

The Business Brain

Why coffee breaks are good for productivity

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We may live in the age of smart phones and Twitter, but ancient signalling systems used by the great apes – and even the birds and the bees – are alive and well in 21st century workplaces. Now, this subtle layer of nonverbal communication can not only be measured, it can be harnessed to enhance productivity, according to new research.

By mapping how employees interact throughout their workday, scientists at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Laboratory have found that something as simple as co-ordinating when employees take their breaks can boost their output. "There are a lot of things we take for granted when we work. We think that having lunch or coffee with friends are luxuries, and not really important for the way we work. But in multiple studies we saw that social interaction was one of the main things that predicts productivity," noted Benjamin Waber, an MIT doctoral student. "The more people talk to other people, the more productive they are."

The research team, led by Professor Alex (Sandy) Pentland, uncovered the impact of nonverbal signalling by asking employees in large workplaces to wear sociometric badges – wearable computers that look like a cross between an ID tag and a deck of cards. Worn around the neck, the badges have sensors that track people's patterns of movement around the office, whether and when they're talking to colleagues, and how engaged they are during the discussion.

"They can tell you who is talking to whom. A microphone records pitch, intonation, and volume," said Mr. Waber. The masses of data are aggregated to detect overarching patterns; they're not analyzed for content ("You can't reconstruct what people are saying," he says). Nor does the company get any person's data.

The researchers knew that social cohesion is linked to job satisfaction and performance, having previously used sociometric badges to track interactions among people working in banks, hospitals, and IT operations. They found that increasing social cohesion by one standard deviation among information technology workers was associated with a 10-per-cent increase in their productivity. But in this new study of 3,000 call centre employees, they demonstrate that face-to-face interaction can actually boost production.

"Call centres are specifically managed to reduce face-to-face interaction between people," Mr. Waber noted. "It's an assembly-line attitude. The work was structured so that no one had a break at the same time," adding to an already stressful work environment, he explained. Mr. Waber hypothesized that allowing cohesive relationships to form among colleagues during overlapping coffee breaks could prevent burnout and improve productivity.

In the first phase of the study, teams of 20 employees wore the badges for six weeks, and the scientists simply measured what happened during their 15-minute breaks. In the second phase, the employees were divided into two groups: those who had the customary staggered breaks, and those who were allowed to take breaks with their colleagues. For three months, the badges tracked the workers' nonverbal communication patterns.

"We found this huge change in how cohesive they were. There was this new opportunity for interaction, and it changed their mindset for the whole day," Mr. Waber said of those who were able to take breaks with their colleagues. "They were less stressed. We saw this dramatic change in their behaviour even though we're only talking about changing 15 minutes of their day."

The badges also tracked interesting clues from the coffee breaks, periods usually seen as lost time by managers. For example, women most often talked to other women, while men talked to men and women in equal measure, Mr. Waber said. And workers with the most experience were neither more efficient at their jobs, nor more socially integrated. But those who were part of a dense social group (meaning that the people they talked to also talked a lot to each other) were the most productive.

"Perhaps a friend said, 'This is how I dealt with this problem or how I pitched this new product,'" Mr. Waber suggested. "At work, the things that matter are these social interactions. Very good managers deeply embedded in a company intuitively understand this. Now we can measure it in completely new ways."

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