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Stress of vanishing lunch breaks

To be seen at your desk between noon and 2pm confirms that you are a member of the modern office culture

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Although we can safely ignore the idiotic 'Lunch is for wimps' challenge, made in that certain Michael Douglas movie, there is no doubt that the formal lunch-break, once the daily, universal custom, is being observed less and less frequently.

One explanation is clearly cultural, a social statement to do with an increasingly flexible workplace policy — a natural urge to distance yourself from the legacy world of typewriters and fixed working hours.

To be seen at your desk between noon and 2pm confirms that you are a member of the modern office culture, where you're free to slip out to a coffee-shop at any time you want. It may also suggest a certain indispensability.

But a much more important factor is the new dynamic of the workplace, where commercial pressures put even junior executives into an entrepreneurial mindset. They may be waiting for some crucial e-mail that requires their urgent attention.

More likely, they might be working through a complex commercial problem involving an important contract, so that going off to lunch might be completely unrealistic. Or, if a lawyer, they may be charging-up billable time, where the temptation to charge an extra hour, may be irresistible.

Wrong focus

I once had to counsel an ambitious young lady called Amanda, who was in her first job as a sales consultant at a travel agents. The basic salary was very low, but the bonuses could mount up if she made enough sales.

The trouble was that most of the customers came in at lunchtime, and the sales staff were tempted to skip their own lunch break in order to increase their monthly bonuses. As this was good for business, the manager did nothing to discourage the habit.

However, two of the other saleswomen pointedly refused to do this, saying that their lunch was important to them, so Amanda found she was picking up even more sales by staying at her desk at the time when she should have been taking a break. (Meanwhile it was forbidden to snack at the desk for reasons of company image, only coffee being allowed.)

Like many others of my clients, in the enthusiasm to focus on her monthly pay, she forgot to focus on her health. Month after month, she simply failed to eat properly through the day (though she drank a good deal of coffee) and she found herself taking more and more headache pills.

Stress can make you vulnerable, as I can testify, and sure enough, during a local

outbreak of flu, Amanda was sick for nearly two weeks, but her two colleagues shrugged it off. That loss of two weeks' earnings finally made her realise what was important. There could be no clearer illustration of the value of a regular mid-day lunch break with a healthy walk and a nourishing diet.

Key points: Changing perceptions

The lunch break is often mistakenly seen as unnecessary

Modern workplace pressures make it hard to leave your screen

Direct incentives may also tempt you into working through lunch

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