Is this the end of eating lunch at our desk? It's about time

For years we've been eating lunch at our desks - munching our way through meetings or replying to messages and emails over a sandwich. Before most of the public were forced into remote working, 42% were taking lunch breaks in front of their screens.

With the lockdown encouraging many to stay at home, this number has halved in just a few months; recent research from Just Eat for Business shows that just 22% are now eating at their desks, with most reclaiming their well-deserved time off.

The impact on our work-life balance is being felt by teams across the UK, particularly with their attitudes towards the humble lunch hour. Whilst the long-term outcomes are yet to be fully understood, there is certainly the opportunity for a real impact on workers' health and mental wellbeing.

Compared to much of Europe, Brits tend to believe that multitasking their way through the lunch hour is the best way to tick items off their to-do list and prove their worth to bosses.

But, it seems we're learning to become more productive and mindful of the impact short breaks can have; whilst extremely beneficial for a healthy lifestyle, the biggest advantage proves to be to our mental wellbeing.

COVID-19 seems to be the beginning of an end for desk lunches.

Mental health has always been a priority for employers, with millions spent each year to support teams.

Whilst it is widely known that taking breaks is beneficial for our wellbeing, though, many employees still believe completing their work is more important, feeling anxious or guilty for spending too much time away from their desks.

Lunch breaks are crucial in alleviating the stress levels that a busy to-do list and high-priority work can produce. Taking the time away from computers and desks is especially important at a time of uncertainty and change when returning back to workspaces alone will be difficult.

With high stress, in turn, results in lower productivity and less precise work; our productivity alone naturally declines throughout the day, becoming even worse with added stress. So, stepping away from desks to relax and refresh during lunchtime is essential in ensuring high levels of concentration can continue.

What's more, eating on the job can be detrimental to our physical health; with our focus on work, we tend to overeat, not taking much notice of what we're actually putting in our mouths.

Not only has lockdown encouraged people to use their lunch breaks to curate a better work-life balance then, but it has also resulted in healthier habits, such as cooking food from scratch rather than ordering 'take away' foods, both reducing stress and increasing productivity.

Over the lockdown period, we have seen a dramatic decrease in orders of 'fast food', such as pizza and burgers, reaching an all-time low in April, making up just 5.35% of orders.

What's more, we've seen an increase of healthy cooking kits being ordered since March as workers use their 'new' lunch break to cook from scratch.

A healthy diet doesn't just affect our physical health, but our mental health and wellbeing, too. Eating a well-balanced diet rich with essential vitamins, minerals and nutrients allow your brain to function properly and, without them, can raise your risk of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

So, not only have the public made a move to keep their hearts healthy, they've been keeping their minds healthy, too.

Before lockdown, work-life culture saw lunchtime breaks become a 'toss-up' between working or taking the time off. And more often than not, work won.

With offices closed, it seems there is no choice. People are not only choosing to take their breaks but with increased productivity and decreased stress levels, it has enabled them to manage their workloads better.

There are few positives to take from the Coronavirus pandemic, but it is crucial that we maintain the healthier lifestyles we developed over lockdown as we head back to offices, to ensure eating lunch at our desks becomes something of the past.

Ben Carter is Managing Director at <u>Just Eat for Business</u> the UK's leading office food delivery marketplace, and when offices closed, it launched Pantry Packages – enabling companies to send gifts, lunches and drinks straight to their employee's homes across the UK.

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