

## MODULE 6: HEALTHY WORKSTYLE IN THE DIGITAL WORKPLACE

### Module Introduction

According to many surveys, we spend most of our waking life at work. In fact, we spend about a third of our days working. This is **double** the amount of our waking time we spend as moments in leisure! Think about that for a second: taking out sleep time, we spend **twice** as much time at work—with our co-workers, direct reports, and yes, our boss—than we do outside work. Until recently – outside work, would mean at home, but as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, many of us have ended up working in a home office, so to be precise: we will refer to working and free time. Home office led to statements like: “can't separate home working and free time” and “no time to relax”, which we have come across doing our Stress-Less research in Q2 2021. Participants who stated higher scores in “no time to relax” also said they were more emotionally exhausted.

Taking into consideration all above, the healthy workstyle in digital environment is becoming a topic of huge importance for the business.

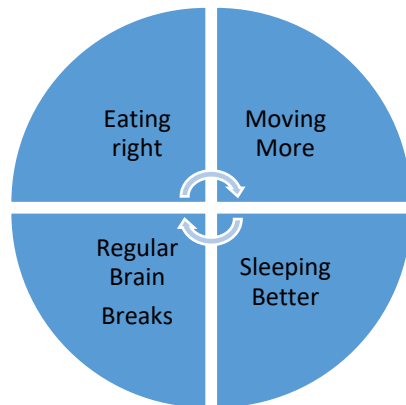
It is scientifically proven that healthy workstyle brings us the following benefits:

- We have less doctor visits, which decreases our healthcare costs and the number of days we are away from work.
- We feel more energetic, which improves our mental and psychical status and helps us to work harder.
- Our happiness level increases, which boosts engagement and productivity. Happy employees are more loyal, creative, and collegial. They also earn more than the unhappy individuals.

However, the working population is increasingly adopting sedentary lifestyle, working behind computer screens, sitting at desks, staying in sitting positions most of the time, or standing in the same position for a long duration. Further to it, we have to take into consideration the negative effects of our increasing ICT exposure which is the main driver for increased working hours, creates interference between work and free time, or results in work intensification.

Working conditions vary, depending on the business sector and whether people work from home office or not, but the unhealthy behaviour appears in all sectors, where workers are unaware of healthy diets, are unable to engage in appropriate physical activities or do not have the means to cope with stress and maintain mental health.

A healthy style (incl. life- and work-style) consists of four core components: Eating Right, Moving More, Sleeping Better and Regular Brain Breaks.



The first component is **Eating Right**. Eating right is important because the food we eat affects, of course our health, but also our brain. We should begin the day with a healthy breakfast and partake in a regular lunch to be more productive. Have you heard the saying “Breakfast like a king; lunch like a prince; dinner like a pauper.”?

So, our daily healthy diet is key for our work productivity and well-being and we have to start paying special attention to what we eat if we would like to avoid stress and other health issues.

The next component of the healthy workstyle, **Moving More**, is like a meta habit for fulfilling your basic needs at work. There are multiple benefits to Moving More, like:

- Better heart health (Physical)
- Reduced Stress (Emotional) and
- Greater focus (Mental).

When we think about exercise, a lot of us think about good looks or losing weight. But in fact, one of the biggest benefits that we now know from the research on exercise is the benefits that we gain in terms of our work performance. This is because exercise makes us smarter, and it does it in some very specific ways. For one thing, it gets more blood flowing to the brain, which improves our focus. That means we're less distractable over the course of the work day. It also activates the memory regions of the brain. So, we remember information more quickly. You don't have to read a memo three times in order to understand it, you get it the first time. Last but not least, it puts us in a good mood. If you think about what we do at work, we are connecting with others: either in connection with our colleagues or we're trying to attract new clients or vendors. And so being in a good mood isn't something that's nice to have, it actually is a necessity for doing a good job at work.

We need to think about exercise as an investment in our future. It's not something we selfishly do for ourselves. If you spend time going to the gym or exercising at home, you're actually investing in a better future, not only for yourself, but for your loved ones and your company.

The third component of healthy workstyle is **Sleeping Better**. Sleep helps us to refuel physically, mentally and emotionally.

Just as exercising is very important for productivity, so is sleep important for our well-being, positivity, and creativity, as well as our health. In addition, it turns out that getting a good night sleep also helps us focus better during deliberate practice.

An experiment has been conducted how our brains function when we sleep seven to eight hours a night or less. People sleeping seven to eight hours a night were asked to memorize positive and negative words and it turned out that they've remembered about 70% of both the positive and negative words the next day. But those who have slept five or fewer hours, were able to remember about 70% of the negative words, but only about 30% of the positive ones. What that means is, when our brain feels like it's not getting sleep, it feels like it's under threat. So then, if you're under a threat what do you do? You are starting to feel anxious, your body starts to generate stress hormones and you're scanning the world for the negatives, the threats to protect yourself from, which means you're missing out on opportunities. You're missing out on creativity and joy.

**Regular brain breaks** can help to refocus your attention if you experience brain fog or feel absent-minded. Taking a moment to move away from the screens and recharge alone gives you time to reflect on yourself and understand why you are feeling the way you are. Such short pauses can actually help to lower the stress in your body and mind.

Apart from our personal healthy workstyle, we should take into consideration that the environment matters too. You can find some useful info about ergonomics of your workspace in the home office module.

You can listen to the material [here](#).

## Activity 1

Emerging evidence suggests a close relationship between diet and mood.

In 2016, researchers found that a diet with a high glycemic load may cause increased symptoms of depression and fatigue. It includes many refined carbohydrates, such as those found in soft drinks, cakes, white bread, and biscuits. Vegetables, whole fruit, and whole grains have a lower glycemic load. (Beware: While a healthy diet may improve overall mood, it is essential for people with depression to seek medical care). Here are some healthy food ideas you may consider to start implementing in your daily routine:

- Start your meals with healthy items (e.g., fresh, raw veggies instead of rice, chips, or fries). Eat a salad before the main meal.
- Reduce sugar intake (from, say, ten spoons a day—across all your drinks—to six).

- Put unhealthy items (e.g., potato chips) in hard-to-reach places and healthy items (e.g., carrot sticks) in easier-to-reach places. You can even stop buying unhealthy items.
- Swap soft drinks for water and herbal tea.
- Replace larger plates or bowls with smaller ones (if you are overweight).
- Take longer (ideally, twenty minutes) to finish a meal that you typically rush through.
- Eliminate snacking after dinner.

Choose at least one of the above, write it down somewhere and make a commitment to start following it on a daily basis.

## Activity 2

Numerous studies show that exercise can boost memory and concentration. It increases serotonin, a neurotransmitter, in the brain that can lead to improved focus and clarity. Other studies show that physical activity may reduce cognitive decline in older adults.

Here are some ideas to help you make the first step toward adopting the habit of moving more:

- Get a pedometer and maintain a record of how much you have walked each day.
- Form a neighbourhood exercise group and take a morning or evening walk/jog/bike ride (or something else) together.
- Exercise (doesn't need to be intense) for a cumulative thirty minutes during the day. Plan the day, so you can start with a minimum of 10 minutes for energy or stretching in the morning and add on during the day to reach at least 30 minutes of exercise.
- Put in reminders—on mobile phone or a computer program—to remind you to take a break from sitting in front of the computer every twenty to thirty minutes and to do something requiring movement.
- Reduce the amount of time spent sitting even when you are not working (e.g., on bus rides, choose to stand).

Choose at least one of the above, write it down somewhere and make a commitment to start doing it on a daily basis.

## Activity 3

Research suggests that engaging in physical activity can release endorphins and other feel-good hormones.

Other great news is that research shows that the physical activity doesn't have to be high intensity for you to reap the mental benefits – so a brisk walk around the block will have you feeling great in no time.

The Activity that we propose for you today is at least once during the day to stop work, ideally in a moment when you are feeling frustrated or about to get stressed out and to do the short exercise sequences that we propose:

1. Neck muscles
  - a. Sit comfortably with an upright back
  - b. Relax down your shoulders
  - c. Bend your head to the left, towards your left shoulder, the right ear should point at the ceiling
  - d. To strengthen your neck muscles – look down, your chin touching the chest. To strengthen the throat muscles, look up – chin towards the ceiling.
  - e. Take 30 seconds for each side.
2. Shoulder stretch
  - a. Sit comfortably with an upright back
  - b. Roll your shoulders back and forth
  - c. Put one of your hands on the opposite shoulder. Let your elbow be at a 90 degrees angle. Don't change this angle.
  - d. For more stretching, push your elbow with the other hand towards the back
  - e. Take 30 seconds for each side.
3. Upper back, chest and arm stretch
  - a. Sit comfortably with an upright back
  - b. Catch the wrist of one hand with the other hand
  - c. Raise the hands above your head
  - d. Actively pull the straight hand with the other hand
  - e. Take 30 seconds for each side.
4. Back stretch
  - a. Sit with an upright back on the front part of the chair seat
  - b. Let your hands fall down besides your body
  - c. Slowly bow forward, your chin touching your chest. Go as far as you can, moving forward slowly, vertebrae by vertebrae.
  - d. Stay down a moment and then slowly go back to upright position.
  - e. Do the exercise a few times for about 1 minute.
5. Hip stretch
  - a. Sit comfortably with an upright back

- b. Flex one leg and put the ankle on the knee of the other leg.
  - c. Bow forward a little bit
  - d. For more stretching you can press the knee of the flexed leg down with the hand.
  - e. Take 30 seconds in this position for each side.
6. Leg stretch
- a. Sit with an upright back on the front part of the chair seat
  - b. Stretch one leg in front with a straight knee and the back of the heel on the ground
  - c. Sit up and then bow forward.
  - d. For more stretching, flex your toes towards you
  - e. Take 30 seconds for each side.

You can download the worksheet [here](#).

There are many guided exercise sequences online, which you can also use. Here is an example for such:

<https://youtu.be/tAUf7aajBWE>

## Activity 4

Sleep is very important for our well-being and productivity. Many people tend to believe that they need no more than 4-5 hours sleep, but it turns out that they are wrong. The scientists have proven that some people have a specific gene mutation that leads to a Short Sleeper Syndrome. It is a condition that allows you to operate on less than six hours of sleep. But it affects about 1% of the population.

The rest of us need minimum 7 hours sleep in order to stay healthy and be productive at work.

Read the following descriptions and be completely honest when thinking if they are valid for you:

- Feeling drowsy or falling asleep during the day, especially during calm activities like sitting in a movie theatre or driving.
- Falling asleep within 5 minutes of lying down.
- Short periods of sleep during waking hours (microsleeps).
- Needing an alarm clock to wake up on time every day.
- Feeling groggy when you wake up in the morning or throughout the day (sleep inertia).
- Having a hard time getting out of bed every day.

- Mood changes.
- Forgetfulness.
- Trouble focusing on a task.
- Sleeping more on days when you don't have to get up at a certain time.

All above are common signs that you haven't gotten enough sleep.

If this is your case you should try to make changes in your sleep behaviour. Move to the next activity to learn why and how.

### Activity 5

Watch this Tech Insider video with the sleep scientist Matthew Walker and reflect on it:

<https://youtu.be/NODZBkQoVfE>

You can choose your language subtitles from the YouTube video settings.

### Activity 6

Here are some ideas that can help you to improve your sleep quality.

- Minimize sources of artificial light (e.g., TV, iPad) in bedroom.
- Get white noise machine for the bedroom.
- Follow regular sleep schedule (e.g., go to bed at 10 p.m. every night and wake up no earlier than 6 a.m.)
- Prevent stress from spoiling sleep (e.g., don't argue with spouse on which TV channel to watch).
- Take a warm shower thirty minutes before sleep.
- Eat early dinner (no food an hour and a half before going to sleep).
- Make bedroom two or three degrees cooler than the rest of the house (if this is not energy inefficient); use thick blankets if needed.

Choose the ones that you like most and make them part of your daily routine.

### Activity 7

If you have been following the healthy workstyle activities in a diligent way until now, you have a list of at least one item for Eating Healthy, Moving More and Sleeping Better ideas, that we have provided you so far.

Now it is time to call a colleague or a close friend, discuss with them the activities you have chosen to follow in order to improve your healthy workstyle and ask them to call you on a weekly basis, asking you whether you follow your healthy activities and how you feel.

## Activity 8

Stress levels tend to rise due to lack of the typical brain breaks that we take from work when we work in the office, for example having some small talk with some of your colleagues when taking coffee from the kitchen. The office chit chat may be gone when we work from home but the brain breaks are still a necessity if we want to keep stress in check. Also, if you talk to the ophthalmologist, she or he will advise you that every 1 hour you must have at least 15 minutes in which you look at a distant object (which is obviously not your computer). In order to turn it into a habit to regularly stop for mini breaks you should start by practicing these deliberately. In your time plan for the day block off screen time and brain break time. In the brain break time, you could go for a short walk and make your phone calls, or you could make some physical exercises. OR you could even take 5 minutes to load the washing machine.

Here is a funny exercise that you can do as a brain break that not only will move you away from the digital devices but will raise the level of your happiness. Place a clean pen or pencil horizontally between your teeth, as if it were a delicate rose stem. It might look a little weird but you will start feeling how your muscle movement mimics a smile. Stay like this for 2-3 minutes. The idea is that the action we have faked transitions into something real – the movement of the muscles and nerves on our face that imitate a smile, give signals to our brain that we are happy and it starts producing the happiness hormones in our body. In the end we genuinely start to smile. It is worth trying it.

## Activity 9

### Summary

In this module you have learnt more about the 4 most important components of the healthy workstyle:

- Eat Healthy
- Move More
- Sleep Better
- Regular Brain Breaks

Keep doing the activities that you like most for the above components for a month and monitor whether and how it helps you keep digital stress away from you.

Share the best of your experiences with your colleagues in order to pay it forward and have fun!

### Suggested Further Readings and Bibliography

1. Raj Raghunathan, (2016) "If you are so smart, why aren't you happy?"
  2. Matthew Walker, (2017) "Why We Sleep: The New Science of Sleep and Dreams"
- Adam Grant, (2013) "Give and Take: A Revolutionary A