

Ten Bad Habits That Should Be Banned from the Workplace Forever

Avoiding these missteps will lead to a healthier lifestyle.

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Over the years, we have developed work styles that are not good for our physical, mental, or emotional health. “It’s not that we’re bad people, or that we aren’t working hard,” as I write in my book *The Healthy Workplace*.¹ “The problem is that what our minds and bodies need at a basic level is in conflict with our work style. We are so focused on work, on getting things done, that we’ve changed the way we eat, move and sleep in a way that is actually counter-productive.”

It turns out that taking care of worker health and well-being is the

most effective way to increase engagement and performance. Putting yourself and your health first isn’t selfish; it’s exactly what we all need

that you don’t make time for exercise during the work week. Why? Studies show that if you wait to work out on the weekend to get the recommended

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to do to make our businesses thrive. It is a minimum requirement for doing your job well.

So what are some of those unhealthy habits that we need to break? A list of the “don’ts” follows, with suggestions on what to do instead.

1. Don’t Wait for the Weekend to Exercise.

Don’t get so caught up in work

amount of exercise, you are not likely to meet the weekly target of 150 minutes of vigorous exercise. It is just too much exercise to fit into too little time. This also increases your chances for injury. Weekend warriors and do-it-yourselfers trying to fit in major home improvements, yard work, and so on during off hours regularly injure themselves by pushing them-

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selves too hard, too infrequently. You need a consistent healthy plan that keeps you strong and full of energy all day and all week.

Instead:

- Set time on your calendar for working out.
- Arrange to meet a friend or colleague to work out. According to Dr. Tim Church, “A significant predictor of whether people are going to stay on an exercise program is if they have a friend (either an individual or group) who works out with them. Getting people connected to each other is critical.”¹

Why? Exercise isn’t just about losing weight, cardiometabolic health, or “something you should do to let off a little steam”—it’s also an effective tool for increasing productivity. Vigorous exercise (e.g., walking at a good pace on the treadmill or other forms of moderate to vigorous exercise) affects us at the cellular level, where energy production begins.

2. Don’t Take the Elevator If You Can Help It.

Elevators in modern office buildings are typically placed front and center, which makes them accessible to all types of people with different physical abilities. However, if you do not need the elevator, you are missing out an opportunity to make a healthier choice.

Instead:

- Take the stairs.
- Use prompts and cues to encourage stair use:
 - Work with your landlord to paint the stairwell a lighter color so it is brighter and more appealing;
 - Add artwork to the walls or pipe in pleasant music; or
 - As is actually happening in some buildings, take music out of the elevators and put it in the stairs to make the stair experience more desirable.
- Want a really simple trick to nudge stair use? Studies show that by just putting up signs that explain the health benefits of taking the stairs (e.g., a sign in the elevator lobby that

shows how many calories you can burn), stair usage increases by 54%!

Why? Taking the stairs counts as “vigorous exercise” and also enables you to bump into and connect with colleagues you might not see otherwise. Save the elevator for people who really need it.

3. Don’t Stay Indoors All Day.

One day we’re going to all look back and realize that we have been working in the dark for the last 200 years, literally, which is negatively

with the outdoors, our workplaces are lit like caves.

Instead:

- Buy a circadian light bulb and screw it into a lamp or fixture you already have at work or home. You can buy “daylight” bulbs for use during the day (to keep you more alert and awake) and “sleepy-time” bulbs for use next to your bed. Try these bulbs for a week and see if they impact your mood and sleep.
- Consider installing a circadian

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impacting our sleep and well-being. A good portion of our global workforce spends 90% of each day indoors, which essentially puts workers in a state of “light deficiency,” and it negatively impacts our sleep cycle.

Instead:

- Get outside, preferably earlier in the day, and for as long as you can.
- Why? We need more intense light to reset our circadian rhythm, which helps us sleep. Some sleep experts recommend being outside as much as two hours a day, but going outside for even 30 to 60 minutes during the day—over a lunch break, for example, or during a walking meeting outdoors—will provide roughly 80% of what you need to “anchor” your circadian rhythm, according to Dan Pardi, a researcher with the Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences Department at Stanford University, and the Departments of Neurology and Endocrinology at Leiden University in the Netherlands.²

4. Don’t Put Up with Bad Lighting.

Most offices today have artificial lighting—some combination of incandescent, fluorescent, or maybe halogen bulbs putting out light at brightness that is just enough for us to see the paper on our desk. Compared

lighting system for your next office upgrade. Circadian lighting in workplaces takes into account natural and artificial light, a certain intensity of light at the desktop height level, and the presence of high light levels for a certain amount of time during the day.

Why? If there is one investment you can make to improve the quality of your workplace, better lighting is probably it. Research from Jennifer Veitch, PhD, Principal Research Officer at National Research Council of Canada, and others show that people who perceive their office lighting to be high quality rate their space as more attractive, have a more pleasant mood, and show greater well-being at the end of the day.³

5. Don’t Multitask While Eating.

Mindless eating (i.e., eating while your head is focused on something else) typically results in eating faster and consuming more calories than if you were seated at a dining table and paying attention to what you eat. Even worse than eating at your desk? Eating takeout food at your desk! Americans eat in a restaurant five times a week, according to a recent survey conducted by Living Social.⁴

Instead:

- Bring in your own snacks and lunch.

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- Eat away from your primary workspace. Keep food and drinks away from your keyboard tray... gross!

- Invite your colleagues to have lunch with you, and use eating time to connect and unplug.

Why? You will automatically make better choices when you are eating without multitasking, because you are more aware of what you are putting in your mouth. If you can find a pleasant environment to eat in with a colleague, all the better.

6. Don't Put Unhealthy Foods Front and Center at Work.

You know how you walk into a grocery store and find yourself buying junk food at the end of the aisle? Or have you noticed how candy is located at child's-eye level by the checkout counter? Foods that are easy to spot and are presented well are not put there by accident, and food companies pay for the privilege. The secret is "choice architecture," a term for different ways in which choices can be presented to consumers, and the impact of that presentation on consumer decision-making. Don't fall victim to this at work!

Instead:

- "Hide" unhealthy foods in the kitchenette or breakroom by putting them in opaque or translucent containers (versus healthy food like fruit or nuts in glass containers). Companies who provide subsidized snacks are starting to opt for refrigerators with glass doors to encourage employees to grab healthy foods with a shorter shelf life (e.g., hard-boiled eggs, salad, fruit) versus processed foods that can be left on the counter.

Why? You will feel better, and your co-workers will too. Healthful foods cut down on extra calories with no nutritional value, which helps productivity and the bottom line.

7. Don't Let the Papers Pile Up.

Paper on your desk, especially if it has been sitting there a while, is likely full of dust and dust mites, which for many people can trigger serious allergies and asthma. Do you really need

all that paper? Many medical practices are finding ways to drastically reduce paper despite HIPAA regulations and other concerns.

Instead:

- File paperwork and put in place a system for removing paper or mov-

ing paper offsite that you don't need access to on a regular basis.

- Put in place a good system for scanning and digital filing of documents, so that you and your team know where to find things later. A trusted electronic system can help

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reduce the need for a paper back-up.

Why? No dust mites and a cleaner desk can improve air quality. Also, removing paper can give the appearance of having more space. Big piles of paper (and all the furniture that store it) eat into the workspace and make the workspace feel more crowded. This feeling of being “crowded in” increases stress and decreases our satisfaction with our work area.

8. Don't Skimp on Vacation Time.

A survey for the career website Glassdoor found that U.S. employees use only 51% of their eligible paid vacation time and paid time off, according to a recent survey of 2300 workers who receive paid vacation.⁵ Even more frightening, 61% of Americans work while they are on vacation, despite complaints from family members; one in four reports being contacted by a colleague about a work-related matter while taking time off, while one in five has been contacted by his or her boss.

Instead:

- Plan your vacations, take them, and enjoy yourself. Give yourself and your teammates permission to unplug.

Why? You need it to refresh and revitalize to be more effective. Your family will love you for it. John De Graaf, who made a documentary about overworked Americans called “Running Out of Time”, has found there is a high cost to not taking vacation. “Women who don't take regular vacations are anywhere from two to eight times more likely to suffer from depression, and have a 50% higher chance of heart disease,” he says. “For men, the risk of death from a heart attack goes up a third.”⁶

9. Don't Go to Work When You Are Sick.

When you come into the workplace sick, you are very likely spreading diseases to colleagues and patients. As tempting as it is for you to “power through” and minimize sick days, the overall health risk is not worth it.

Instead:

- Stay home!

Why? Researchers from the University of Arizona in Tucson placed a tracer virus on commonly touched objects such as a doorknob or tabletop in workplaces.⁷ At mul-

our emotional, physical, and mental best is foundational to doing our best work. It's time to get our priorities straight, and make worker health and well-being a foundation for good business, not just something that is “nice to have.” **PM**

Consider adopting a “work from home” policy to allow sick workers to stay home.

iple time intervals, the researchers sampled a range of surfaces, including light switches, countertops, sink tap handles, and push buttons. They found that between 40% and 60% of the surfaces were contaminated within two to four hours. Consider adopting a “work from home” policy to allow sick workers to stay home.

10. Don't Put Work Before Your Health.

If you aren't healthy, it impacts your productivity—and you can't be there for your patients, colleagues, friends, and family when they need you.

Instead:

- Set an example for your colleagues and patients to follow. Make your health a priority, and start by building time in your calendar to work out, to relax, or to do something that gives you energy and sparks your personal passion.

Why? Companies that make investments in employee health and well-being are also seeing increases in creativity, engagement, and productivity, and, as a result, business growth.

Conclusion

Healthy workers are more productive. The most obvious benefits to the bottom line are the avoidance of healthcare costs, but companies that make investments in employee health and well-being are also seeing increases in creativity, engagement, and productivity, and, as a result, business growth. Being at

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