

Take a Break – Don't Procrastinate!

Procrastination is defined as the practice of carrying out less urgent tasks in preference to more urgent ones, or doing more pleasurable things instead of less pleasurable jobs.

(*Wikipedia.com*) As a result, impending tasks are put off to a later time.

Procrastination is an undesirable practice, but one that employees have been guilty of committing from time to time. Usually, we beat ourselves up about it, vow not to let it happen again and push ourselves harder to focus on set tasks at hand. Recently, however, it has been questioned as to whether procrastination can be used in a productive way.

Communications Specialist at the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council (NCPC) Geraldine Bicette-Joseph states, "Procrastination is seen as being totally unproductive and therefore timewasting; however there are actually ways to use the action to our advantage, and in a productive way. Reports show that all employees need to take a break while carrying out their tasks during the work day. It is how we spend that time whilst on a break that turns a positive, productive time to recharge into a time of procrastination..."

A recent study conducted by Alejandro Lleras, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, reinforces the idea that regular breaks throughout the day can actually make an employee more productive, improve focus, and help with creativity.

"When you do the same thing for a long time, performance falls," says Lleras, "At any point in time you have multiple possible concerns or thoughts. It's difficult to maintain one

particular [focus] for a long period of time. If you break that pattern and force yourself to think of something else very briefly, when you go back to your task your focus is refreshed."

He goes on, "It plays into what we know about the brain's process of habituation. Our minds are constantly dulling out any information that feels constant, like the smell of bread in a bakery, so that we will be alert to threats, like the smell of something burning. In terms of survival, it makes sense that there would always be a time of expiration in regards to how long we can keep an idea in mind".

Therefore, as the average worker is situated at their desks for nearly eight hours a day and are asked to focus on one specific task, there will always be slumps in productivity. In fact, it is reported that after about 40 minutes of constant focus, our attention begins to wane.

Lleras continues, "You can avoid many of these dips in productivity simply by renewing your focus to the task at hand. One of the best ways to do this is to let your mind escape. In laboratory settings, even just a few seconds make a big difference. However, it must be noted that not all breaks are created equal. A few minutes spent doing the wrong thing could derail your entire work plan".

Therefore, what can be labelled as productive break and what should we view as 'non-productive procrastination'?

Lleras listed some examples of productive and unproductive activities.

•Disconnect from Social Networks and Call a Friend or Visit a Work Colleague at Their Desk. Lleras states, "You'll get calming benefits from fostering a connection, and taking a break from the screen at the same time. Changing your environment helps you to truly leave your work behind. If my office is the place where I'm working all the time, not being in my

office allows me to more cleanly cut myself off from that task momentarily. The cleaner the break, the more likely you are to return to your task reinvigorated”.

•**Do Not Let Your Mind Wonder, Get Active.** “While it can be relaxing to picture your upcoming tropical vacation, daydreaming doesn't have that definite ending that you're looking for in an ideal break”, says Lleras. “Instead, get up and go and fill a prescription at the pharmacy. The change of scenery will help you to clear your mind and to come back with renewed intensity”, he says.

•**Instead Of Eating At Your Desk Take A Real Lunch Break.** According to US News, it has actually been found that eating at your desk can drain you of energy and decrease productivity. Instead of trying to power through that project, take a few minutes to recharge midday away from your desk.

•**Don't Snack, Take a Walk!** Getting a little exercise can distract you from mindless snacking when you are feeling a little listless. It can also help you refocus on getting things done. If you have the time and flexibility, plan your full workout for the middle of the day. Studies suggest that exercise during the work day, (even if it means time away from your desk) increases productivity and harbours many health benefits too. However, if the idea of a big workout session at midday is not for you, remember that just five minutes of being active can help.

It is important to keep in mind that the intention is to take a ‘break’ from your work and not to get side tracked. What you do with your time matters, make it work for you.