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Feature: A Desk for One for Lunch

A Desk for One for Lunch

Heavy workloads and job insecurity keep many employees tethered to their desks, but skipping lunch takes a toll on productivity and physical health.

By Rita Pyrellis

Never mind the three martini lunch. Less than half of today's workforce leaves the office for a midday meal, according to a recent online survey by LinkedIn and Right Management Inc., an employment consulting firm.

Heavier workloads and job insecurity keep many employees tethered to their desks, but skipping lunch takes a toll on productivity and physical health, warns Lynn Clement, market vice president at Right Management. "As we come out of the recession, people are working longer hours."

The firm polled 2,311 workers in August and found that just 47 percent "almost always" take a daily lunch break. Of the remainder, 20 percent usually eat at their desk, 19 percent take a break only occasionally, and 13 percent rarely break for lunch.

Encouraging people to step out of the office can strengthen employee engagement, Clement says. "We emphasize with employers that people need time for a break and that this has a direct impact on wellness, productivity and engagement."

Tony Schwartz, president and CEO of the Energy Project, a consulting firm that focuses on employee engagement, doesn't need convincing. This summer the Energy Project launched Take Back Your Lunch, an online appeal to get workers out of the office at least once a week. Schwartz urged employees around the world to organize midday gatherings using Meetup.com, the social networking site. Thousands responded.

So far, "meet ups" have been organized in such places as Albuquerque, New Mexico; Bangalore, India; and Pretoria, South Africa. Schwartz says the global workforce is facing "total burnout," and skipping lunch is part of the problem. "Once upon a time everyone took the lunch break for granted, but now it's the exception, not the rule. It seems like the loss of a fundamental right and we want to take it back."

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