

# Desktop dining: to lunch or not to lunch

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So I met an interesting, professional gentleman at a lunch spot where I frequently purchased my lunch-to-go. I would notice him sitting at the same place at around lunch time and I naturally found myself thinking, "Where does this guy work? Are they hiring? Why does he look so damn happy and relaxed?"



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I had never been exposed to a corporate culture where it was deemed normal for people to actually take the break legally allotted to them, to take time... *Sit* and have lunch *away* from the office. My mind was blown at this concept. So I decided to engage him. He told me he depended on his lunch break to "cope." He elaborated that he needed the mental break from the office, a change of environment that required not only leaving his workstation but the entire building.

He described his "coping" strategy as portioning the work day into two sessions, morning and afternoon. The mental break allowed him a "fresh start" in the afternoon and in this regard aided his productivity far more than a continuous, break-free approach to the work day.

The Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) prescribes at least one hour-long meal interval for an employee who has continuously worked for five hours. With all the strides made in this technological age, the improvement of the average human's attention span has not been one of them. According to [Fortune.com](https://www.fortune.com), the average adult attention span has plummeted from 12 minutes a decade ago to just 5 minutes now. If it's clearly such a struggle to stay committed to the task at hand, why wouldn't you want an hour break?

Within the corporate spaces I have experienced throughout my career, I have noticed that the “company culture” doesn’t allow for such a break and, as such, I used to be the ultimate desktop diner.

For health as well as financial reasons, people choose to bring a packed lunch from home. Mandy\*, a project manager, shares how the company culture at her workplace is such that people eat at their work stations. Zee\*, a digital analyst, shares that when she first joined her company, she noticed that nobody took lunch outside of the office and she just conformed to the standard. Since everyone had lunch at their desk (including her manager), she didn’t want to seem like a rebel. She states that it was unfathomable for her to take an hour’s lunch break in light of “worked through” lunch time. She feared it would make her seem like she wasn’t interested in her job or was not a hard worker.

A New York Times Magazine article entitled "[Failure to Lunch](#)" showcased a series of photographs by Brian Finke displaying well, just how frantic, frazzled and *sad* we look desktop dining. Finke captures a number of people eating at their desks indulging in anything from salads to sandwiches to greasy pizza.

The article explores the gradual consensus in corporate spaces taking place in recent years that lunch breaks denote idleness and lack of industriousness. There is a sense of anxiety that white-collar office workers face with regards to taking their lunch hour. In essence, lunch has become more of an option than an intuition. In terms of employee wellness, there is an element of alienation associated with desktop dining. Most adults tend to eat alone whilst browsing social media or returning emails.

Studies show that “workplace satisfaction is so much higher if you eat with your colleagues.” So why aren’t we doing this? Mandy explains that there are no dining facilities within the office building or nearby parks where she could go to at lunch time so she ends up having lunch at her workstation.

Recently, I have taken a conscious decision to take my lunch break, to take that mental break - a breather from the office and change in environment. Whether I take a walk or go to the nearby mall just to browse, regardless of what I do, I take the break. I have found a nearby park where I can just sit, have my lunch, read a bit and switch off for a few minutes. Not only is this the ultimate form of professional self-care, it really does allow me the time to distance myself from work stress and come back to work more energized, more productive and ready for the “second half”. Not only is this a legislated right, it is something which should be encouraged as part of employee wellness and nurtured within company culture.

So next time you consider whether or not you should take your lunch break... **Do**.

\*names have been changed

## ABOUT APHELELE TAPILE

Aphelele a Labour Relations/Labour Law Specialist with a passion for all things Industrial Sociology, Labour Law, Labour Philosophy and Human Capital.

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