

Freedom and choice key to restorative lunch breaks, study says

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Working through lunch might not be as bad as they say, suggests a new paper on work recovery, but only if employees choose that themselves, and don't feel pressured into it.

"We found that a critical element was having the freedom to choose whether to do it or not," says John Trougakos, , who is an associate professor in the Department of Management at the University of Toronto Scarborough, and holds a cross-appointment to the UofT's Rotman School of Management. "The autonomy aspect helps to offset what we had traditionally thought was not a good way to spend break time."

Co-written with Bonnie Cheng, a Rotman PhD student, Prof. Ivona Hideg of Wilfrid Laurier University (who is also a graduate of the Rotman PhD program) and Prof. Daniel Beal of the University of Texas-San Antonio, the study surveyed a range of administrative employees at a large North American university. Participants were asked about what they had done during their lunch breaks over a 10-day period. Researchers then asked participants' co-workers to report how tired their colleagues appeared by the end of each [work](#) day.

The study found that relaxing activities during lunch, freely-chosen by workers, led to the least amount of reported fatigue at the end of the day. Getting work done resulted in employees appearing more tired, but that effect was reduced when employees felt it was their decision. Socializing, however, also led to higher levels of fatigue; something the paper says

has to do with whether workers feel free to decide if they want to socialize and who they're socializing with.

Although we might assume lunchtime socializing is a good way for employees to relax, Prof. Trougakos says that's not necessarily the case if they socialize with other employees in the company cafeteria or if the boss is around. Conversations may be about work, and employees may be more careful about what they say and the impression they make with their colleagues.

"You're hanging out with people who you can't necessarily kick back and be yourself with," says Prof. Trougakos.

Organizations that don't provide opportunities for [employees](#) to recover from work during the day risk lower employee effectiveness and productivity, leading to burnout, absenteeism, and higher staff turnover, he says.

This is the first study to examine the role and effect of employee autonomy on work recovery activities. It will be published in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

Provided by University of Toronto

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