



Down tools

A break during the working day, whether it's for a sit-down lunch or a few minutes' fresh air, is not just a nice bonus; it's vital to well-being and productivity. **Oonagh O'Mahony** reports

DO you remember school? That was when you got two lunch breaks, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. They were the best few minutes you had all day. You got to eat, chat with your friends and escape the relentless stream of information for a few minutes. Ah, those were the days!

Now, many of us can barely remember what a lunch break is. We grab a sandwich at the local shop and mull over reports at lunchtime, praying the relish will not drip on the boss's copy.

Cadbury's recently carried out research into break patterns in Irish work places. The 'Snack in the Mouth' survey found more people are working through their scheduled lunch breaks in an attempt to get further work done.

The report says the pattern of daily work schedules have changed, and as a result people are working longer hours and under more stress. This is having negative effects on both employers and employees.

Employers might think keeping staff at their posts for as long as is legally possible will boost productivity levels, but research has proven otherwise. Kenneth McKenzie, snack expert and social psychology researcher at University College Dublin, says: "Chaining someone to a desk for eight hours a day doesn't mean they will be more productive."

It all relates to the Dobson rule. This concludes that the more tired you become the less you are able to concentrate. We all know children have a limited attention span, hence the scheduled lunch breaks at school, but as we get older our attention span broadens. However, McKenzie says even adults need to take regular breaks in order to stay focused on the task at hand.

He says companies that allow staff more autonomy in regulating their break patterns

often see greater levels of productivity. "There are two theories for managing people," explains McKenzie, "theory X and theory Y." The first believes employees are lazy and will avoid work at all costs. As a result employees are often given less autonomy and work in an environment with strict controls. Theory Y allows employees more freedom. It assumes they are ambitious and enjoy being challenged. It operates under the assumption that if employees have greater control over their working conditions they will be more creative and productive.

McKenzie mentions two American companies that have adopted a theory Y approach to managing staff - Google and Best Buy. Both have seen a rise in their levels of productivity. They believe staff should be trusted to get the job done. "People won't shoot themselves in the foot by taking breaks and allowing loads of work to build up," says McKenzie.

However, just how many breaks is a person supposed to take in one day, and for how long? McKenzie has found some companies budget their time to allow for breaks to be taken throughout the day. Nevertheless, he also says businesses have become more consumer orientated and there is greater demand to have staff available at all times of the working day, including what is generally considered as the lunch hour.

McKenzie suggests employees need to take a break every 50 minutes in order to refresh themselves. It is felt that people working at computers, in particular, should take a break at least every 45 minutes. Five or 10 minutes should suffice to clear an employee's head and prepare him or her to face the job again.

The survey also found the decline in scheduled breaks was making it harder for people to

socialise in work.

"There is a social aspect to it too," says McKenzie. "We all know about the 'water-cooler conversations' where people can catch up on the latest company news." He says this can often be the moment for great breakthroughs or problem solving. "Answers to problems might come when people are just discussing their day," says McKenzie. "Talking with people from different departments can sometimes shed new light on an issue."

He is not suggesting that employees set off for a two-hour break in the middle of the day, though many of them would jump at the chance. "The idea of a 'French lunch hour', where you sit down to a meal for two hours, is not good for you. A periodic break will give more life to a dead afternoon," says McKenzie.

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Kenneth McKenzie, social psychology researcher at University College Dublin, says spending hour after hour at a desk does nothing for productivity