

More Breaks May Help You Go With the “Flow” at Work

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Giving employees more breaks and vacation time may actually help improve their performance on the job by increasing their experiences of “flow,” according to new research.



It’s common for people to feel tired after work, but after taking time off for a vacation or a fun evening out they’re likely to feel refreshed or recovered. According to the effort-recovery model (ERM), this occurs because people require a reserve of cognitive resources to maintain performance throughout the day. When demands are reduced, such as during leisure time, cognitive resources are restored.

In a recent study, a group of psychological scientists led by Maïke E. Debus (University of Zurich) tracked 121 programmers to see how recovery affects “flow” — a state of total, enjoyable immersion in a task — throughout the work day. Athletes who find themselves “in the zone” experience flow, and the frequent experience of flow in the workplace is associated with gains in productivity and work satisfaction.

Debus and colleagues sent participants a series of questionnaires each day for five days. A pre-work questionnaire gauged how recovered they felt in the morning before work and three additional questionnaires equally spaced throughout the day asked them to rate their sense of flow at work.

The researchers expected highly recovered participants to show a U-shaped pattern of flow throughout the day, with the highest reports of flow in the morning and evening and a “postlunch dip” in the middle of the day. Previous research suggests that this U-shaped pattern is due to fluctuations in the body caused by circadian rhythms.

The results of the study showed that the more participants felt recovered in the morning of a specific day, the more flow they experienced during work. Highly recovered participants also experienced the

hypothesized U-shaped pattern, with a dip in flow experiences around noontime followed by a subsequent uplift.

Participants with a low sense of recovery experienced less flow throughout the day; but, instead of rallying after the postlunch dip, they declined through the afternoon.

When experiencing a low-recovery day, people might be well advised to engage in rest periods to “reload” their resources. By deliberately engaging in breaks, employees might thus be able to prevent a gradual decrease in flow experiences throughout the day.

“Practically speaking, our study highlights that to experience flow it is important to recover well during non-work time,” they write in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, “research suggests that leisure time experiences such as relaxation help people to recover.”

Reference

Debus, M. E., Sonnentag, S., Deutsch, W., Nussbeck, F.W. (2014). Making flow happen: The effects of being recovered on work-related flow between and within days. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 99(4), 713-722. doi: 10.1037/a0035881