

Restore Productivity with Timely Pauses

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I just finished reading Daniel Pink's [When: The Scientific Secrets to Perfect Timing](#), an interesting read that explores the science behind human productivity. Many people believe that productivity patterns are black & white; if they're a morning person, they are most productive in the morning, or if they're a 'night owl,' the best time to get things done is in the afternoon or evening. However, research suggests that our productivity 'sweet spots' depend on the task at hand. For example, Pink explains that afternoons are the best time of day for brainstorming activities, but decisions made at that time are often suboptimal.

If you're like me, you have long work-related and personal to-do lists, which rarely (if ever) include scheduled 'downtime.' Yet the human brain needs a little downtime to be the most productive. Team members who are working remotely may be inclined to complete personal tasks instead of taking true breaks from work.

Daniel Pink's book offers helpful tips and insights on how to leverage timing to optimize your performance. His book explores several ideas related to taking quality breaks—those that work to restore cognitive processes—and not just simply taking a 'break' (e.g., scanning your work emails). The following tips resonated with me:

Restorative pauses may mitigate preventable risks. Research has shown that people are better able to execute tasks that require critical thinking *after* they have taken a restorative break. Examples of this trend can be seen everywhere from school-aged children's test scores to medical facilities that use checklists at specific critical points during surgery. In the medical example, hospital staff physically take a step back from a patient, and every staff member lists off vital patient information before resuming the surgical procedure. Practicing this simple check-in has led to a significant drop in surgical errors.

Frequent short breaks are more effective than occasional ones. Researchers at the [Draugiem Group](#) use a popular time-tracking application called [DeskTime](#) to analyze productivity patterns. They found that the 'golden ratio' between work time and rest was 52 minutes of focused productivity, followed by 17 minutes of real rest. My own observations from my professional meeting planning experience corroborate this golden ratio. I have found the sweet spot in retaining participant engagement is to schedule 50-minute breakout sessions followed by 15-minute breaks. Being mindful of the natural rhythm in your nonprofit will help you discover the perfect golden ratio for your team.

The most important takeaway from this tip is to ensure that these micro-breaks allow staff enough time to get up and walk away from work tasks often enough to let their brains digest what has been happening. Encourage relaxation during the 'off time.' Suggested activities for quality breaks include stretching, short walks, or simply staring out the window and daydreaming.

Lunch breaks offer a powerful reset and recharge to your workday. The most powerful lunch breaks have two key ingredients: autonomy and detachment.

Nonprofit leaders should discourage team members from using lunch breaks to go through emails, catch up on news and world events that affect the nonprofit, or take a 'working lunch' at their desk. Omitting time to recharge increases mental fatigue. Instead, encourage the following healthy practices at lunchtime:

1. Take lunch **away** from your desk!
2. Use lunch breaks to catch up with friends.
3. Choose break activities that give your eyes a rest from screen time: doodling, getting some fresh air, or enjoying the fish tank.

Nonprofit staff—driven by their passion for the missions they serve—may push themselves to work longer hours, take fewer breaks, and work through lunch to devote more time to work responsibilities. Without breaks, employees are more apt to feel overwhelmed, stressed, and fatigued, all of which can lower performance and true engagement.

Nonprofit leaders should strive to inspire a culture that encourages breaks and social connections. Fostering restorative moments will enhance workplace wellness, boost employee moods, reduce mental fatigue, and amplify brain functions.

Related Resources

- [“Dream a Little Dream: Managing Sleep Deprivation Risks,”](#) Risk Management Essentials
- [“When: Restorative Breaks,”](#) infographic by Daniel Pink
- [Focus and Flow](#), by Garrett Dimon
- [“The 52:17 Rule; The Golden Ratio of Workplace Productivity Unveiled!”](#) 101 Productivity