



Ten Bad Habits You Should Ban from Your Workplace

For giant leaps in productivity and morale, follow these simple steps.

Over the years, we've developed work styles that aren't good for our physical, mental, or emotional health. "It's not that we're bad people, or that we aren't working hard," says Leigh Stringer, author of *The Healthy Workplace* (harpercollinsleadership.com). "The problem is that what our minds and bodies need at a basic level is in conflict with our work style. We're so focused on work, on getting things done, that we've changed the way we eat, move, and sleep in a way that's counter-productive."

So what are those unhealthy habits we need to break? Stringer, a workplace strategy expert and researcher (leighstringer.com), offers a list of the "don'ts" with suggestions on what to do instead.

1. Don't assume that sitting is the only way to work. It's not.

The problem isn't that we sit, it's that many of us sit and work without standing or walking for many hours at a time. **Instead:**

Encourage employees to stand up every 30 minutes and walk around once every hour. Suggest that they take phone calls, watch presentations, read, or perform other activities while standing up or walking if it makes sense for the task at hand.

Create surfaces around the workplace that are bar-height where people can stand and work for a few minutes each day.

Hold standing and walking meetings whenever possible. They improve team spirit, model good behavior, and give people "permission" to work a little differently.

Why? These steps will improve cardio metabolic health, prevent conditions like deep vein thrombosis, and increase creativity levels. Walking has also been shown to help with improved attention and short-term recall (sciencedirect.com).

2. Don't take the elevator if you can help it.

Elevators in modern buildings are typically placed front and center, which makes them good for "universal design" and accessible to all types of people with different physical abilities. However, those who don't need the elevator are missing an opportunity to make a healthier choice. **Instead:** use cues to encourage stair use:

Paint the stairwell a lighter color so that it appears brighter and more welcoming.

Add artwork to give the stairwell a personal touch and add visual interest.

Use point-of-interest prompts. Studies show that just by putting up signs that explain the health benefits of taking the stairs (such as a sign in the elevator lobby that shows how many calories you can burn), stair usage increases by 54%.

“Give people “permission” to work a little differently.”

Why? Taking the stairs keeps people moving. It also gives them a chance to bump into colleagues and connect with them, improving morale. Save the elevator for people who really need it.

3. Don't multi-task while eating.

Mindless eating (eating while you're focused on something else) results in eating faster and consuming more calories. Even worse than eating at your desk? Eating take-out food at your desk! **Instead:**

Create an attractive area where everyone can eat lunch together. Include a refrigerator where people can keep healthy snacks and lunch ingredients.

Invite your colleagues to have lunch with you and use eating time to connect face-to-face. If you work remotely, host a “virtual lunch” via Skype.

Why? People automatically make better choices when they eat without multi-tasking. And eating with others strengthens bonds.

4. Don't put unhealthy foods front and center.

Instead:

“Hide” unhealthy food in the break room by putting it in opaque containers (versus healthy food like fruit or nuts in glass containers). Organizations that provide subsidized snacks are opting for refrigerators with glass doors to encourage employees to grab healthy foods with a shorter shelf life (boiled eggs, salad, fruit) versus processed foods that can be left on the counter.

Work with food service providers or restaurants to provide healthy options for meetings and events.

Why? People tend to eat the foods that are handiest. Healthful eating cuts down on extra calories with no nutritional value, which helps productivity.

5. Don't let papers pile up.

Piles of paper, especially if they've been sitting a while, are likely full of dust and dust mites, which for many people can trigger serious allergies and asthma. Do you really need all that paper? **Instead:**

File paperwork. Create a system for removing (or moving off-site) any papers you don't need to access on a regular basis.

Have 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 reduce the need for a paper back-up.

Why? A cleaner desk can improve air quality. Piles of paper make the workspace feel more crowded. This feeling of being “crowded in” increases stress and decreases satisfaction.

6. Don't e-mail after hours.

Late-night e-mail chatter escalates anxiety, hinders sleep, and impacts long-term productivity. **Instead:**

Wait until normal business hours to send e-mails.

Consider using project management or communication tools that let participants choose when they want to work on something.

Why? Intrusive e-mails impede smooth communication. Tools such as Slack and Asana, which facilitate teamwork without e-mail, save stress and time.

7. Don't skimp on vacation time.

A survey for Glassdoor found that U.S. employees use only 51% of their eligible paid vacation time and paid time off. Even more frightening, 61% work while they're on vacation. One in four report being contacted by a colleague about a work-related matter while taking time off. **Instead:**

Give yourself and your team mates permission to unplug.

Why? Everyone needs to refresh and revitalize to be more effective. According to John De Graaf, who made a documentary about overworked Americans called “Running Out of Time,” there's a high cost to not taking vacation. “Women who don't take regular vacations are 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.”

8. Don't go to work when you're sick.

When you come into the workplace sick, you're likely spreading diseases to colleagues, which reduces organizational output. As tempting as it is for you to “power through,” the overall health risk isn't worth it. **Instead:**

Stay home!

Why? Researchers from the University of Arizona placed a virus tracer on objects such as doorknobs, light switches, and tabletops in workplaces. They found that between 40 and 60% of the surfaces were contaminated within two to four hours. This may be a reason to adopt a “work from home” policy, if you're looking for one. Beyond that, everyone should frequently wash their hands. You can help by positioning bottles of hand sanitizer throughout the workplace.

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9. Don't stay indoors all day.

A good portion of the workforce spends 90% of each day indoors, which puts workers in a state of “light deficiency.”

Instead:

Plan outdoor meetings or other ways for workers to spend time outdoors.

Add tables outside your office building where people can take their lunch and coffee breaks.

Why? We need light to set our circadian rhythm, which helps us sleep. Lack of sleep is a major cause of poor work performance and impaired decision making. Going outside for 30-60 minutes during the day will provide 80% of what you need to “anchor” your circadian rhythm, according to Dan Pardi, a Stanford researcher.

10. Don't put work before health.


If people aren't healthy, they can't get anything done and won't be there for their colleagues when needed. **Instead:**

Urge workers to make health a priority, and provide information on healthy habits.

Offer training that includes practices like meditation, yoga, and whatever topics spark employees' personal passion.

Why? Studies show that unhealthy work habits, like staring at computer screens and rushing through fast-food lunches, take their toll in the form of increased absenteeism, lost productivity, and higher insurance costs – but it doesn't have to be that way. Organizations that make investments in employee health and well-being are seeing increases

in creativity, teamwork, productivity, and organizational growth.

Our emotional, physical, and mental health is foundational to doing our best work. It's time to get our priorities straight, make worker health and well-being an organizational foundation, not just a “nice to have,” and incorporate healthy practices into our organizational cultures. 

Boost Engagement, Health, & Productivity

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