

'It's one piece of the healthier workplace issue'

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recently introduced a program called Take Back the Lunch Break to encourage workers to take a break at least three times a week. The new initiative follows a similar program set up at the University of Toronto, which aims to improve employee well-being and productivity by getting people away from their desks every day.

"It's a fun, creative response to a very common issue — people not taking lunch," said Michelle Lucas, spokeswoman for the Nova Scotia Public Service Commission, which organized the program for government employees earlier this year.

"It's one piece of the healthier workplace issue, and the response has been really good. It's as though we had to give people permission to take a break. But we're trying to change a culture, and it will take time."

Lucas said the initiative has caught the attention of organizations across the country who are looking for ways to reduce absenteeism and increase productivity as well as to recruit and retain employees.

"Human resources professionals are concerned that



Another worker skips her lunch break although she would be better off getting out. — CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

people are working through their lunch hours," said Eileen Stewart, who is head of BCIT's human resources program.

"People are not effective after a certain amount of time — they may be putting in a lot of hours, but they're not necessarily productive."

B.C.'s Employment Standards Act states that employ-

ees can't work more than five consecutive hours without a meal break, which is to be a minimum of 30 minutes. But studies show that the law is regularly ignored. A recent U.S. study suggests 75 per cent of workers eat at their desks at least three times a week.

Working through lunch is not a new phenomenon, but

it has become more common with electronic devices and e-mails that never seem to take a break.

Stewart said people are also more concerned about their work-life balance and mistakenly believe they can save time by working through lunch.

In some organizations, staff take their cues from managers who never leave their desks.

"Some bosses consider eating at your desk a badge of honour," said Stewart. "Managers are the role models, and if people want to get ahead, they feel like they have to do the same thing and it becomes part of the organization's culture."

"Then it feels like you don't have a choice — you're chained to your desk."

Janet Austin, CEO of the Vancouver YWCA, said the organization has no formal policy on daily breaks, but wellness is a big part of the culture. Employees and their spouses receive a membership to the Y's fitness centre and are encouraged to take care of their physical and mental health.

"Statistics support that taking a break during the day improves productivity, and managers should be setting the standard," Austin said.

"We should encourage employees to get out, take a break, go for lunch, but there also needs to be a much broader support for employee wellness."

Austin tries to take a break every day and works out with a personal trainer two or three times a week.

Sometimes, she arrives at the office early in her workout clothes, puts in a few hours at her desk then heads to the gym.

Other days, she might take a fitness class or go out for a run with a colleague.

Simon Evans, CEO of the B.C. Human Resources Management Association, has made a habit of getting out of his downtown Vancouver office for at least 15 minutes every day.

"It's part of my discipline now, and I encourage my staff to get away too," he said.

"You have to take time out to refresh your brain. When you get tired, your decision-making suffers and then you're not productive."

Evans said managers should make it easier for employees to take a break, but workers are also responsible for changing their own patterns.

"People have to train themselves to take a break," he said. simoneh@yimg.com

Break tips

This week is national Healthy Workplace Week in Canada and a good time to break the no-break habit. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

■ Be ruthless. Commit yourself to taking a break from your desk. If you prefer to eat while you work, go outside and take a walk instead.

■ Find support in numbers. Convince a couple colleagues to take a break with you for lunch or some other activity.

■ Tell your manager. Let your boss know you're taking a break in order to improve your efficiency during the work day. You will be more productive if you get out of the office and clear your head at least a few times a week.

■ For managers and supervisors: Avoid scheduling meetings during the lunch hour and encourage staff to take breaks.