Reenergizing Lunch Breaks and the Role of Autonomy

Key Concept
Intuitively, a lunch break will give employees a chance to stop working and restore some energy for the rest of the day. New research, however, shows that not all lunch breaks are restorative. Indeed, it is not only what employees do during lunch but whether they had a choice in what they did that makes a difference. The researchers demonstrate that the less choice or ‘autonomy’ given to employees over their lunch breaks, the less rested or reenergized they will feel by the end of the workday.

Idea Summary
More than just an assigned period for eating, a lunch break is an opportunity for employees to engage in various types of activities, from socializing with friends and colleagues to relaxing with a book to catching up on work. Managers and employees might assume that the effectiveness of a lunch break in helping employees restore energy for the rest of the workday would depend on the activity that occurred during that break.

Through their research, however, professors John Trougakos of University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management, Ivona Hideg of Wilfrid Laurier University, and Daniel Beal of the University of Texas, San Antonio, joined by PhD student Bonnie Cheng, that autonomy more than activity is the deciding factor on the restorative power of a lunch break.

In their research, Trougakos and his colleagues not only looked at the impact of different activities — socializing, work and relaxation — on end-of-day fatigue, but also compared the autonomy involved with those choices. While a lunch break is a standard part of the workday, not all employees have the same autonomy over how they spend that period. For example, employees might socialize because they enjoy it (the highest level of autonomy), or because it is convenient and a distraction (a lower level of autonomy), or because they have a specific purpose in mind, such as currying a favour with a superior (the lowest level of autonomy).

Working during lunch can also be autonomous or not: you might want to work during lunch to get a jump on the big project you’ve just been handed. Even relaxation, which one expects would always be desired, can have different levels of autonomy. You may be forced to take a break when you would actually prefer to be working and not falling behind on your deadlines.

The results of the research based on the activity alone were for the most part not surprising: employees were less fatigued at the end of the day if they had relaxed during lunch, and more fatigued if they had worked. One interesting result from the research, however, was that social activities left employees more fatigued and not less.
However, the researchers also showed that autonomy had an impact on the fatigue or restoration of energy that resulted from social activities or work. For example, the researchers wrote, “Engaging in higher levels of work or social activities was especially fatiguing under conditions of low lunch break autonomy and less fatiguing when autonomy was higher.” The same dichotomy applied to work.

In general, relaxation activities are always going to be beneficial — having higher levels of autonomy did not increase the benefit of higher levels of relaxation. However, the research shows that combining low autonomy with low levels of relaxation is going to produce particularly heavy end-of-day fatigue. In other words, lack of autonomy exacerbates the detrimental effect of lunch breaks that offer little opportunity for relaxation.

**Business Application**

As a result of this research, business leaders and managers may want to review their assumptions and procedures related to lunch breaks. For example, some business leaders might believe that organized social activities during a break can help employees relax and recover. Or, in the spirit of wellness, they might prevent employees from working during lunch, insisting in the name of overall productivity that employees “take a break.” However, an enforced break, the research shows, is counter-productive — employees will be more tired than if they had been allowed to finish, during lunch, the project they’ve been working on.

Employees must be aware that their decisions concerning lunch breaks can have more of an impact than they might realize. Even seemingly inconsequential choices can add to their fatigue at the end of the day. Understanding the positive or negative consequence of social, work and relaxation activities on end-of-day fatigue — and the role played by autonomy — will help them make better choices.

The question, of course, is whether they have the freedom to make those choices. Employees may be experiencing less and less autonomy over lunch breaks as companies try to do ‘more with less’. Employers who are delighted to see employees skipping lunch to continue working must realize that they might be witnessing the foundation of future problems in employee productivity and well-being.

After all, employers can control what employees do, but not how they feel. If employees are fatigued at the end of the day, it’s the company that pays the price.

**Further Reading**


**Further Relevant Resources**

John Trougakos’s profile at Rotman School of Management
Ivona Hideg’s profile at Wilfrid Laurier University
Bonnie Hayden Cheng’s profile at Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Daniel Beal’s profile at University of Texas, San Antonio
Rotman School of Management Executive Education profile at IDEP