Email 'vacations' decrease stress, increase concentration, researchers say

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Being cut off from work email significantly reduces stress and allows employees to focus far better, according to a new study by UC Irvine and U.S. Army researchers.

Heart rate monitors were attached to computer users in a suburban office setting, while software sensors detected how often they switched windows. People who read email changed screens twice as often and were in a steady "high alert" state, with more constant heart rates. Those removed from email for five days experienced more natural, variable heart rates.

"We found that when you remove email from workers' lives, they multitask less and experience less stress," said UCI informatics professor Gloria Mark. She co-authored the study, "A Pace Not Dictated by Electrons," with UCI assistant project scientist Stephen Voida and Army senior research scientist Armand Cardello. The UCI team will present the work Monday, May 7, at the Association for Computing Machinery's Computer-Human Interaction Conference in Austin, Texas.

The study was funded by the Army and the National Science Foundation. Participants were computer-dependent civilian employees at the Army's Natick Soldier Systems Center outside Boston. Those with no email reported feeling better able to do their jobs and stay on task, with fewer stressful and time-wasting interruptions.

Measurements bore that out, Mark said. People with email switched

windows an average of 37 times per hour. Those without changed screens half as often – about 18 times in an hour.

She said the findings could be useful for boosting productivity and suggested that controlling email login times, batching messages or other strategies might be helpful. "Email vacations on the job may be a good idea," she noted. "We need to experiment with that."

Mark said it was hard to recruit volunteers for the study, but "participants loved being without email, especially if their manager said it was OK. In general, they were much happier to interact in person."

Getting up and walking to someone's desk offered physical relief too, she said. Other research has shown that people with steady "high alert" heart rates have more cortisol, a hormone linked to stress. Stress on the job, in turn, has been linked to a variety of health problems.

Study subjects worked in a variety of positions and were evenly split between women and men. The only downside to the experience was that the individuals without email reported feeling somewhat isolated. But they were able to garner critical information from colleagues who did have email.

The Army is examining use of smartphones and such applications as email for soldiers on battlefields, said David Accetta, spokesman for the Natick facility's research and development section. "This data may very well prove helpful," he said.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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