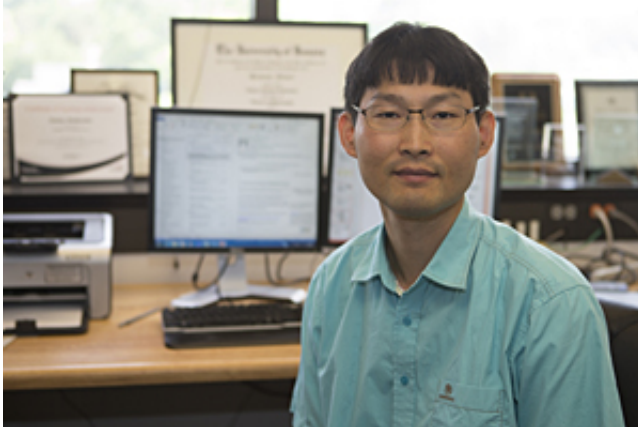


Web-surfing at work has its benefits

August 4 2014, by Dawn Fuller



Researcher Sung Doo Kim, a doctoral candidate in the Carl H. Lindner College of Business.

A new e-memo for the boss: Online breaks at work can refresh workers and boost productivity. Early findings from a University of Cincinnati study will be presented on Aug. 5, at the 74th annual meeting of the Academy of Management in Philadelphia.

Researcher Sung Doo Kim, a doctoral candidate in the Carl H. Lindner College of Business.

The study, led by Sung Doo Kim, a doctoral candidate in the Carl H. Lindner College of Business, opens a rare avenue of research into coping with technology-induced distractions in our contemporary society.

Previous research has focused on breaks during off-job hours such as evening, weekend and vacation periods, or on traditional "offline" breaks taken during working hours, such as lunch or [coffee breaks](#). Given the prevalence of online work breaks, the UC study examined this phenomenon in depth, utilizing extensive one-on-one interviews about online breaks with 33 professionals from a variety of industries and occupations. The researchers examined several factors including:

- Triggers that prompt online work breaks
- Conditions that lead to taking an online break rather than an offline break
- Different online break activities
- Consequences of online work breaks
- Triggers of Online Work Breaks

Kim says workers engaged in online work breaks when they reported a high need for recovery (feeling frazzled from an intense work period, recovering from a reported significant loss of physical or emotional energy). Triggers also included breaking monotony or boredom, checking on demands at home and other personal demands, or emotional work-related events that triggered anger or frustration.

Conditions that Lead to taking an Online Versus Offline Break

Workers whose jobs required extensive computer time or sitting at a desk for prolonged periods were less likely to find online breaks rejuvenating, versus jobs that required a good deal of physical activity or a lot of face-to-face interaction, prompting employees to decompress with some "alone time" online.

Organizational policies also affected the tendency to take online breaks, as some of the employees reported that their workplace had strict policies on the personal use of workplace computers. Kim adds that older workers who had spent years in the workplace previous to the birth of the Internet frowned on online breaks, stating that they were being "paid to work." So, personal values also played a factor in taking online breaks.

Online Break Activities

The reported online activities were categorized into two types: pleasure-seeking and non-work-related duties and responsibilities. The former includes listening to music, reading entertaining articles and checking the sports scores while the latter includes checking in with family members, paying bills and doing school work. Many activities reported, however, were not clearly delineated between the two types, indicating the multipurpose fuzzy nature of online breaks.

Consequences of Online Work Breaks

The researchers outlined three consequences of online work breaks: momentary recovery, learning and satisfaction. First, the workers took online breaks as a quick chance to unwind. "Employees reported benefits on going online to balance their work and personal responsibilities, such as checking on their children," says Kim. "After reassuring themselves about their children, they were better able to focus on their work." Kim adds that people going online for industry news or research felt that they were benefitting themselves in their careers. He says that employees who took online breaks also reported greater levels of satisfaction at work, perhaps because of the freedom to be able to occasionally check in on their personal life. The researchers add that if taken in an undisciplined manner, online breaks could turn into cyberloafing, resulting in the

excessive loss of time and productivity.

Demographics

Sixty-two percent of the participants were female and 38 percent were male; 38 percent were married and 50 percent of the respondents had children. The majority of the respondents had an average 8.6 years of working experience. The respondents included 14 health care workers and 19 full-time working MBA students. The MBA sample involved workers in banking, education, media and nonprofits.

New Avenue of Research

"There's little research about whether workers take online or offline breaks in distinct ways, therefore, this exploratory study fills an important gap in that research by providing evidence into what motivates online or offline work breaks," says Kim.

The study suggests that managers consider organizational policies to tap into the positive potential of online work breaks but also establish policies encouraging responsible behavior, such as providing limits on the time spent on online breaks, or holding training on effective strategies that bring benefits from online breaks.

Kim says future research will involve a much wider survey as well as examine how working in different industries could affect the choice and effectiveness of taking online breaks.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

Citation: Web-surfing at work has its benefits (2014, August 4) retrieved 27 June 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2014-08-web-surfing-benefits.html>

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