

The Effective Manager . . . Takes a Break

Evan M. Berman
Louisiana State University
Jonathan P. West
University of Miami

This study examines how senior local government managers take work breaks and how doing so is associated with perceptions of performance. Three purposes of taking a break are studied: (a) to reflect on prior work, (b) to restore oneself physically and mentally, and (c) to take care of personal, nonwork needs. On average, managers take a few breaks every week, lasting about 15 min each. Only about 45% of managers agree or strongly agree that break-taking helps them to reduce stress, clear their mind, make them feel reenergized, or otherwise improve their perceived effectiveness. About one third of managers often think about work while taking a break, which is not associated with positive break outcomes. Positive outcomes are strongly associated with minimizing external distractions, such as asking not to be interrupted, removing oneself from the workspace by taking walks or doing exercise, and focusing the mind on nonwork matters.

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A growing stream of research and popular press articles challenge us to think about how managers take a break (Labor Occupational Health Program, 2007; Linder & Nygaard, 1998; A. Smith, 2003; Strongman & Burt, 2000). Work breaks can provide the necessary antidote for the busy schedules and numerous stresses that managers often experience; breaks can help managers to physically and mentally restore themselves and, thereby, mitigate the negative effects that stress, hurry, and exhaustion can have on their judgment, productivity (e.g., here in body, but not in mind), and working relationships (Gillings & Kleiner, 1993; Irvine, 2005; Kim & Wright, 2007; Mental Health America, 2007; Prizzia & Helfand, 2004). Recognizing the importance of workers being relaxed and fit for work, some employers, albeit not many, now provide increased opportunities for taking a break, such as by providing quiet spaces, napping pods, massage chairs, and so on. Rather than regarding these as passing fads, we take this as evidence of a growing recognition of the importance of this job aspect (Baxter & Kroll-Smith, 2005; Simhan & Chandramouli, 2003; Smerd, 2007).

Authors' Note: Please address correspondence to Jonathan P. West, Professor, University of Miami, Department of Political Science, 314 Jenkins Building, Coral Gables, FL 33124; e-mail: jwest@miami.edu.

At present, almost nothing is known about how often managers take their breaks, how they do so, and to what extent they achieve the above benefits of taking a break. This article addresses the following questions: (a) How often do senior local government managers take a break? (b) What activities do managers engage in while taking a break? (c) What outcomes do managers report from taking a break? and (d) What conditions and attitudes contribute to positive outcomes from taking a break? These questions are addressed through an extensive mail survey among senior managers in U.S. cities with populations of more than 50,000, as well as in-depth interviews among administrators providing specific information about work-break characteristics and their outcomes.

As a general matter of human resource management (HRM), federal law does not require meal or coffee breaks, despite widespread popular misconceptions; however, when employers offer minibreaks, federal law considers such breaks to be work time that must be compensated (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Rather, union pressure and government action have resulted in public policy initiatives that provide breaks for workers, and currently 21 states¹ have legal provisions for workplace breaks, most of which require a rest or meal break for adult workers (Dearing, 2005; Martucci & Lu, 2007). Employees now often expect employers to provide two 15-min breaks per day, which are frequently mentioned in collective bargaining agreements (Freeman & Rogers, 1999, p. 48; Kojola, 2004; Lissy, 1989). In fact, according to the most recent data available from union contacts on file with the Bureau of National Affairs (1995), rest breaks are referred to in 45% of collective bargaining agreements. Although the exact duration of breaks has become a matter of practice and union negotiation, rather than law or regulation, the idea is firmly established that workers should get compensated breaks, in addition to mealtime.²

However, break provisions in negotiated contracts do not generally apply to managers, who are considered to have more control over their own work schedule. Nonetheless, conditions and attitudes have not always been very positive about managers taking breaks. Many managers experience very busy schedules, with numerous interruptions and demands, and they may work after hours to meet their deadlines. In the end, such frenetic conditions may reduce their ability or desire for taking breaks (e.g., Fletcher, Higginbotham, & Norris, 1993).³ Furthermore, managers are widely thought to set examples for their workers, and they may perceive that taking a break will set a bad example, encouraging workers to work less, thereby feeding negative stereotypes of public sector employees (Bentley, 2006; "Enhance Worker Productivity," 2005; S. Smith, 2007). When managers do take breaks, they may experience guilt for the time spent on nonwork activities (A. Smith, 2003). Hence, many circumstances work against managers receiving the necessary benefits of taking a break.

This research acknowledges the following limitations. First, it assesses the opinions of top managers, rather than of lower managers or employees who may also benefit from a time-out or who have opinions about the restorative effect of their managers' taking a time-out. Second, the survey measures perceptions and self-reported behaviors;

we did not observe respondents over any prolonged period of time. Third, although we capture important characteristics of break-taking, it is a highly varied practice, and not all variations are documented, nor are all conditions associated with break-taking known. Finally, we rely on the perceptions of respondents about the benefits of taking a break; no objective data currently exist on the matter.

Framework

In this article, *taking a break* is defined as “a self-generated interlude in the stream of one’s current work activities” that provides an opportunity for the person to redirect his or her mind and activities in ways of his or her choosing (Linder & Nygaard, 1998; Strongman & Burt, 2000; Sudhakaran & Mirka, 2005). The break belongs to the person, at least psychologically, who is free to do as he or she pleases during that time. Typical break activities include quietly relaxing in one’s office, walking, exercising, enjoying time with others, or running errands to take care of personal matters. Although different typologies of work breaks exist, we are mostly concerned with planned or intentional breaks, rather than unplanned or unintentional breaks such as those caused by unforeseen emergencies or unannounced friendly interruptions by colleagues.⁴

Scholarly recognition of the need for periodic rest breaks during work dates back to the scientific management literature with the writings of Frederick W. Taylor (1856-1915). Taylor’s industrial relations research using time and motion studies addressed the issue of worker fatigue and the need for periodic rest breaks (Taylor, 1911/2006, chapter 2). For example, Taylor’s observations of workers unloading pig iron led him to recognize the need for rest breaks to allow recovery time from fatigue, ideas later adopted by industrial organizations and by government. More recent research with computer operators shows that productivity and worker well-being benefit from frequent, short rest breaks (Dababneh, Swanson, & Shell, 2001; Henning, Jacques, Kissel, Sullivan, & Alteras-Webb, 1997), and Hamermesh’s (1990) research, using detailed time diaries of union and nonunion workers, finds that entirely limiting work breaks is counterproductive. Although Taylor and these more recent studies did not address the special case of supervisors, the same reasoning would appear to apply to managers, ensuring that they recover from their mental and stress-related physical fatigue.

This framework posits that taking a break has three broad purposes for managers, each of which has performance implications. First, taking a break allows managers to interrupt their busy schedule and to reflect on past or pending decisions; as Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) noted, “These days, what managers desperately need is to stop and think, to step back and reflect thoughtfully on their experiences” (p. 57). Similarly, a survey by the Families and Work Institute finds that 29% of employee respondents often or very often feel that they “don’t have the time to step back and process or reflect on the work they’re doing” (as cited in “The Negative Effects,” 2001, p. 9). Work breaks

allow time for pondering the meaning of events, considering additional information, and generating new perspectives (Daudelin, 1996; Grant, 1989). At issue is not only organizing existing information but also considering angles that might have been inadequately considered in the hurry of one's job, including legal or ethical aspects, and broader stakeholder interests. Certain problems are quite complex, requiring time out for lining up all the facts and for considering one's options. Reflection can also be part of "mindfulness," "purposeful noticing," or "attentiveness," which are related activities that also aid in "sense making" of one's activities and environment (see, e.g., Argote, 2006; Seiling & Hinrichs, 2005). The need for reflection may arise from the hectic nature of one's hurried schedule, habitually engaging in routine-driven behaviors, and from the limitations of group decision making (e.g., groupthink) or political pressures that seemingly constrain options.

It can be argued that taking time out for reflection and to see things in a broader light ought to be part of a manager's job description or general duties, rather than a break activity. Although we agree that this may be normatively preferred, we are concerned that the *de facto* demands on managers (and possibly their own predispositions) may make break time the most convenient or only time for engaging in reflective activity. Whether reflection about work should be an activity of one's break is also debatable, though it is consistent with the above definition of being a self-generated interlude in the stream of one's current work activities.⁵

A second purpose of taking a break is to physically and mentally restore oneself, which affects managerial effectiveness in two ways. First, daily work may produce emotions (e.g., anger, fear) and physical symptoms of stress (e.g., tight muscles, shallow breathing), which can affect judgment; a restorative break is thus needed to see things with a proper view, resulting in hopefully better decisions and interactions with others (e.g., Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003, 2004; Mental Health America, 2007; Page & Tate, 2007; Simhan & Chandramouli, 2003; A. Smith, 2003). A break also helps one to achieve the optimal work–rest mix, important for individuals and organizations (see, e.g., Bechtold & Thompson, 1993; Carlin, 1997; "Enhance Worker Productivity," 2005; Higgins & Duxbury, 2005; Van Mechelen, 1998). Second, as the mind relaxes or thinks about other things, new concepts or thoughts can serendipitously arise, which then allow a person to see matters in a new light. As an anecdote, people who take frequent breaks report that they often get good ideas while doing so, and the ideas are then pursued when they return to work. Creativity often occurs this way, too, allowing subconscious thoughts to surface when one is not actively engaged in problem solving (Pollick & Kumar, 1997; West & Berman, 1997). This idea is echoed by Mathis (1999), who advocated planning for daily quiet time:

Daily personal quiet time is a requirement in our world. Personal quiet time involves shutting out pressures and, in a quiet place where you can be alone, asking yourself key questions to help determine the importance of activities and events that demand your time and attention. (p. 7)

Third, taking a break allows managers to balance work with nonwork obligations, such as taking care of personal or family matters. With the advent of virtual workplaces facilitated by telecommuting and new technologies, the home–work boundaries are blurred making it more difficult to distinguish public and private space and time (Baxter & Kroll-Smith, 2005; Berman, Bowman, West, & Van Wart, 2006; Reich, 2000; S. Smith, 2007). For example, managers, like other workers, may need to call or e-mail significant others or children to arrange something, or they may need to discuss a problem with a service provider such as a doctor, insurance agent, broker, or building contractor. Occasionally, nonwork obligations are significant and can only be addressed during business hours; taking care of nonwork obligations can increase managerial effectiveness by limiting distractions that preoccupy managers' minds, and hence, allow them to better concentrate on the work at hand.

It should be noted that the locus of break activities, such as a brief walk or enjoying time with others, can often serve multiple purposes. For example, taking a walk can be used for reflection (away from interruptions of the office), and for restoration (smelling the roses, literally) and addressing nonwork obligations through a quick cell phone call. Likewise, taking a break in one's office, having lunch, running an errand, or exercising also provides opportunities for achieving these purposes. However, break-taking activities do not always realize their intended purposes; for example, calling home to restore one's mind can often have the unexpected result of adding new problems and worries. Furthermore, there could be multiple reasons for managers not to take breaks during work time (e.g., no time, deadlines, heavy workload, fear of failure, guilt; Strongman & Burt, 2000).

The effectiveness of break-taking depends on several personal and external factors that may render certain break activities more effective than others. First, taking a break requires awareness and personal skill. Reflection presumes that managers know how to reflect and concentrate on ideas. Restoring oneself assumes that managers are able to take their minds off current tasks and events.⁶ They also need to control any routine, compulsive behavior, such as checking e-mail, which, during a break, is apt to cause reengagement, and it also requires arresting inhibiting thoughts that managers ought to be seen working, rather than taking a break. Managers also need to overcome any negative associations they may have with taking breaks, such as noted in the introduction. To a degree, taking a break involves learned mental and behavioral skills.

Second, external factors play a role, too. It is likely to be more difficult to take a break in one's workspace, where new events can easily reach managers and, thereby, interrupt their break-taking activities of reflection, restoration, or attending to nonwork obligations. Busy schedules that bring them in contact with many different people increase the likelihood of interruptions occurring. Then, being either gone from the workspace (e.g., exercising) or asking not to be disturbed may promote break effectiveness. Some organizations further this by creating expectations about taking breaks or by creating conditions that are appropriate for doing so, such as spaces for taking short naps and getting away from one's workspace. In short, the outcomes of breaks are far from certain and depend on personal and external conditions.

Method

In 2006, a mail survey of city managers and chief administrative officers (CAOs) was undertaken in all 662 U.S. cities with populations more than 50,000 (International City/County Management Association, 2005). This was followed up by in-depth, telephone interviews in spring 2007. The mail survey involved a pilot survey and three rounds of mailings; this extensive mail survey of 287 items resulted in 212 completed responses for a response rate of 32.5%. This is at a lower, but acceptable range of response rates reported in the literature (e.g., Berman & Korosec, 2005; Hays & Kearney, 2001; Sheehan, 2001). Among respondents, 55.2% of surveys were completed by the addressee (city manager or CAO, as appropriate); among the remainder, about one half were completed by an assistant city manager, and the other one half by respondents with such titles as *city clerk*, *director of human resources*, *director of administrative services*, or *chief of staff*. On average, respondents stated that they have worked 22.5 years in government and 11.7 years in their present jurisdiction. Reflecting this diversity, experience, and knowledge, the sample is referred to as "senior managers."

Demographically, 69.3% of respondents are male. Of respondents, 19.6% are younger than age 45 years, 37.8% are between age 45 and 54 years, and 42.6% are older than age 54 years. Among respondents, 53.8% have their highest degree is in public administration; the remainder reported degrees in business administration, political science, law, engineering, and other fields. Of respondents, 70.1% have an MA degree, 20.6% have a bachelor's degree; the remainder, 9.3%, have an associate's degree, law degree, or doctoral degree.

The possibility of sample bias is examined by comparing the responses of addressees (city managers and CAOs) with those of other respondents. Although a few differences exist, they are relatively minor and do not significantly affect our results.⁷ To examine nonresponse bias, we completed a phone survey among a random sample of nonrespondents of the mail survey ($N = 41$). Comparing these responses to those of respondents of the mail survey, we found no meaningful, significant differences between respondents and nonrespondents to the mail survey.⁸ For example, one might assume, as one reviewer does, that managers who have more break time are more likely to respond to the survey, thereby introducing bias; however, the analysis in the footnote shows that those who did not respond to the mail survey do not vary in their frequency or duration of breaks.⁹ Finally, we found no significant differences between early and late mail survey respondents regarding their perceptions of break-taking in their organizations. We also conducted 15 in-depth interviews (approximately 1 hr each) among senior managers in responding jurisdictions, the results of which are reported below. Interviewees were selected purposively, among those who indicated on the mail survey taking either a very large or a small number of breaks. The purpose of these interviews is to provide further understanding of the quantitative, mail survey results.

Table 1
Taking a Break: Frequency and Duration

A. How often do you take a break or time-out in the course of your daily activities?	%
Never or almost never	13.7
About once a month	2.8
About 2-3 times each month	6.1
About once a week	11.3
A few times each week	15.6
About once per day	23.6
About twice per day	14.6
About 3-4 times each day	8.0
About 5-7 times each day	3.8
More than 7 times each day	.5
B. How long are your breaks? Please identify (with a "✓") all kinds of breaks that you take.	
A few minutes	27.4
5-10 min	25.1
11-15 min	13.3
16-30 min	13.3
31-60 min	21.3
1-2 hr	11.4
More than 2 hr	3.8
Mean	15.6 min

Results

Break Characteristics

Table 1 shows that most senior managers take breaks.¹⁰ About one half, 50.5%, of senior managers take one or more breaks every day, one fourth, 26.9%, take up to a few breaks in the course of a week, and the remainder, 22.6%, reported that they seldom take breaks or take only a few each month. On average, managers take "a few breaks" every week; however, among those who take one or more breaks daily, the mean is almost two breaks every day. Managers vary in how long their breaks last and, as one noted, "I definitely take breaks, but not on any formal schedule." Although the average break is reported as being about 15 min, about one half, 52.5%, of all breaks are fewer than 10 min, and about one third, 36.5%, are more than 30 min. Those who take breaks more often also take breaks that last a few minutes longer.¹¹

Table 2 shows where these breaks occur (locus). Senior managers commonly report taking a break while at lunch (57.3%), which is followed by taking a break in one's office with the door open (49.8%), talking with someone (39.8%), and taking a walk (35.1%). One interviewee responded, "I might read, go on the computer and check the stock market, check for breaking news stories, check recent indictments.

Table 2
Ways of Taking a Break (Locus)

Which of the following conditions typically characterize your breaks?	%
Please check (✓) all that apply.	
I am at lunch.	57.3
I take a break in my office with the door open.	49.8
I talk with someone with whom I often share my thoughts.	39.8
I take a walk.	35.1
I do exercise.	20.4
I seek a place to be alone, other than my office.	19.3
I take a break in my office with the door closed.	18.5
I drive or I am being driven.	17.5
I am in a meeting.	13.7
I ask not to be interrupted, unless for an emergency.	6.6
I make myself fully and completely unavailable.	3.3

It's a mental time-out. I very seldom leave the office when taking a break." However, others do leave the office to take a break. About 47.1% of respondents engage in physical activity of walking or exercising, as noted by this top official: "I sometimes walk up and down the hall or go for a cup of coffee. It gets my body parts moving again." Another stated,

My most satisfying activity for a break is to get physically away from work, from the desk, from the office. I used to walk through the state capitol building for a break. It was perfect. No one thought I was on a break. I got to see the elected officials, lobbyists, and senior agency heads. They probably thought I was there on business. A boss once told me that the perfect place to take a break was in the public waiting area of the governor's office. People who saw you there would think you were there on important business. I never tested his theory. Also, one can take minibreaks while at a desk. I would check the weather forecast via Internet as a form of a minibreak. The down side of Internet breaks is the occasional abuses by the few who view pornography and gambling Internet sites.

Lunch is usually a time for an extended break: "People in senior administrative and managerial positions (exempt under FSLA) generally have opportunities to take extended time (more than an hour) for lunch. To them taking lunch as a break is a benefit of office." Lunch often is part of the work routine that provides a locus and opportunity to escape from work: "Now, I might do as I did yesterday, go to lunch and read the paper or check on tickets for a special event"; however, occasionally managers do work during their lunch breaks, too, as the results in Table 2 suggest.

Indeed, the diversity of how breaks are taken is clearly reflected in Table 2. To summarize those results, about one third, 36.3%, of respondents seek to minimize external distractions by seeking to be in a place alone, asking not to be disturbed,

being in their office with their door closed, or otherwise making themselves unavailable. About 41.0% of respondents talk with someone, and, it is interesting to note that about 13.7% report taking a break while in meetings.¹² Some break-taking activities allow for solitude and interaction with others, for example, when taking a break in one's office with the door open (49.8%). Beyond this, one interviewee noted how break-taking could become part of the organizational culture: "I have been in jobs where taking a break with others was part of the culture or routine—one day a week a group would go out for ice cream during working hours."

The possibility of intergenerational or gender differences in break-taking activities was examined; however, neither managers' age nor gender is associated with the frequency or duration of breaks (Table 1). The lack of age-related differences in break-taking may well reflect the fact that the sample consists of mostly older workers who are already socialized into managerial roles; only 8.6% of respondents are younger than age 35 years, and the estimated mean age is about 50.6 years (see Methods, above). Regarding the locus of break-taking (Table 2), females more often take a break while eating lunch (68.9% vs. 50.0%, tau-c = .151, $p < .05$) and associating with other people (57.8% vs. 28.4%, tau-c = .200, $p < .01$).

Table 3 reports respondents' activities while taking a break, building on the purposes described in the framework above. First, it is quite common for senior managers to be pondering about work while stating that they are taking a break. Almost one half of the respondents, 49.0%, often or always think about an approach for dealing with a situation, and 38.5% often or always make a decision about a particular problem or situation. About two thirds, 68.4%, of respondents often or always engage in the most commonly mentioned items in Part A. In addition, Part B shows that about one half of managers, 49.2%, often or always use breaks to think about principles of ethics involved in their work, and 34.2% reported that they think about whether a pending decision is consistent with their values. Almost two thirds, 61.3%, of respondents engage in at least three of the activities mentioned in Parts A and B often or very often.

Thinking about or engaging in work while on a break raises interesting issues. Although reflection about work is noted as a break purpose in the framework, the inability to disengage from work may impair the ability to achieve other, restorative purposes: "No, you shouldn't have to take a break to be thinking about these matters, it is ingrained. To think about ethics and professionalism on a break is work related and inseparable from the job," and "A break is effective as a distraction and refresher when work problems are temporarily set aside." However, a few interviewees reported finding it difficult to set aside work from their thoughts, for example, "I am preoccupied with work. If I take a break during the course of work, I am always thinking, 'I need to get back to work.'" And, "It is fair game to be thinking about work, but then I am a borderline workaholic. . . . I am not one who dozes off at work or who meditates—I can't do that." We also asked interviewees to identify challenges in removing work from their thoughts:

Table 3
Focus of Break Activities

Which of the following activities do you do during your break time?	Always ^a	Often	Occasionally ^b	Never ^c
A. Problem-focused				
Think about an approach or process for dealing with a situation	23.5	25.5	35.5	15.5
Make a decision regarding a problem or situation	22.3	16.2	40.9	20.7
Think about other things that I must do later	22.0	25.0	41.0	12.0
Think about things that could be done to make the city better	21.0	25.5	36.0	17.5
Think how I can better present a problem or strategy to others	18.4	24.9	38.3	18.4
Organize new information in a coherent way in my mind	16.5	21.0	40.0	22.5
Weigh options regarding a problem and make a decision later	14.7	23.9	43.2	18.3
Identify facts about a problem or situation not yet considered	13.1	16.7	43.4	26.8
Use my computer to check my agenda or e-mail	12.6	24.2	27.3	35.9
Reflect on an action taken, to improve on it later	11.9	24.8	46.5	16.8
Define a problem in a new way	10.5	19.0	41.0	29.5
B. Values-focused				
Reflect on principles of ethics before addressing a situation	24.1	25.1	27.7	23.1
Reflect on the values of stakeholders before addressing a situation	18.9	18.9	37.2	25.0
Assess whether a pending decision is consistent with my values	17.1	17.1	38.9	26.9
Consider professional aspects of the problem or situation	14.1	17.1	42.2	26.6
Decide how to deal with a decision that seems inconsistent with my values or those of the community	12.1	14.6	39.4	33.8
Consider legal or ethical aspects of the problem or situation	10.5	14.5	39.0	36.0
C. Nonwork-focused				
Momentarily disengage myself from all work and nonwork issues, such as by enjoying a cup of tea or coffee or exercising, before returning to a problem or situation later	12.5	16.0	36.0	35.5
Attend to a personal or non-work-related matter	10.2	23.4	43.2	22.9
Nurture social relationships in the workplace	5.0	13.9	43.1	38.1
Momentarily disengage myself from all work and nonwork issues through meditation, before returning to a problem or situation later	4.0	5.0	13.6	77.4
Nurture social relationships in the community	3.0	10.1	39.4	47.5
Allow my mind to roam freely and see what thoughts come up	2.5	11.3	35.5	50.7
Use my computer to surf the Internet or play a brief game	1.0	5.4	17.1	76.6

a. Includes "always" and "almost always."

b. Includes "occasionally" and "about half of the time."

c. Includes "never" and "seldom or rarely."

I do it by active involvement in what I am doing. For example, if I am interacting on the computer with a news story or a search on Amazon.com, I have to focus on it. This enables me to think of something besides work.

Second, Table 3, Part C shows that about one fourth, 28.5%, of respondents always or often disengage themselves from all work and nonwork. This might involve enjoying a cup of tea or coffee. Other interviewees reported that taking a walk outside helps restore and refresh them mentally. As might be expected, very few senior managers engage in meditation to rest their mind. About one fourth, 23.7%, of managers surveyed occasionally surf the Internet or play computer games while taking a break, though a few often or always do so, and respondents reported that this helps them to mentally restore themselves. About 18.9% of respondents state that they use a break to nurture social relationships. According to one respondent,

It is not a primary activity of mine, but I might network up and down the hall by poking my head in to a colleague's office and ask, "What's happening?" In some workplaces there is a need for more social interaction.

Interviewees indicate that such interaction often helps them to distract their mind and leaves them more rested, while also serving to improve the workplace. Gender among managers is not associated with using breaks to nurture social relationships in the workplace.

Third, taking a break is also used to meet nonwork obligations. About one third, 33.6%, of respondents always or often attend to personal or non-work-related matters. An interviewee provided the following example:

I now have online bill paying, I don't often do it at work, but I may do so if I have time. Some people I have worked with devote break time to family-type issues, health matters, child care, or sports talk.

Finally, those who take at least daily breaks somewhat more often or always engage in personal and nonwork matters than those who take less frequent breaks, 39.6% versus 27.3% ($\tau\text{-}c = .157, p < .05$) and, it is interesting to note that men more often report that they do so than women: 45.8% versus 29.5% ($\tau\text{-}c = .147, p < .05$).¹³

Correlates and Outcomes

Table 4 shows that, among respondents, 48.3% agree or strongly agree that taking a break makes them more effective as managers. Specifically, 47.8% agree or strongly agree that taking a break helps clear their mind, allowing for a fresh perspective, and 42.7% agree or strongly agree that doing so helps them make better decisions. In addition, 49.0% agree or strongly agree that taking a break reduces their stress, and 37.9% agree or strongly agree that it reduces the stress of those around them. Of respondents, 50.7% agree or strongly agree that taking a break reenergizes them. Of respondents, 38.3% agree or strongly agree that taking a break at work helps the management team to make better decisions. On average, 45% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the seven items in Table 4.

Table 4
Perceived Break Outcomes

Taking a break at work....	Strongly Agree/Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Reenergizes me when I refocus on work	50.7	32.2	7.9	9.3
Reduces my stress	49.0	29.1	11.2	10.7
Improves my effectiveness as a manager	48.3	29.3	12.2	10.2
Clears my mind allowing for a fresh perspective	47.8	36.6	7.9	7.8
Helps ensure that I make better decisions	42.7	32.5	14.6	10.2
Helps ensure that our management teams make better decisions	38.3	35.9	13.7	12.1
Reduces stress of those around me	37.9	32.0	10.2	19.9

These results show that although respondents report generally favorable perceived outcomes of breaks, there is also room for improvement. The mean score of all seven responses is only slightly more than *somewhat agree*, 2.78, on a 7-point scale.¹⁴ On average, respondents only agree or strongly agree with 3.2 of the seven items; 29.4% of respondents fail to agree or strongly agree with any item. These findings may seem surprisingly low if one expects managers to be positive in the self-reporting of their perceived outcomes from break-taking. For example, it might be speculated that problems of cognitive dissonance will cause respondents to overrate break outcomes, to justify (rationalize) their break-taking habits. However, if the results of Table 4 are taken as an upper estimate of perceived break outcomes, then senior managers must be regarded as only modestly successful break-takers and, in about one third of cases, as decidedly poor break-takers.¹⁵

Interviewees provided numerous examples of how breaks can achieve positive outcomes. In general, regardless of the specific activity, several respondents found a positive impact of taking a break, such as voiced by this manager:

A successful break is [one that] clears the mind, and this makes you more productive. It reduces physical stress when you return to work with a sense that you have a better handle on work problems and tasks. Returning to work after a break can renew the efficiency and effectiveness of your work.

Interviewees also noted the serendipitous experience of productive thoughts coming to mind when not focusing on work itself. This is quite common, as noted by this respondent:

A break can be an opportunity to find solutions. What I'm hoping happens is that the solution to the problem or a decision on a course of action to take comes to mind [when I] get away from the grind for a few refreshing moments.

The following is a rather typical example that shows the benefit of engaging in social activities when taking a break:

Cultivating important work relationships is the high art of breaking. Be engaging, but don't gossip. It's OK to talk about family, hobbies, personal interests, activities during breaks. It's amazing how information you learn about others during breaks will help you understand their reactions to business issues. You are able to reach a comfort level with coworkers that can carry over into business and professional occasions.

Based on Table 4, index variables were created through summation of items assessing perceptions of "effectiveness" and "feeling restored."¹⁶ Table 5 shows items listing activities and conditions associated with these outcomes. Taking more breaks is associated with perceptions of increased effectiveness and feeling restored (both $ps < .01$). For example, those who take daily breaks more often agree or strongly agree that it increases their effectiveness as a manager than those who take fewer frequent breaks—60.0% versus 36.0% (tau-c = .377, $p < .01$), they also more often agree or strongly agree that it reduces their stress—63.2% versus 34.0% (tau-c = .353, $p < .01$), and they say it makes them feel reenergized when they refocus on their work—60.0% versus 41.0% (tau-c = .251, $p < .01$). Among senior managers, 59.4% agree or strongly agree that they get good ideas when they are alone, and Table 5 shows that this is significantly associated with perceptions of increased effectiveness ($p < .01$).

Table 5 also shows that minimizing external distractions such as asking not to be interrupted is associated with perceptions of increased effectiveness and feeling restored. For example, among those who take a break with their door closed, respectively 68.5% agree or strongly agree that it helps them to make better decisions, compared to 37.1% who do not take a break with their door closed (tau-c = .188, $p < .01$), and among those who walk or exercise, 63.2% agree or strongly agree that it helps to reduce their stress, compared to 35.1% who do not engage in such activities (tau-c = .281, $p < .01$). Table 5 also shows that respondents who stated that they get good ideas when they are alone also reported larger benefits from their breaks. Attending to a personal matter also is associated with perceptions of increased effectiveness and restoration, as is the index of nonwork activities that is shown in Table 3. In response to a question about what stops people from taking breaks, one interviewee said, "Custom, office policy (formal or informal), the inability to see that a break can improve productivity, fear that the boss or coworkers will see the break as a negative activity."

Although we examined the relationships between break activities (shown in Table 3) and perceptions of effectiveness and feeling restored (Table 4), only nonwork activities are associated with increased effectiveness ($r = .262$) and feeling restored ($r = .222$, both $ps < .01$). It is particularly noteworthy that none of the activities associated with work (problem-focused and value-focused) in Table 3 is associated with perceptions of increased effectiveness or feeling restored, and neither is any aggregate index measure of these variables. The only exception is the 30.6% of respondents who

Table 5
Correlates of Taking a Break

	Effectiveness	Restore
A. Activities		
Frequency of breaks	.346**	.302**
I take a break in my office with the door closed.	.192**	.180**
I seek a place to be alone, other than my office.	.208**	.230**
I ask not to be interrupted, unless for an emergency.	ns	.089**
I take a walk.	.195**	.231**
I do exercise.	.140*	.151*
Attend to a personal or non-work-related matter.	.127**	.146**
Momentarily disengage myself from all work and nonwork issues, such as by enjoying a cup of tea or coffee or exercising, before returning to a problem or situation later.	.226**	.255**
Momentarily disengage myself from all work and nonwork issues through meditation, before returning to a problem or situation later.	.137**	.163**
Allow my mind to roam freely and see what thoughts come up.	.107*	ns
Non-work-focused activities (Table 3)	.195**	.191**
Among "action"-oriented managers, only ^a		
Problem-focused activities (Table 3)	.210*	ns
B. Conditions		
I had a mentor or friend who advised me to take breaks	.161**	.209**
I had a mentor or friend who showed me how to make best use of break.	.158**	.202**
I get good ideas when I am alone.	.173**	.157*
I feel guilty when I take a break from work.	-.126*	ns
My organization allows people to take time out for reflection.	.117*	ns
My organization encourages people to take time out for reflection.	.154**	.147**
Many of our offices are open spaces.	ns	.159**
Organizational activities leave no time for breaks.	-.144**	ns

Note: Cronbach alpha scores of index variables are 0.95 (effectiveness), 0.88 (restore). Tau-c values shown.
 a. Defined as those who managers who agree or strongly agree that "I like a busy schedule" and "I prefer doing things rather than reading things."

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

have a strong action orientation, defined as "liking a busy schedule" and "preferring to do things rather than reading things." For them, thinking about work problems during breaks is weakly associated with perceptions of increased effectiveness (tau-c = .210, $p < .05$, Table 5), but not with feeling restored. It may be that such managers need a break to think and reflect, whereas managers generally find time to do so during their regular, nonbreak activities. The idea that thinking about work during a break does not always lead to greater effectiveness is voiced by several interviewees.

Table 5 also provides further evidence that taking a break is, in part, a learned art. "Having had a mentor who advised me to take breaks," and "showed me how to take breaks" are significantly associated with positive perceived outcomes (both $ps < .01$). However, not all managers have good role models, as one interviewee observed: "I did

work for someone who took long breaks, but it involved a romantic liaison which was not a model of good break-taking activity.” A more positive lesson was learned from another manager:

The first time a new boss invited me to a break taught me something about the boss’s style and habits, how they chose to communicate. It made me feel comfortable about our relationship and ability to get along in a new business relationship.

Among senior managers, 23.3% agree or strongly agree that they feel guilty when they take a break from work; this is significantly, negatively associated with the frequency of taking breaks ($\text{tau-c} = -.271, p < .01$) and with perceptions of effectiveness from taking a break, shown in Table 5 ($p < .05$). One manager stated: “I have on occasion felt guilty about taking a break, mostly because how colleagues would see my break-taking. Everyone wants to be seen as a team player. Some may see taking a break as abandoning the team.” These interviews suggest that in addition to heavy workloads, deadlines, and time constraints noted in the literature as reasons why more breaks are not taken, peer pressure, absence of positive role models, discomfort with one’s boss, and guilt can also deter managers from taking breaks. However, another manager stated,

I don’t feel guilty when I take breaks. Sometimes when I might spend more time on personal matters than usual I may pay attention, but as long as the work gets done I don’t feel guilty. I often come into the office on Sundays, so, on balance, I am always putting in the requisite time.

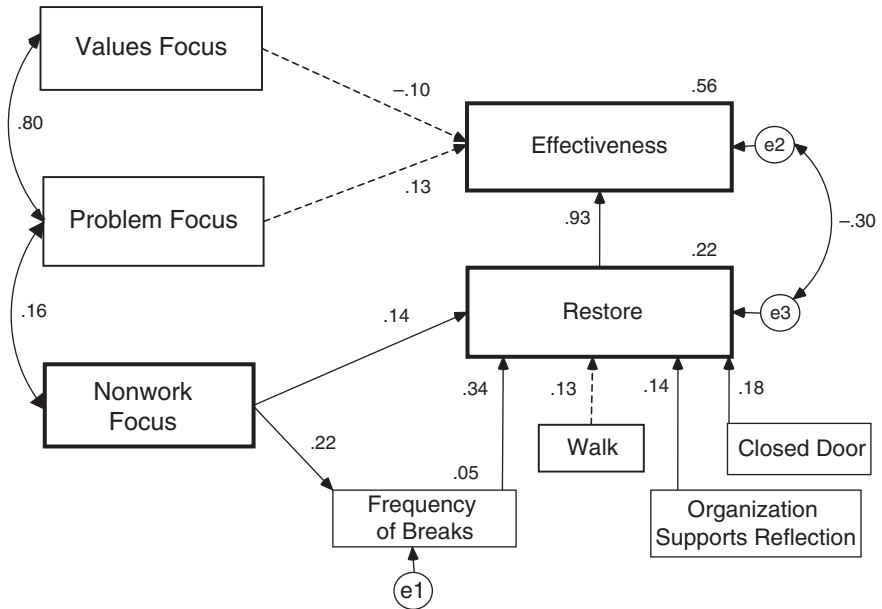
Table 5 also shows that organizations where people are encouraged to take time out for reflection are associated with perceptions of increased managerial effectiveness.

Finally, Figure 1 shows a structural equation model that further examines the impact of break activities (shown in Table 3) on perceptions of effectiveness and feeling restored (Table 4). Figure 1 is one of several models that all lead to essentially the same conclusion. Regarding the validity of Figure 1, the variance-covariance matrix is consistent with that of the data ($\text{chi-square} = 15.2, df = 24, p > .05$), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is .00 (under the norm of .05), the Goodness-of-Fit Index is .979, the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index is .961, which exceeds the threshold of .90, and the maximum Modification Index is a mere 1.04. The Comparative Fit Index is 1.0, indicating good incremental fit, and the Parsimony-Adjusted Normed Fit Index of .598 compares favorably with competing models.¹⁷

Figure 1 shows the effect sizes (standardized coefficients) of the relationships. The dotted arrows show relationships that are not significant at the customary 5% or 1% levels; however, they are included for reasons of theoretical interest above. Figure 1 reaffirms the above finding that work-related activities, however prevalent, during breaks are not associated with perceptions of increased managerial effectiveness or feeling restored. Beyond this, it also furthers the above findings by showing that the path toward

Figure 1
Impact of Taking a Break

Chi-square = 15.239
 $p = .914(df = 24)$



Note: e1, e2, & e3 are error terms.

perceptions of increased effectiveness goes through feelings of being restored. This is shown through the direct effects of restore on effectiveness; any reverse relationship is insignificant. We also tested for direct impacts of problem- and values-foci on restore; however, these relations were insignificant, as is the impact of nonwork activities on effectiveness. The standardized total effect of nonwork activity on perceived effectiveness (.198) compares favorably to other variables and is second only to the frequency of breaks (.314), apart from the impact of restore. Thus, Figure 1 reaffirms the findings of the current study that taking a break is positively associated with perceptions of increased effectiveness, provided that during the break one is truly able to rest and clear the mind.

Summary and Conclusions

This article finds that about one half, 48.3%, of managers agree or strongly agree that taking a break makes them more effective as managers. Approximately the same percentage also agree that taking a break helps them reduce stress, clears their minds, and reenergizes them when they return to work. About one half, 50.5%, of senior managers take one or more breaks every day, and one fourth, 26.9%, take up to a few in the course of a week. Managers vary in how they take their breaks; however, the perception of positive outcomes from breaks is strongly associated with minimizing external distractions such as asking not to be interrupted, taking walks or doing exercise, and attending to personal and other, nonwork matters. The current study also finds that about one third of senior managers often ponder about work while taking a break, which is not associated with perceptions of improved break outcomes (except among a minority of managers that can be described as very action-oriented). Organizations can encourage workers to take a break and time-out (e.g., for reflection), and doing so is positively associated with perceptions of positive break outcomes among senior managers.

This research addresses a long-overlooked topic of HRM. Although it provides some initial systematic data and interpretations, the current study is based on perceptions only, and future research on break-taking behavior could be based on observation-based data and linked to other organizational indicators of success.¹⁸ For example, how effective are rest-breaks in preventing or mitigating work stress and managerial exhaustion? Also, the views of other organizational participants, such as subordinates or superiors, could add to this line of research. Moreover, how does break-taking relate to other HRM activities? For example, given that breaks also facilitate nonwork activities, how does their effectiveness vary from that of flex-time and flex-schedule options that meet the same need of providing time for employees to deal with nonwork demands? Further study might also explore intergenerational differences in break-taking, especially differences between senior managers and younger subordinates. For instance, almost one fourth of the senior managers “feel guilt when they take a break.” Do younger managers (underrepresented in this sample) have similar feelings?

The current study, as well as the academic and popular literature, suggests various strategies that organizations might pursue to improve performance. Taking a break is a necessary part of the job experience that helps employers to have well-rested and productive managers. At issue is not any recommendation here for organizations to adopt policies or rules about taking breaks, as organizations typically allow for breaks. Rather, taking a break can be viewed as a learned behavior that can be improved on. Indeed, the time has come for organizations to ensure that managers and their employees know how to productively take a break. Thinking about work while taking a break is quite common for many managers, yet managers can surely be taught to balance different break purposes. To this end, organizations can offer a lunchtime program on breaks and encourage people to take breaks when they become aware of the onset of fatigue. Managerial training can also include techniques for relaxation and clearing the mind, and, unlike recreational yoga or meditation, training can clearly show how

these techniques further productivity. In addition, organizations might consider allowing some brief period for taking care of nonwork obligations. Many organizations already allow workers to use the phone and computer for some limited personal use during work hours, and excessive break-taking can be controlled by setting reasonable limits on this activity.

Examining policies and practices regarding break-taking is a good first step for managers and their organizations to increase awareness about taking a break. Organizations can ask, "What are desirable break purposes?" and "How well are these purposes being realized?" The results of such assessment can inform efforts to improve individual performance and well-being as well as organizational productivity. The topic of taking a break is a little-discussed but important public management issue, so much so that the benefits from break-taking are increasingly being suggested and anecdotally reported. As the current study reveals, break-taking behavior among managers is indeed strongly associated with the positive perceptions of increased effectiveness and restoration. Thus, with growing interest not only in the private sphere but also among local government managers, we predict that "taking a break from work" will receive significantly more attention in management practice as well as in future training and consulting.

Notes

1. The 21 states include California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin (Dearing, 2005).

2. Some authors, such as Linder and Nygaard (1998, chapter 9) argue for changes in the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), Occupational Health and Safety Act (OSHA), and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) provisions, proposing that FLSA establish minimum standards for meal (45 min) and rest breaks (6 min per hour).

3. The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (n.d.) makes break-taking easier with its downloadable program, "Remind Me," which prompts the computer to remind employees to take breaks. One can argue that busy schedules should prompt managers to take more breaks; however, the question here is about actual practice.

4. Breaks can be classified as planned or unplanned. Planned breaks can include "pseudobreaks" (merely changing your activity or location/position at work), "minibreaks" (several seconds to a few minutes for stretching, deep breathing, short chats, etc.), and "real breaks" ("preplanned, enjoyable, and associated with completion of some goal or task"), whereas unplanned breaks include "emergency breaks" (external and compelling pressures require diversion from work) and "spontaneous breaks" (e.g., unannounced friendly interruptions from colleagues; "The Fine Art of Taking a Break," 2007). The current investigation addresses somewhat broader concerns in that it distinguishes among additional purposes that break-taking can serve.

5. It is also unknown to what extent managers themselves view reflection in this light, and it may be that reflection is better undertaken under conditions (e.g., walking and running an errand) that are closely associated with the other purposes, and is thus "break-like."

6. In addition to learning how to reflect, managers with attention-deficit disorders and high anxiety will find it very difficult to focus and analyze their thoughts, as well.

7. For example, regarding Table 1, addressees (city managers and chief administrative officers [CAOs]) and other respondents score, respectively, 5.4 and 5.1 ($5 = \text{a few times each week}$, $6 = \text{about once a day}$), $t = .89$, $p > .05$. The only statistically significant difference of the items in Table 3 is "I exercise," respectively, 30.8% and 14.1% yes ($\text{tau-c} = .157$, $p < .05$). Perhaps most important, there are also no significant differences in any of the five indexes used in Figure 1 (based on Tables 3 and 4): problem-focused

($t = .114$); values-focused ($t = .151$); non-work-focused ($t = .928$); restore ($t = .453$); and effectiveness ($t = .457$), all $ps > .05$.

8. To examine nonresponse bias, we completed a phone survey among a random sample of nonrespondents of the mail survey ($N = 41$). A sample of four randomly selected items was used; comparing these responses to those of the mail survey, we found no statistically significant differences. These items are "How often do you take a break in the course of your activities" (t test = .488, $p = .626$), "How long do you take your breaks: a few minutes" ($\text{tau-c} = .040$, $p = .291$), "How long do you take your breaks: 16-30 minutes" ($\text{tau-c} = .023$, $p = .513$), and "I take a walk" (cf. Table 3, $\text{tau-c} = .013$, $p = .771$).

9. Furthermore, the section of the 11-page 287-item survey containing 102 items on "taking a break" was just one component of the larger four-part survey on other topics, further minimizing the possibility of response bias based on frequency of break-taking.

10. Consistent with the definition in the framework, the survey instrument reads, "This part of this survey addresses ways in which you take a break in the course of your work activities. The phrase 'taking a break' is defined as an interlude in the stream of one's work activities, during which you feel free to direct your activities in ways of your choosing. People choose to fill their break in many different ways."

11. Analysis shows that the mean break time of those who take at least daily breaks is 17.1 min, compared to 14.2 min among those who take breaks less often. Specifically, 41.2% of respondents who take daily breaks report taking breaks longer than 30 min, compared to 31.8% among those who take breaks less often; however, these groups do not differ in their propensity for taking short breaks.

12. This is consistent with another response, not shown in Table 2, that 14.2% report taking a break while in a public meeting or public activity.

13. Men and women do not differ in their aggregate means of the index variables reported in Figure 1: problem-focused ($t = -.154$); values-focused ($t = -.189$); non-work-focused ($t = .443$); restore ($t = .014$); and effectiveness ($t = -.484$), all $ps > .05$.

14. 1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*.

15. Another noted that "I am also not very impressed with the percentages of managers indicating breaks help in various ways that always center on 50%. Well, that means about 50% do not think they help, and that is very surprising to me, especially given the likely biased results." As shown above, there is no evidence of response bias in the sample (regarding the frequency of taking a break), and an alternative explanation for this finding is simply that managers are not very good at producing effective break outcomes. This is supported by various qualitative interview comments.

16. The index measure of effectiveness is composed of the items "Improves my effectiveness as a manager," "Clears my mind allowing for a fresh perspective," "Helps ensure that I make better decisions," and "Helps ensure that our management teams make better decisions." The index measure of restore is composed of the items "Reenergizes me when I refocus on work," "Reduces my stress," and "Reduces stress of those around me." The respective alpha measures are .95 (effectiveness) and .88 (restore).

17. A reviewer commented that he or she prefers using D-WLS as an estimation method; however, this is not available in AMOS, which we used, but only in LISREL. We used generalized least squares, though other AMOS estimation methods such as asymptotically distribution-free and maximum likelihood all produce similar findings as those reported here. We encourage future researchers to use alternative estimation methods as appropriate and available.

18. As one reviewer asked, Are the "break takers" and self-avowed "more refreshed and effective managers" the ones with the best careers and current positions? For example, controlling for age/experience, are the break takers managing larger cities or commanding higher salaries?

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Evan M. Berman is Huey McElveen Distinguished Professor of Public Administration at Louisiana State University. He has published eight books and more than 100 publications. He is editor-in-chief of the Taylor & Francis book series on public administration and public policy.

Jonathan P. West is professor of political science and director of the MPA program at the University of Miami. He has published eight books and more than 100 scholarly articles and book chapters. He is managing editor of the journal *Public Integrity*.