

Active Work Breaks

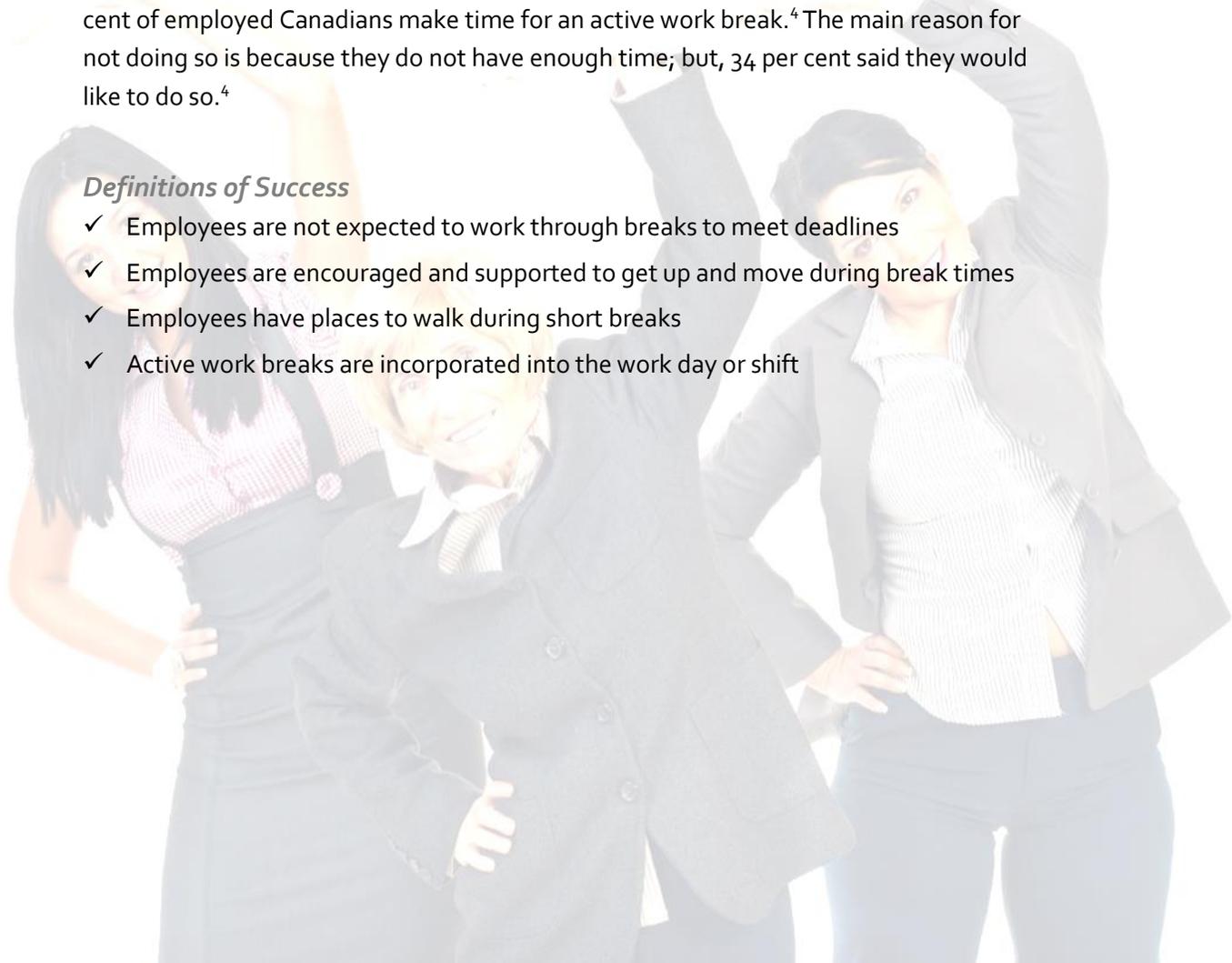
Breaks are "planned or spontaneous recesses from work on a task that interrupt the task's flow and continuity."¹ According to the Ontario Employment Standards Act, employees are not to work for more than five hours in a row without getting a 30-minute meal break free from work. Employers are not required to give employees other types of breaks,² although many collective agreements between employers and unions require two 15-minute breaks (one in the first half of the shift and a second in the latter half) in addition to a meal break.

Historically, breaks were used to lessen fatigue, injury and boredom, especially for employees performing repetitive tasks.¹ Typically, these other breaks involve drinking coffee or another type of beverage, using a telephone or computer for personal reasons, eating unhealthy snacks or smoking cigarettes.³ In fact, ParticipACTION reports that 88 per cent of employed Canadians spend time at work on personal activities such as checking social networking websites, making personal calls or chatting with colleagues.⁴

Active work breaks provide an alternative to traditional work breaks and have been shown to have positive effects by reducing physical discomforts,^{5,6,7} and injuries.⁸ Research has not shown any negative effects on productivity.⁷ However, only 17 per cent of employed Canadians make time for an active work break.⁴ The main reason for not doing so is because they do not have enough time; but, 34 per cent said they would like to do so.⁴

Definitions of Success

- ✓ Employees are not expected to work through breaks to meet deadlines
- ✓ Employees are encouraged and supported to get up and move during break times
- ✓ Employees have places to walk during short breaks
- ✓ Active work breaks are incorporated into the work day or shift



1.0 Needs Assessment

During your needs assessment, determine if there are barriers to taking active work breaks.

- How do current policies, collective agreements address the issue of breaks?
- How many employees take breaks? How often do they skip breaks and why?
- What do employees do during breaks currently?

Refer to page 35 in Section 3.0: Getting Started for more information about needs assessments.

2.0 Evaluation Indicators

Some possible indicators include:

- Record process indicators about attendance at activities and what employees like and lessons learned
- Assess employee stress levels, productivity scores, etc.
- Track trends in occupational health and injury claims

Refer to page 45 in Section 3.0: Getting Started for more information about evaluation indicators.



3.0 Implementing Active Work Breaks

Employee interests and opportunities

Things to consider:

- What would employees like to do during active work breaks (e.g., walking, tai chi, stretching, etc.)?
- Are there some employees already trained in leading certain activities (e.g., race walking, urban pole walking, tai chi, stretching, etc.)?
- Where could active work breaks occur (e.g., stairwells, hallways, common areas, meeting rooms, outdoor grounds, etc.)?

Supportive management practices

Managers and supervisors need to understand how active breaks can be beneficial to the organization and to employee health and well-being. This is a crucial first step in changing the culture of a workplace to be more supportive of employees taking breaks rather than working through them.

Refer to “Organizational Culture” in this section on Supportive Environment (page 105) for additional information about developing supportive management practices.

Spontaneous versus scheduled breaks

Depending on the workplace, it is not always possible for employees to get up from their work stations whenever they want to (e.g., employees on factory lines, at reception desks, telemarketers, etc.). If breaks need to be scheduled, a plan needs to be created outlining how this will occur. Such a plan could include an assessment of which jobs need to be continuously staffed and who could provide relief during breaks.



DID YOU KNOW?: Radio Exercise

Many workplaces in China have brought back mandatory twice-daily exercise breaks. Music and instructions are broadcast at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. each day over the radio.⁹ Employees stop what they are doing and participate.

In the late 1920's, Japanese radio introduced “rajio taiso” (radio exercise) after hearing similar 15-minute radio broadcasts in the United States sponsored by Metropolitan Life Insurance Co.¹⁰

Reminders to take a break

Some employees may benefit from being reminded to take break. There a number of resources available to help employees to remember to get up from their work stations. It can be as simple as an employee setting a reminder in their electronic calendars or using a Smartphone application or software download on their computer. A traditional hour-glass can also be set on a desk or meeting table as a visual reminder to get up and move when the sand runs out.



HELPFUL TOOLS: Books

The following books can be borrowed from the [Region of Waterloo Public Health's Resource Centre](#) or ordered through a local bookstore.

Booster Breaks: Improving employee health one break at a time

by Wendell C. Taylor and Karen L. Pepkin (2010)

<http://www.boosterbreaksbook.com/>

Instant Recess: Building a fit nation 10 minutes at a time

by Toni Yancey (2010)

Active Work Breaks References

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- ⁴ ParticipACTION. (2012). Media Release: Only 1 in 5 working Canadians fit physical activity into their work days. April 9, 2012. Retrieved February 21, 2014 from the World Wide Web <http://files.participaction.com/nationalrelease-sneakitin-final.pdf>
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- ⁶ Van Dieen JH, Oude Vrielink HE. (1998). Evaluation of work-rest schedules with respect to the effects of postural workload in standing work. *Ergonomics*, 41(12): 1832-1844.
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- ⁸ Tucker P, Folkard S, Macdonald I. (2003). Rest breaks and accident risk. *The Lancet*, 361: 680.
- ⁹ Glionna JM. (2010). China's state-mandated lunge break. *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 2010. Retrieved February 21, 2014 from the World Wide Web <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/aug/31/world/la-fg-china-exercise-20100901>
- ¹⁰ Fukue N. (2009). Wake up, hike out, tune in, move it. *The Japan Times*, February 21, 2014. Retrieved April 4, 2012 from the World Wide Web <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20090722i1.html>