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A Marathon, Not a Sprint: The Benefits of Taking Time to Recover from Work Demands

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Introduction

"Are you binge working?" was the title of a recent NBC News article[14] describing recent cases in which people reported working as many as three days straight without any breaks, and in some cases literally dying as a result. Although cases like these are extreme, they point to a growing trend in today's workplace—one that suggests employees are working longer hours, coping with increasing work demands, and readily adopting technology that tethers them to their work 24/7. Coupled with a working culture that equates face time and being "always on" with high job commitment, we're left—perhaps not surprisingly—with a workforce that is overworked, sick, and less likely performing at a high level [5,7,11]. In the face of these challenges, how can organizations maintain a healthy, engaged and productive workforce? Drawing from research on employee recovery from work demands, the answer to this question may lie in incorporating strategies that allow employees to regularly recharge their batteries during time away from work.

Background

Athletes know the importance of letting their muscles relax after strenuous exercise so the body can repair and strengthen itself between workouts. Accordingly, recent research shows that rest and recovery is just as important to maintaining a healthy physique as it is to sustaining a psychologically healthy workforce. Simply put, employees, like athletes, benefit from time to step away, unwind, and recover from work demands. Early research on the brain compared it to a muscle and argued that similar to athletes who must take time to recover their muscles, people must take time to reenergize their minds in order to maintain high levels of motivation and performance [4]. In the work context, investing effort to complete work tasks and coping with work-related stressors (e.g., conflicts with co-workers or customers) can drain employees of important psychological resources (e.g., mental energy, positive mood) and leave them feeling exhausted. Recovery from work refers to stepping away from work, unwinding, and experiencing the absence of work-related demands—in short, recovery is a means by which employees can hit the "off" switch. Research suggests that when employees are able to recover from work demands they benefit from improved well-being and enhanced performance capacity (i.e., readiness to perform, attentional capacity, and/or feelings of being focused, energized, and motivated to work). These effects can occur

in two ways: 1) experiences that enable recovery to occur help employees build important social and psychological resources that result in greater well-being, and 2) recovery experiences can interrupt the negative effects of work demands and stressors on negative well-being by allowing employees to get away from work circumstances that are causing stress.

Perhaps not surprisingly, researchers find that recovery is important each and every day. However, highly stressful workdays can inhibit recovery the same day (during evenings after work), which in turn may contribute to increased strain and decreased well-being at bedtime and the following work day[12]. This indicates that on very stressful workdays employees remain "switched on" and therefore are less likely to replenish important resources during nonwork time. In the absence of daily recovery, strain resulting from everyday work demands can build up and result in a greater need for recovery at the end of the workweek. Fortunately, weekends and vacations provide employees with longer time periods to recover from strain that might have

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accumulated over many days or weeks. Studies find that to the extent that employees can successfully recover during the weekend or a vacation, they report decreased strain (e.g., burnout) and increased cognitive functioning at the beginning of the following workweek[7]. Thus, meaningful recovery can—and should—occur on a daily basis as well as during longer breaks from work.

Apart from promoting employee well-being[12], research in organizational psychology shows that on days when employees feel recovered after a leisurely evening or weekend, they are more engaged at work [11, 15] and perform at a higher level. Importantly, feeling recovered not only encourages employees to put more effort into completing their assigned work tasks (i.e., task performance), but may also prompt employees to engage to a greater extent in discretionary behaviors such as helping support their colleagues and taking initiative [5, 11]. Thus, finding ways to support employees to recover from work demands is one proactive strategy organizations can

employ in order to support employees' sustained well-being and performance on the job.

Importantly, it's not just the time away from work but the activities and psychological experiences associated with those times that are helpful for recovery. Empirical research identifies at least three nonwork psychological experiences that are beneficial to employee recovery: psychological detachment, relaxation, and mastery[13] (Figure 1). Research shows that these experiences during nonwork time are associated with enhanced well-being in the form of increased positive mood, feelings of energy and vigor, reduced strain and other negative emotional states, and even increased life satisfaction. When back at work employees who have recovered from work report higher work engagement[3], higher task performance[5], creativity[5], initiative taking[3], and helping behavior[5].

Implications for Practice:

Organizational Strategies

- Reduce stressors. As a first step, organizations should make efforts to avoid or reduce work-related demands and stressors (e.g., role ambiguity or workplace conflict). However, we realize that not all demands can be reduced, and therefore recovery from those demands is needed.

- Encourage employees to take vacations. A recent report conducted by Oxford economists and sponsored by American Express showed that employees leave an average of 5 out of 21 paid vacation days on the table each year[1]. Encouraging employees to use vacation time, rather than trading it in for additional monetary rewards or accruing it over consecutive years, ensures that employees and organizations capitalize on opportunities for recovery.

- <u>Reinforce norms for recovery through leadership</u>. Leaders are an important source of information for employees with regard to organizational values and expected behaviors. Leaders can role model successful recovery by taking their own vacation time and refraining from work during nonwork time. Further, leaders who support employees in creating better work-life balance help reduce employee work-family conflict and increase job satisfaction[8].

- <u>Develop policies around work-related technology use</u>. Supervisors can actively encourage employees to unwind and recharge during nonwork time through creating policies and norms for appropriate work-related technology use; for example, setting limits on the frequency of work-related phone calls or emails during evenings, weekends, and vacations, and encouraging team members to do the same.

- <u>Allow flexible scheduling</u>. Workplace flexibility is one way in which organizations can help employees ensure opportunities for adequate recovery[9]. It can be created through implementation of flextime (i.e., flexible start and end times), telework, or compressed work schedules (e.g., four ten-hour workdays each week) all of which increase employees' schedule control.

Individual Strategies:

- <u>Take time to detach</u>. Strategies such a turning off work-related email on one's personal phone, or using an out-of-office response during vacation can make it easier to mentally distance oneself from work outside of the office. In addition, separate email accounts, phones, or computers for work and nonwork activities may be strategies for enhancing the ability to psychologically detach from work.

- <u>Relax</u>. Activities such as meditation, yoga, going for a walk, or reading a book allow both physical and psychological systems to return to their resting levels and enable the recovery process to occur.

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- Challenge yourself. Activities such as taking classes to learn a new skill, engaging in exercise that is challenging, traveling, and doing something creative represent nonwork mastery experiences that enable psychological resources such as positive mood and sense of confidence to be replenished.

- Create recovery routines. Developing routines around recovery from work helps reduce the effort involved in engaging in those activities. Some examples might be creating exercise routines (e.g., exercising during the same time with others every week), regularly meeting with family and friends, or maintaining good sleep habits (e.g., going to bed at the same time every night, refraining from using technology right before bedtime [2, 3]).

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- Draw on a support network. One's social network (e.g., significant other) can help support recovery from work [10]. Therefore, communicating one's need for recovery and negotiating time and opportunities for recovery with a partner and friends can facilitate the recovery process.

Next Steps

Encouraging employees to take advantage of their time away from work to recover and re-energize on a regular basis is crucial to the well-being of employees, as well as the long-term success of organizations. Just as athletes need time to physically recover from the demands of strenuous exercise, employees, too, require regular opportunities to psychologically disengage and recover from the demands of work; doing so enables employees to sustain high levels of well-being and energy that translate into work performance[5]. Alternatively, employees who fail to recover are more likely to suffer from increased strain and feelings of burnout over time[6]. Therefore, organizations that understand their role in facilitating employee recovery, and that encourage their employees to leverage work breaks for the purpose of recharging and unwinding, will benefit from a workforce that is psychologically fit, energized, and ready to work[6].

Are your employees getting the time they need to rest and recover from work demands?

Recovery Experiences		
Psychological Detachment Refraining from work-related thoughts, activities, and emotions during nonwork time	**Relaxation** Engaging in low-activation, low effort activities such as taking a walk or reading a magazine	**Mastery** Seeking out activities that pose a challenge or present an opportunity for learning

Figure 1. Recovery Experiences (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007)

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