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Monday, August 22, 2005

On the job

More work, errands eat up lunch breaks

Employees are taking shorter respites or opting to finish chores, job duties to make it home earlier.

By Arielle Brustein / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Ah, the lunch hour. For many of us, it's that essential break in the day relieving us of cramped cubicles, annoying co-workers and staring at unfriendly computer screens.

But apparently, not many of us are taking full advantage of the lunch hour, at least not in the tradition sense, that is.

A recent survey conducted by office furniture designer [Steelcase Inc.](#) found that 55 percent of American office workers take 30 minutes or less for lunch each day. An earlier survey by the same firm found that 14 percent opt not to take a lunch break at all, while more than half do almost anything but eat during their lunch break.

So what are office workers doing other than eating during lunch breaks?

They're busy catching up on work, running to the bank, going to the post office and even tying up their tennis shoes to burn a few extra calories. It seems the majority of us rather give up lunch to complete errands, work and other activities during the day in exchange for more time to spend at home with our families.

Renu Zaretsky of Mount Lebanon, Pa., grabs a fruit smoothie and Power Bar for lunch to keep her going as she completes errands she would otherwise have to do in the evening. "Running errands at rush-hour traffic when you're going home is no fun," said Zaretsky, who works at the Jewish Healthcare Foundation in Pittsburgh.

Thirty-five percent of those surveyed blame the disappearing lunch hour on a changing work environment, 22 percent each cited increased pressure to perform or a desire to get home earlier by taking a pass on their midday meals, and 21 percent say they use the time to catch up on individual work.

"The traditional structure of the lunch hour has transformed as the nature of work has evolved," explained Chris Congdon, market development manager for Steelcase. "Efficiency has become a core aspect to our day-to-day lives, at work and at home. Most employees still feel entitled to their lunch hour, but many times choose to use their time efficiently -- to catch up on work, run errands or grab a quick bite to eat."

Lunchtime shopper Debbie Francis, a compliance consultant at Highmark Inc., said, "Life is so busy" when asked to explain why she skipped lunch to buy gifts. Francis sympathizes especially with working moms who go straight home to pick up kids from day care and make dinner. "The lunch hour is probably the only uninterrupted time that they have to do the things they need to do," she said.

At Pittsburgh's Point State Park, where office workers stroll in full

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business attire and sneakers during lunch, Robert Patton of Monroeville, Pa., took a breather from his lunchtime workout to comment on the growing trend of the shorter lunch "hour" and why he thinks office workers are using it for tasks unrelated to eating.

Patton, a project manager with the U.S. Department of Energy and a previous worker in the mills, says that Pittsburgh's shift from a steel town to a more "service-oriented town" allows workers more flexibility with when they eat and the ability to free up their lunch break for other activities.

"When you're back in the steel mill doing labor-type activities, you're so busy laboring that come lunchtime, you're ready to eat," he said.

"People can now eat lunch at their desk while they work."

According to the survey, office workers in the Northeast take shorter lunch breaks -- 67 percent -- compared with an average 52 percent across the nation.

In the earlier Steelcase survey, which also looked at incomes, those at higher household-income levels, \$50,000 and above, were the most likely to skip lunch altogether. Women also are more likely to take a shorter lunch break -- 61 percent vs. 48 percent for men.

In today's fast-paced business world, it seems it isn't exactly food that American office workers find themselves desiring at lunch -- it's time.

"We're hungry for minutes," Zaretsky said.

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