 minute coffee times morning and afternoon, and a 30-minute or half-hour lunch break at noon. If these have gone by the wayside, start small. Incorporate more frequent, shorter breaks. You'll see how invigorating that can be. Work your way up—from micro pauses of a few seconds, through mini pauses of 10-15 minutes, to macro pauses of an hour or so.

Start with reminders. Grab a few sticky notes. Write these words down: "It's okay to stop! You have permission to pause!" Post them everywhere.

Experiment with a short break of a few seconds every hour

on the hour. Step away from your computer. Take a few deep breaths. Stand and stretch. Sip a long cool glass of water. Walk to the window and take a look at what's going on outdoors.

## Using technology to take a break

Here's where technology can help. Use the clock alarm on your calendar program to remind you that it's break time. Install a software program like Stretchware ([www.stretchware.com](http://www.stretchware.com)) or Prevent Repetitive Strain Injury ([www.prevent-rsi.com](http://www.prevent-rsi.com)). You can set them to interrupt you at specific times of day, every 60 or 90 minutes, or after a set number of keystrokes. On your preprogrammed schedule, they offer you an audible invitation to stretch, and lead you through a brief set of four or five exercises. Stretch frequently through the course of the day and you'll end up in much better shape, with fewer accumulated aches and pains.

As you experiment with longer breaks of five to 10 minutes, look for actions that provide some kind of contrast to the flow of your workday. For example, if you are stuck in an indoor cubicle with no view of the outside world, step outside and catch a breath of fresh air. If you are working solo, planning or analyzing, reach out to make a social connection with one or two of your colleagues. If you're mired down in serious issues, search out the comedian in your crew to lighten your spirit.

## What kind of break do you need?

When it comes to breaks, neither one size nor one style fits all. Introverts who are constantly working with others may need to get away and find a quiet space, creating a little down time on their own. Don't take it personally if someone prefers a solo walk or reading in the shade to the pleasure of your company. It may be just the thing he or she needs to bring them back to work refreshed.

When it comes to longer lunch-style breaks, again, think about what would be invigorating for you. Chowing down on a sandwich while hammering away at your email may not put you as far ahead as you hope.

Check your needs. Do you need more physical activity? Do you need more social interaction? Do you need to clear your mind? Do you need to remind yourself of why you are doing this work in the first place?

Sometimes working on a puzzle or walking and chatting with someone who has a great perspective on life will bring

you back to work refreshed. If closing the office door and stretching out on the floor for a 10-minute rest revives you, go for it!

Build breaks into the regular flow of your workday by incorporating them into the work. If you're meeting with a couple of people and you don't need paper, then schedule a walking meeting. If you find yourself on the telephone repeatedly through the day, look for ways to hold those conversations standing up while moving around your office.

No one knows as well as you what it is that reinvigorates and re-energizes you. If you've forgotten what charges you up, it's even more important to invest in figuring that out. Once you become more knowledgeable about this, you'll make better, more creative choices.

What this means in the workplace, is that not everyone may be taking the same kind of breaks on the same kind of schedule. Finding ways to accommodate diverse forms of renewal will keep more people at full strength.

At this point, things may be handled pretty traditionally in your workplace. Only specific scheduled breaks may be allowed. Or, people may have developed the practice of simply taking coffee and lunch to their desk, spending their entire day at the keyboard. If so, then raise the questions, open the conversations, and negotiate a wider range of options.

Organizations can play an active role in supporting diversity in renewal. Add props to break rooms that encourage activity – a dart board instead of a cribbage board. Create a quiet room with dim lighting and comfortable furniture for workers to step away from the frenzy and find a quiet moment of rest. Or set aside a workout space with weights, yoga mats and pilates equipment.

Above all, look to your own habits and practices. Set an example for others in your workplace. Customize your own pattern of energy breaks and share your ideas. Encourage others to think about and act on their own needs and preferences.

There's definitely more than one way to re-energize the overloaded workplace. ■

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Patricia Katz, MCE CHRP, is a Canadian speaker and author who helps the overloaded and overwhelmed to get things done and have a life, too. Sign up for Pat's free weekly e-zine, *Pause*, and learn more about easing your load at [www.pauseworks.com](http://www.pauseworks.com) and [www.patkatz.com](http://www.patkatz.com).