Breaks

The long-term health consequences associated with a sedentary lifestyle are serious; widely recognised and well-documented and given the percentage of our lives spent in the office, (estimated at between 21 and 26% in a typical office role), the nature of this type of vocation, where users are predominantly seated and relatively inactive, is a concern.

This information sheet seeks, not to expound the virtues of breaks, which may go beyond the long-term health benefits of sitting less, but to explore the reasons that computer users don't take breaks, at least not with any consistent regularity or for any notable duration. To perhaps debunk some of these reasons or find fault in their rationale, so as to encourage you to increase your efforts to incorporate more breaks into your working day…

Productivity

By far the most frequently recounted reason for not taking sufficient breaks is workload. The idea that time away from the workstation is time not spent doing work and so is wasted. So, let's explore this premise: Increased breaks = reduced time performing work task = reduced productivity over a specified time.

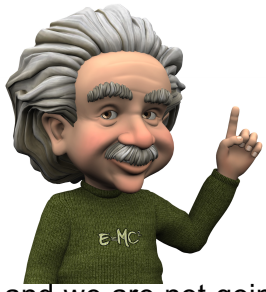
This assumes that there is no drop off in production with fatigue, both mental and physical, which we know intuitively is not true and indeed this is supported by research. Several studies have shown no loss of productivity with increased breaks and some studies have even shown an increase in productivity over the course of a shift with more breaks. Short frequent breaks have been shown to be most effective with as little as three minutes having some benefit but five minutes being a preferable minimum.

The optimal length and timing of breaks is debatable and is probably industry/task specific. However, a general rule of thumb would be to take a break of 3-5 minutes every 20-30 minutes and a 10-15-minute break, incorporating movement away from the workstation every 2 hours.

Now most of the aforementioned studies looked at work, such as data entry, which is easily measurable from a productivity perspective, but requires relatively low *creative* processing. Roles requiring greater levels of focus and lateral thinking may not lend themselves so easily to taking frequent breaks due to the impact on work 'flow' (see 'Distraction' below).

Distraction

This is probably the most valid reason for not taking a break. The idea of stopping in the middle of a task requiring high levels of concentration and focus (programming a section of code; drafting a complex legal opinion; editing a complicated spreadsheet formula), to take a break. This would theoretically reduce productivity, though it is unclear if it does in practice. Let us explore the concept of focus and distraction a little.



Focus is difficult to maintain. This is an incontrovertible truth. Einstein's distraction index, so the fable goes, was developed by the infamous intellectual as a teenager in attempts to remain focused for as long as possible. His supposed record was 42 minutes. So, breaks in concentration are not only normal, but are relatively frequent. Some research suggests that the average amount of work time before being interrupted could be as little as 12-13 minutes.

Focus can be trained and improved. Use of various techniques can be employed and we are not going to get into the details of these here, but improving the ability to focus and perhaps employing tools such as focus timers (check out the Pomodoro Technique) and listening to background music (often employed by software developers) is useful. This allows you to maximise productivity in a given time frame so that the idea of taking a short break after that time is more palatable.

As well as improving focus, and the key to employing this skill, it is essential to try to manage distraction. Firstly, distractions need to be identified. Is the main source of distraction your colleagues; is it an environmental element (noise/temperature); are their personal circumstances? The ability to manage these will determine the effectiveness of any focus techniques that you try to employ. Of course, musculoskeletal discomfort associated with not taking sufficient posture breaks, may, ironically, be a distraction in itself.

Suitable rest space

Taking a break does not necessarily mean moving away from the workstation, though this does have a significant benefit. It could mean simply standing at the desk and stretching for a few seconds or performing other work-related activities such as visiting a colleague at their desk or collecting print outs. Where roles don't involve 'auxiliary' non-computer-based tasks (call handlers; copy typists), breaks are essentially just that, non-work-related breaks, and in the absence of a suitable space in which to go to take a scheduled break, the temptation may be to simply continue working.

If the work area is not ideal, then simply behave like a smoker – go outside and stand around chatting with a colleague for 5 minutes (away from the smokers). In this way, you will have the benefit of providing the eyes with natural light and a different focal distance as well as leaving the air-conditioned environment.

Culture

There are some industries and organisations where taking breaks is 'frowned upon'. Where, though explicitly stated that it is acceptable to take 'screen breaks' and breaks from sitting, there are implicit cues that suggest otherwise and the risk that professional advancement could be adversely affected by the optics of not being seen at the workstation, is enough to dissuade the most health conscious of us to take less breaks. This is a rather archaic philosophy and one that, thankfully, is slowly evaporating from office cultures and values, particularly in progressive industries such as technology and design.

Where this issue continues to exist, it can be problematic and difficult to manage, however it is important in this situation to have an 'internal locus of control'. To take responsibility for your situation and to prioritise your health, secure in the knowledge that your productivity will not suffer, for the reasons stated above. If you can demonstrate your productivity objectively then you should feel, not only justified, but perhaps self-righteous in your break taking.

"*Leadership is practiced not so much in words as in attitude and in actions*". - Harold S. Geneen

Also note that there is a responsibility on employers, to a degree, to foster a positive culture when it comes to flexible working and breaks. The Health and Safety Display Screen Equipment Regulations states that an "employer shall so plan the activities of users at work in his undertaking that their daily work on display screen equipment is periodically interrupted by such breaks or changes of activity as reduce their workload at that equipment."

Forgetfulness

The final common reason for not taking breaks is that you simply forget. Though this is understandable and again valid, it is a simple one to fix. The aforementioned focus timers will provide structure to your working schedule so as to include breaks or you can simply use any timer application on your smartphone to set reminders. Outlook and other diary management software can also be used to remind you of breaks.

Various specific break applications also exist, allowing people to set micro and macro break periods, defining both the frequency and duration of these. Some also include various exercises such as stretches for the neck, back and upper limbs. These include the following:

- RSI Guard (www.rsiguard.com)
- Work Rave (www.workrave.org)
- 'Scirocco Take A Break' (www.scirocco.ca).
- 'Time Out Free' (Apple Mac application) https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/time-out-break-reminders/id402592703?mt=12)