

The loss of lunch

Executives don't have much time to eat
SURVEY RINGS ALARM BELLS ON UNHEALTHY TREND



By Alexandra R. Caleca SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

Short lunch breaks, if taken at all, have become the norm among senior executives in recent years, according to a survey.

On average, executives are spending 35 minutes per day on lunch — seven minutes fewer than reported five years ago. Executives are also working through lunch about three days a week, according to an OfficeTeam staffing services survey of 150 randomly selected business leaders at the 1,000 largest U.S. companies.

OfficeTeam blames tight deadlines, higher expectations and business conducted across multiple time zones as reasons for the shortened break, and it warns that the trend isn't healthy or productive.

"People are now trying to do more with less," said Sean P. Dowling, Boston's regional manager of OfficeTeam. "The reality is that everyone needs to take a break

Shrinking lunch break

"What's the average length of your typical lunch break?"

- 35 minutes..... 2008
- 42 minutes..... 2003

Tips to reclaim the lunch break

- Plan your day
- Schedule lunch with colleagues
- Book an appointment
- Step away from the desk
- Put work aside

Source: Survey for OfficeTeam, a Robert Half International Company

throughout the day to remain at their maximum work level.”

Taking a lunch break is crucial for ensuring peak performance, said Joan V. Hill, a nutritionist at Hill Nutrition Consulting LLC in Natick.

“The body needs fuel for work,” she said, citing the importance of keeping a steady level of blood sugar. “Without proper nourishment, you will be able to do fewer things throughout the day.”

Holly E. Bartelmann, a Worcester nutrition consultant, suggests eating a few small meals throughout the day that are rich in protein, healthy carbohydrates and some fats.

“People are more apt to not make as good decisions on an empty stomach, and will not perform to the best of their ability,” she said.

In order to keep the lunch break alive, Mr. Dowling said setting a realistic schedule with ample time allotted for a break and sticking to that schedule is most important. He believes, however, many executives tend to get sidetracked and don’t allow time for the unexpected.

“One of the biggest things you run out of is time, and it’s the one thing you can never get more of,” Mr. Dowling said. “So it ends up coming from areas set aside for different things.”

“Lunch is just not a high priority,” said Jane R. Fine, founder and president of Fine Properties Inc., a residential and commercial real estate company in Worcester. “It is very rare that I take a lunch break.”

Ms. Fine said she attends a scheduled networking meeting once a week at lunchtime, but does not go out of her way to take lunch on the other four days.

“I just don’t have the time to get out,” she said. “I keep snacks in the office if I get hungry.”

Joy C. Child, vice president of Alexander, Aronson, Finning & Co., a public accounting and consulting firm with offices in Westboro, Worcester and Wellesley, said that during the busy tax season she eats lunch at her desk while working in her Worcester office.

“Most of the time I take about 10 minutes as I’m listening to messages or checking e-mails,” she said. “Though I do try to get out of the office at least once a week at lunchtime” during tax season. During the rest of the year, Ms. Child said, she takes a lunch break away from her desk two or three days a week.

Andy R. Davis, president of Davis Advertising in Worcester, said he has worked through lunch his entire career — whether it is in his office or during scheduled lunch meetings with co-workers or clients.

“To me, lunches are working lunches, and they have been for the past 20 years,” he said.

Though Mr. Davis said lunchtime conversations could sometimes swing toward events such as opening day at Fenway Park, he believes it remains a good way to discuss business with less pressure.

Handling the pressure of the work environment is also a high priority for George A. Balko III, a partner in Bowditch & Dewey LLP’s Worcester office.

“I usually take a lunch because, as a trial attorney, I need a stress break,” he said. “Though it depends on my workload and deadlines.”

Adamant about taking a lunch break is Paul A. Turner, president of the Worcester Executives Association as well as Marie's Direct Mail Inc. in Worcester.

"I take a break at lunchtime every day," he said. "Even if I don't eat, I still need time to give my brain a rest."

Practices like Mr. Turner's have very beneficial effects on one's health and well-being, according to Regina A. Leduc, founder of AIM Business Solutions, a group of management consultants specializing in professional development based in Worcester.

"It is impossible to function at your peak if you're not getting proper nutrition or rest from stress," she said.

"Even 15 or 20 minutes away from the job will do a lot to reenergize, refocus and redirect your mind."

Mrs. Leduc said that it is imperative to "work smarter, not harder" during the day while planning out a realistic schedule.

"Next to goal setting," she said, "scheduling is the most important tool that a successful person has."

Mrs. Leduc suggests eliminating unnecessary tasks, setting time restrictions on specific activities and prioritizing properly.

OfficeTeam's Mr. Dowling also warned that higher-level executives who skip lunch tend to set a bad example for the rest of the staff, who may then feel inclined to do the same.

"Most look at what those above them do as a guideline, whether it's dictated to them verbally or otherwise," he said. "Leading by example is imperative in business."