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A Qualitative Study of “online” Work Breaks

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing empirical evidence on the beneficial effects of “micro” work breaks, scant research has examined “online” work breaks. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the nature and effects of online work breaks. Through an in-depth qualitative study of a diverse set of 33 full-time working professionals, we identified conditions under which online breaks occur as well as the characteristics and outcomes of these breaks. Interestingly, our findings point to both negative and positive outcomes associated with online breaks, largely dependent on an individual’s ability to self-regulate. Our grounded theory approach allows us to develop a richer description of online work breaks and a theoretical model to help guide future research.

Keywords

Qualitative; grounded theory approach; recovery; breaks; work-nonwork interface

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As technology increasingly permeates many aspects of life, many, if not most, employees use technology during the work day to engage in activities not directly related to their work tasks. Some reports suggest that employees spend up to two hours per eight-hour work day on non-work activities, including technology-enabled activities such as responding to emails on a personal email account, checking friends’ social media updates, reading sports or news, and paying bills online (Henle, Kohut, & Booth, 2009; Vitak, Crouse, & Larose, 2011). These behaviors are often labeled as “cyberloafing,” defined as counterproductive behaviors in which employees are perceived as stealing time from the organization by using technology for personal reasons (Ugrin & Pearson, 2008; Weatherbee, 2010).

To combat the potential for cyberloafing, many organizations have developed formal policies or practices designed to restrict employees from using technology at work for personal or non-work-related activities (Ugrin & Pearson, 2008; Young, 2010). Yet, as the epigraphs above illustrate, employees may use these online activities as work breaks that provide an opportunity to refresh their minds and replenish personal resources taxed during work (Trougakos & Hideg, 2009). Accordingly, it is possible that, rather than always constituting deviant or counterproductive work behaviors, “online” breaks used strategically during the work day may contain some functional aspects that allow employees to regulate their work and non-work demands across both time and space.

Given the ubiquity and accessibility of information and communication technologies, more research is needed to explore why and how employees take online (versus offline) breaks and the effects of doing so for employees and employers. However, most of the research to date on workplace breaks has examined traditional breaks taken during non-work time, such as vacations, weekends, and evenings (e.g., Flaxman, Ménard, Bond, & Kinman, 2012; Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005; Hahn, Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2011; Kühlén, Sonnentag, & Westman, 2009; Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2008; Sonnentag & Kruehl, 2006). The impact of work breaks taken during the work day has received far less attention and has focused almost exclusively on “offline” breaks (e.g., Fritz, 2012; Hunter & Wu, 2016; Trougakos, Beal, Green, & Weiss, 2008; Trougakos, Hideg, Cheng, &
been shown to use the prevalence of online breaks in the workplace, it is important to fully understand their effects, rather than assuming these breaks are universally negative.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate online breaks; that is, how and why employees take breaks via technology and the consequences of those activities. After a review of pertinent literatures, findings from in-depth interviews with working professionals are presented. An emergent model based on these data depicts the conditions under which online work breaks produce both negative and positive outcomes for employees.

Theoretical perspectives on work breaks

Work breaks traditionally have been viewed as “periods of time during which work-related tasks are not required or expected” (Trougakos et al., 2008, p. 133). In this paper, we broaden the scope of this definition to include time during the work day in which work-related tasks are not performed. Taking this broader approach allows for consideration of work breaks that are woven in and out of the day-to-day flow of the work day, and not necessarily scheduled at a specific time. This study focuses exclusively on within-day online work breaks, i.e., breaks taking place via technology on devices including, but not limited to, work computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones. All other work break activities, such as stretching, taking a walk, and chatting face-to-face with coworkers, are regarded as offline work breaks.

For both on- and offline breaks, the conservation of resources model (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993) can be used to explain the role of breaks in the recovery process. The COR model posits that people strive to obtain, retain, foster, and protect resources they value (Hobfoll, 1989). These resources refer to “objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued in their own right or that are valued because they act as conduits to the achievement or protection of valued resources” (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 339). According to the model, individuals experience stress when threatened by persistent resource loss, actually lose resources, or fail to gain resources after a period of perceived resource investment. For instance, employees who work overtime to meet an impending deadline may lose valued physical and emotional energy, or may have little time to replenish these depleted resources (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006). Sustained resource loss may lead to burnout, (Freyed & Hobfoll, 1994), emotional exhaustion, and other deleterious health outcomes, such as sleep disturbance (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004) and somatic symptoms (Hunter & Wu, 2016). Thus, work breaks – whether off- or online – may provide opportunities to interrupt the cycle of resource loss and create a cycle of resource gain (Hobfoll, 1989). As Gilbert, Foulk, and Bono (2018) noted, an abundant literature exists suggesting the value of work breaks as an organizational intervention to help employees build psychological resources, reduce stress and burnout, and improve cognitive function.

Another theory relevant to understanding the efficacy of work breaks is self-regulation theory, which emphasizes an individual’s ability to guide his or her own activities by setting standards and monitoring and abiding by them (Bandura, 1991). Although online work breaks are typically taken in an autonomous manner according to an individual’s personal needs, it is important to note that they take place during working hours against the backdrop of organizational rules, policies, and norms. Thus, individuals must exercise self-control and suppress short-term temptations and impulses, in order to act in accordance with social and situational demands (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994). Individuals also may need self-regulation to constrain their urges to take unnecessary or inappropriate breaks (e.g., frequent internet surfing when they should be working). To the extent that online work breaks tap into impulse control issues, we believe that the ability to self-regulate is critical to accrue positive rather than negative outcomes.

Within-day work breaks

The literature on work breaks has grown substantially in recent years, focusing primarily on how taking a short break during the work day relates to fatigue, vitality, emotional experiences, job satisfaction, and job performance (e.g., Hunter & Wu, 2016; Kim, Park, & Niu, 2017; Trougakos et al., 2008, 2014; Zacher, Brailsford, & Parker, 2014). For instance, Trougakos et al. (2014) found that lunch break activities associated with relaxing led to enhanced work recovery while those associated with socializing or working led to increased fatigue. Interestingly, employees’ autonomy over how to utilize their lunch breaks played a pivotal role in enhancing recovery after the break. Further, a recent diary study (Hunter & Wu, 2016) elucidated the characteristics of work day breaks that are associated with more beneficial outcomes: break activities that were preferred and taken earlier in the work shift related to greater recovery and well-being. This study also suggested that frequent short breaks may be more beneficial than infrequent short breaks.
Lastly, Kim et al. (2017) investigated different types of micro-breaks (relaxation, nutrition-intake, social, and cognitive activities) as moderators that could mitigate the effects of work demands on end-of-day negative affect. Only relaxation (e.g., listening to music) and socializing (e.g., short chats with colleagues) micro-break activities were able to offset the adverse effects of work demands, while cognitive activities (e.g., reading news articles) unexpectedly aggravated them. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that within-day work breaks may be critical for employee performance and vitality; however, these outcomes may depend on the types of break activities and the level of employee control.

Online work breaks

While past research has enhanced our understanding of the effects of work day breaks, researchers did not differentiate between online and offline activities, perhaps reflecting an assumption that they function similarly. We question that assumption for several reasons. First, previous research suggests that individuals should be allowed to choose when and how to take a break depending on their personal needs and daily rhythms (Jett & George, 2003). It is possible that technology may afford individuals the ability to take a break as needed. For example, whereas offline breaks typically are taken in prearranged, definable chunks of time (e.g., an hour lunch break), technology may allow employees to engage in micro-break activities (e.g., quickly checking a sports score), perhaps without others even noticing. Given the importance of frequent short breaks in recovery (Hunter & Wu, 2016), research on online breaks is needed.

Further, the prevailing view treats online breaks as cyberloafing (Ugrin & Pearson, 2008; Weatherbee, 2010), suggesting the withholding of effort (Lim, 2002) and disregarding possible benefits. Instead, Coker (2011) found that frequency of personal internet use at work was positively related to attendance, work quality, and performance quality, suggesting that time spent “surfing the web” allowed employees to restore their mental capacity and fostered feelings of autonomy. These conflicting results call for additional research to explore online breaks and their effects.

Finally, emergent research studying outcomes associated with within-day work breaks relies heavily on quantitative methods, including diary studies (e.g., Bosch, Sonnentag, & Pinck, 2018; Rhee & Kim, 2016; Zacher et al., 2014). These approaches identify the types of breaks employees may take but provide little (if any) information about employees’ motivations or the decision processes underlying their behaviors.

Given the above discussion, this research focuses on the following questions: (1) Under what conditions do online breaks occur? (2) Given the depth and versatility of technology, what are the characteristics of online breaks? (3) What are the outcomes of online breaks?

Method

This qualitative work is part of a larger study of technology use among working professionals. Qualitative approaches are appropriate for understanding complex and dynamic processes (Trougakos & Hideg, 2009) and when research questions focus on understanding how or why a phenomenon occurs. Unlike quantitative research which primarily tests theory, qualitative research aims to develop or elaborate theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). We sought to elaborate theory by building on existing theory on breaks, while remaining open to what our data were telling us (Locke, 2002; Suddaby, 2006).

In this study, we used a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to uncover and develop a more nuanced understanding of how, when, and why employees use technology to take breaks during the work day. As in similar study designs, an orienting theoretical perspective and sensitizing research questions helped inform our understanding of the complex social reality we were studying (e.g., Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009). An orienting theoretical perspective “guides researchers in what they should pay attention to but does not focus research so narrowly as to exclude data whose importance may not be recognized at the outset of a project” (Locke, 2001, p. 20). However, grounded theory also requires that researchers remain open to what informants are describing. Researchers, then, iteratively adjust interpretations based on both incoming data and the literature (Charmaz, 2014).

Sample

For this study, we interviewed 33 full-time professionals working in a large Midwestern city. About half of these individuals worked in various clinical (e.g., nurse, technician) and non-clinical (e.g., administrative support) roles at a regional healthcare facility, which initially served as the research site for the larger study in which this work was embedded. This site was chosen due to the breadth of occupations held within the facility and the varying degrees with which individuals in those occupations utilized mobile technology in the work and nonwork domains. To further diversify our
sample, we recruited additional participants (all working adults) from a part-time MBA program at a large Midwestern university. These individuals worked in a variety of different functional areas across a wide range of industries.

Overall, 67% of the study participants were female; 33% were married, and 49% had children. The participants had an average of 8.6 years of work experience and worked in a variety of industries including healthcare, banking, education, manufacturing, arts, architecture, media, and nonprofits. Within these industries, participants held a variety of roles, including clinical coordinator, customer accounts manager, educator, financial analyst, library senior associate, logistics assistant, maintenance manager, communications coordinator, sales representative, stockbroker, and senior researcher. Collecting data from a diverse sample enabled the capturing of “shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity” (Patton, 1990, p. 172).

**Data collection and analysis**

We conducted one-on-one interviews with participants using a semi-structured interview protocol, which allowed us to ask participants a standard set of questions and to probe more deeply into interesting comments and themes. Interviews lasted 50 minutes on average. Questions in the interview protocol aimed to elicit participants’ understanding of their workgroup’s technology use practices, the primary reasons for taking online breaks, the activities in which they engaged during online work breaks, and the implications of those activities (see Appendix A for examples of questions). All interviews were tape-recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim.

To analyze the interview data, we utilized grounded theory techniques to uncover what lies behind the little information known about online breaks (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 19). We analyzed transcripts in an iterative fashion, moving back and forth between the data and existing literature. For coding, we used a two-step process. Working in pairs, we first independently read and coded the transcripts based on our own interpretations and knowledge of the literature. We then met jointly to compare our individual codes and determine final codes to be used on each transcript. When disagreements arose, the pair of authors coding discussed the meaning of the passage until both agreed, producing rich opportunities for theory elaboration. We entered all emergent codes into a coding dictionary, which included definitions for each code. Throughout the coding process, we wrote memos of observed relationships in the emergent data and also recorded connections to the literature.

The coding and analysis process used is consistent with other qualitative studies adopting grounded theory techniques (e.g., Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Kreiner et al., 2009; Volkoff, Strong, & Elmes, 2007; Vough, Cardador, Bednar, Dane, & Pratt, 2013). Theoretical saturation (conceptual density in existing codes) was reached after coding 30 transcripts (Locke, 2001); however, we coded three additional transcripts for further examples. To move from the dictionary codes to the main thematic categories used in the overall model, we compared existing data with additional data, emerging findings, and the literature. We illustrate this process in Figure 1, which depicts the analytic process and data structure, i.e., the first-order codes that represent the participants’ responses, the theoretical categories we derived from these first-order codes, and finally aggregated dimensions associated with the theoretical categories (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Van Maanen, 1979).

**Findings**

Findings from our study document conditions under which online breaks occur, and the reported outcomes of these breaks. Analyzing participant responses led to the uncovering of factors facilitating online breaks and characteristics and outcomes of online breaks. In Figure 2, we present an emergent model of factors and conditions affecting online work break outcomes that incorporates these findings. Below, we describe this model in detail, along with supporting evidence from the data. We address our research questions and link findings to existing work (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Conditions of online breaks**

Our first research question asks how and why online breaks are initiated. We identified several factors, which we placed in two categories: organizational policies and norms, and personal values and preferences.

**Organizational policies and norms**

Many participants identified organizational policies and norms as a factor in their engaging in online breaks. Individuals interact with their work environment, and their behaviors are strongly influenced by situations in which they are involved (Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989; Mischel, 1977). Companies often develop organizational policies to guide employee behaviors (Hall, 1984). These policies may reduce the perceived acceptability of certain behaviors. This was certainly true for
our study participants who considered organizational policy before going online at work. For example, one participant compared a past organization’s inhibiting internet policy to the current organization’s lack of such a policy:

[T]he earlier organization didn’t allow any kind of internet access, versus this organization – they don’t have any restrictions around it. They mentioned that there is a policy … not to misuse it, but given that freedom, I think it really helps for me to check something that on a personal ground, especially because I have some big agenda in my life. (12-M, Project Management Analyst)

Given that this participant was now working in an organization that allowed “freedom” to go online for personal reasons versus the constraints of a previous organization, he reported being more likely to take an online break. Another participant described a specific policy regarding the use of work computers for personal use, noting “no personal computer use [was allowed] unless it’s within our break room during a scheduled break” (28-F, Nurse Manager). In the latter case, offline breaks were built into the schedule and personal technology use could only transpire with preplanning; thus, a break via technology could only be used within this parameter.

In addition to a formal organizational policy, informal norms also affected whether or not employees took an online break. Norms play a well-known role in inducing stable and predictable workplace behaviors (Feldman, 1984; Schaubroeck, 2012). Subjective normative beliefs, or perceptions of social pressures, affect decisions about whether one should or should not perform a particular behavior (Ajzen, 2012). These general axioms about normative behavior also applied to online break activity in our study; however, the associated social pressures affecting online break behavior sometimes derived from sources beyond the immediate work group. Our participants were cognizant of break-taking norms in their organization, work group, and even their respective industry. For example, one participant, who held two different jobs, reported that the industry norms at her newspaper job were different from those at her library job:

[At the newspaper company I’m working for] I’m looking at the computer screen all day but, of course, in different ways. There, having an online break [is helpful], because I might read an article about marketing trends or something like that, find something about a client online. So there, constantly being online is … a bit normal considering it’s … a media company. It’s not frowned upon like it may be at the library. (17-F, Marketing Communications)

**Personal values and preferences**

In addition to contextual conditions, personal characteristics also emerged as conducive to online breaks.
Many of our study participants reported personal values as contributing to their decision to take (or not take) an online break. This finding broadens the research by Li, Zhang, and Sarathy (2010) which suggested that an individual’s values, beliefs, and moral standards may affect the tendency to use technology for personal purposes while at work. In our study, some individuals opted not to take online breaks, even if approved, because they viewed using a company computer for personal purposes as unethical, whereas others did not feel guilty doing so. For example, one individual’s personal values prevented him from engaging in online breaks, even though others around him had no issues doing so:

I guess I’m old-fashioned. I’ll be 65 this year. I’m from the old school, and ... I’m being paid to work, not to be on the computer, looking at houses and cars ... It’s actually done, and that’s sad. (35-M, Maintenance Technician)

Finally, another individual condition for taking an online break that emerged was an individual’s preference. Some individuals preferred to recharge individually, spending time online, while other individuals felt more rejuvenated by interacting with others, as can be seen in this quote:

I’m generally a people person ... and don’t prefer to sit at my computer and stare at it for eight hours. I would rather get up and take a walk and go chat. (09-F, Services and Communications Intern)

**Characteristics of online breaks**

Our next research question asks: Given the depth and versatility of technology, what are the characteristics of online breaks? Our analyses revealed three characteristics of online breaks: 1) work modulating, 2) time slicing, and 3) boundary blurring.

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**Figure 2.** A emergent model of online work breaks.
Work modulating
Our participants reported engaging in online breaks to deal with both low and high levels of workload, as well as to change the work situation. When workload was not heavy, some participants reported using online breaks as a way of filling time. As one noted, “Every once in a while on a slow day, if I get a break I probably get online and check my own email.” (22-F, Certified RN Assistant). Conversely, a heavy workload could also increase the tendency to take online work breaks. Some participants reported that during intensified levels of workload, they took a short online break to escape the pressures of work:

If things are getting really busy or if the work demand comes up real heavy, after I get into it for a little while, I might read some [online] news articles or maybe something of interest ... like an [online] forum or something like that. (18-M, Customer Accounts Manager)

Thus, both light and intense workload situations prompted online breaks. In the former case, the break provided a means of filling downtime, while in the latter, online breaks provided an escape from a heavy workload. Taking online breaks to adjust to different levels of workload may be beneficial as micro-breaks were found to reduce the adverse effects of work demands on end-of-work day negative affect (Kim et al., 2017).

In some cases, online breaks were used to change the tone of the work situation. Consider this example:

Sometimes when I’m at [my job] I might be ordering ads all day long. I feel like I need something to break up that monotonous feeling. I’m just constantly in this program, walking back and forth to the printer picking up the order tickets or filing them away or passing them off to the graphic designer. I guess I try to do it [online breaks] just to kind of break up my day a little bit ... I might check my Facebook or Twitter feed, or even Instagram throughout the day, either on the desktop or on my phone. (17-F, Marketing Communications)

In this example, the job required a narrow range of tasks and skills, leading to monotony and a desire to check out online news or social networking sites to “break up [the] day a little bit”. Similarly, some may take online breaks as a way to deal with work-related frustration. For example, one participant reported that his profession, marketing, is not appreciated by others, leading to constant frustration and subsequent online breaks:

In our line of work, and I am assuming this is probably true for other marketing professionals, I would say the vast majority of people feel like they can do our jobs. They feel like they know how to market, and that’s not the case. So it’s constantly a headache; it’s constantly a battle trying to rein them back in ... So there is a level of frustration that can come from the day-to-day work that you just need a little outlet. You need something. I definitely find that there is value for it [online break]. Whether research supports it or not, I definitely do. (01-M, Marketing Communications Coordinator)

In this example, we can see the individual went online as a needed “outlet” from the frustration associated with daily work events. Thus, online breaks are used to cope with or modulate different work situations, whether individuals find their jobs monotonous or stressful or whether their workload is heavy or light.

Time slicing
Online breaks are often taken in very short “bursts” at unpredictable or unplanned points in time when it is most convenient for the employee, allowing break takers to time slice with greater ease. “Time slicing” is defined here as instances in which an employee converts smaller and smaller portions of time into valuable work and non-work activities (Govindaraju & Sward, 2005, p. 349). Whereas traditional offline breaks tend to be taken in more identifiable chunks of time (e.g., 15-minute coffee breaks, lunch hours), online breaks are typically shorter in duration, but may occur more frequently and as needed without ever leaving one’s desk. As one participant stated, “It’s easier to jump online and get something done if I’m on break” (29-F, Administrative Assistant), and another, “I don’t want to take myself away from the office or walk down the hall or this or that; I do that [online work breaks] all the time” (01-M, Marketing Communications Coordinator). The brevity and frequency of typical online breaks can be seen in this quote:

I would say [I take online breaks] pretty often. I would say if I’m working on a project, I might work on it for 45 minutes of an hour. If I’m not comfortable where I’m at with it, then I’ll take a break and check my personal email or go to ESPN, something like that; just checking on stuff, maybe five, ten minutes max, then go back to my work. (08-M, Services Director)

This reveals that online breaks take place frequently when individuals want to psychologically step away from work, and they may last for just a few minutes. In part, the brevity and frequency of typical online breaks may be explained by the way technology is set up by the user. Consider this example:

I am notified if somebody has sent me a message on Facebook. I have three email accounts that are linked to my phone – two personal and one school … Unless
I’m doing something where 100% of my attention is required, I’m probably going to notice it and I’m probably going to take a glance at it. (16-F, Marketing Intern)

Thus, technology can be set up to notify individuals of a non-work message that may require a response. These non-work tasks may operate as disruptions, where individuals may get distracted from work and feel the need to address it quickly, contributing to the time-slicing nature of online breaks.

**Boundary blurring**

Another characteristic of online breaks is the blurring of boundaries between breaks and work, and between work and personal lives. Defined as periods of time when work-related tasks are not required or expected (Trougakos et al., 2008), a work day break has been viewed as an activity that is distinct from work. However, the affordance of various technologies makes the boundary between a break and work increasingly blurred. Consider this example:

I guess I would generally go online to look at the news. I might want to look up some topic that I’m finding kind of interesting, and it might be something that’s sort of related to my job, but not really. For example, when Penn State had all of their issues, well that’s something that sort of was indirectly related to compliance [an aspect of her work] and therefore my job; I found that very interesting and so I went online and looked at a bunch of stuff related to that. I don’t know if you can say that’s related to my job or not, probably not. (02-F, Director of Internal Audit)

In this case, going online to read articles this participant finds interesting might be viewed as a break. But, because the news is “indirectly related to compliance” (an aspect of her job), this activity may also be viewed as work. As indicated in this example, even the participant is not sure if checking the news should be viewed as work or a break. To be fair, offline breaks sometimes blur the boundary, too. For example, chatting with colleagues in a break room can turn into a serious conversation on work-related issues. However, the chances of switching between a break and work are increasingly likely with the use of technology that is necessary for work and that is prevalent during a break in the modern workplace.

In addition, online breaks are used to actively bring one’s personal life into a work domain, blurring the boundary between work and personal lives. Although individuals engage in personal matters during traditional offline breaks (i.e., running errands), technology advances have dramatically broadened the scope of non-work-related activities performed during a break and have made the activities much easier and quicker to perform with just a few clicks. For example, some participants engaged in online breaks to meet demands from outside of work:

I guess probably email to check to see if I was supposed to be getting a message from somebody and I just wanted to make sure I got it. Before I even got home I could check to see if it was even there – [a] family member or if I had an appointment of some kind and I wanted to verify that it was there … So just to confirm that everything, all of my appointments and stuff, are on time. (36-F, Shift Lead, Food Service)

In this example, the participant was able to check in on home activities while still at work in an effort to meet those responsibilities and to maintain control over non-work demands. Traditionally, chore break activities are viewed as laborious, requiring considerable effort (Trougakos et al., 2008) but technology may allow them to be performed with greater ease. For example:

Mine would be to communicate with friends and family. I talk to my mom on Facebook a lot. I check in with her at least once a day. We just chat, say “hi.” The same with friends, I would say. What else? You know, check bank statements, things with financial stuff. (16-F, Marketing Intern)

Through use of online chatting and banking software, both activities can be done throughout the day with minimal effort. Thus, micro-breaks enabled by technology blur the distinction between work and personal lives to a greater extent.

**Outcomes of online breaks**

The last research question asks: What are the outcomes of online breaks? Consistent with prior literature, we found mixed results. However, while both positive and negative consequences were present, the outcomes of online breaks appeared to be greatly impacted by the employee’s level of self-regulation, which emerged as one of the most dominant themes in our study. We found that when study participants described using discipline in online break taking, they tended to report multiple functional outcomes, which we subsequently categorized as timely momentary recovery and staying current. However, when self-regulation was low, online breaks were more often described as having the dysfunctional outcomes associated with cyberloafing, such as excessive time loss and diminished productivity.

**Functional outcomes**

First, participants pointed out that online breaks allowed for timely momentary recovery. Although
research suggests the importance of taking a break at the moment it is needed (Fritz, Lam, & Spreitzer, 2011; Trougakos & Hidieg, 2009), it is only with technological advances that this has been achieved easily while working. Taking online breaks appears to give individuals a short mental break from work, where they can psychologically detach without physically leaving their desk or office (Sonnentag & Kruehl, 2006). Thus, from a conservation of resources theory perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), online breaks may provide an opportunity to replenish depleted resources, aiding in combating work-related fatigue and in facilitating positive work experiences (Kühnel et al., 2009; Sluiter, De Croon, Meijman, & Frings-Dresen, 2003). As one participant noted, online breaks are “very refreshing in the sense that just sometimes you can unwind in the same place that you are working.” (03-M, Architectural Intern) Another participant added:

I think it’s [an online break] important, especially as an ICU nurse. Things can get pretty intense ... the patients we take care [of] are very sick. Sometimes you just need to walk away from that [figuratively] and kind of regroup and just let your mind go to a different place for a few minutes and come back refreshed ready to do the next task that you need to do to get through your shift. So I do think they are important. (27-F, Clinical Administrator)

These frequent “micro-pauses” at work via technology can provide temporary relief when breaks outside of work are not sufficient in allowing recovery from work (Ivarsson, 2011).

In addition to allowing frequent recovery as needed, online breaks also provide an ability to recover from work at exactly the right time. Meijman and Mulder (1998) noted that timing of the break is as crucial as the quality and quantity of the break. For example, the following participant reported using an online break earlier in the day when feeling “frazzled” after intensive work:

In the morning if I come in and, oh my gosh, there are like three emails that are just burning a hole in my inbox and I just have to take care of them, and then they need this now, and so it’s like 9:30 and I am just frazzled already. I will definitely take 5–10 minutes on my computer [for online breaks]. (01-M, Marketing Communications Coordinator)

Due to situational constraints, offline breaks may not provide individuals the right timing to take a break. For example, leaving one’s desk for a break early in the day might be considered slacking in the eyes of managers. A short break via technology is less subject to those constraints and thus provides an opportunity to recover at the needed time, increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of resource recovery (Hunter & Wu, 2016).

To be truly refreshing, however, online breaks should involve relaxing activities that require less effort. Online breaks involving chore activities may not provide adequate momentary recovery from work demands, as illustrated in the following example from a working professional who attended school part-time:

If I take an online break from work to write an email about class, that’s not really a refreshing break. But if I go online and I look on ESPN, it’s like my mind has completely gone away from obligations. It’s on to something kind of fun, light. (16-F, Marketing Intern)

As can be seen in this quote, taking an online break to handle non-work-related responsibilities requiring cognitive effort (school-related work) was not perceived to be as refreshing as an online break purely for fun and pleasure.

Another functional outcome emerging from our analyses is staying current. Some participants indicated that the knowledge gained from news and social media could be utilized in their work role, thus providing some enrichment benefits from the break. This utilization appeared to be particularly beneficial when online searches overlapped considerably with work roles. Further, individuals tended to view their online breaks as more geared toward information searching and not so much toward seeking pleasure. In the following example, a financial analyst we interviewed discusses online breaks as a way to keep current with news relating to the profession:

In my work I feel it’s better to be online because there’s always news coming in. It’s very beneficial to me ... so anytime you’re online there’s newsfeeds constantly coming up. For me it’s helpful just because when clients call wanting to know “What’s this going on?” I’ll have some type of knowledge of it. (19-M, Stockbroker Trainee)

Knowledge gain may not only benefit the person’s job performance but also his or her colleagues within the work group. Consider, for example, this quote:

Sometimes [online breaks] yield positive results. You will see an interesting health article or somebody released this health study, so it’s something that could be pertinent to my group [medical staff] and we will typically share that kind of information. We will copy an email link and send it out to everybody and say, “Hey, check this out FYI.” Just to digest some information that isn’t always work related, it’s definitely helpful. (01-M, Marketing Communications Coordinator)

Thus, information gained during an online break helped provide information across the work group, beyond just informing the person taking the break.
**Dysfunctional outcomes**

Participants also pointed out dysfunctional outcomes of online breaks, such as *excessive time loss* and *diminished productivity*. Interestingly, the importance of self-regulation emerged as we analyzed results and discovered that proactive self-regulatory behaviors impacted whether positive or negative consequences emerged from online breaks. As noted earlier, many participants described the importance of monitoring and regulating their online break-taking activities. Despite their potential positive outcomes, participants often pointed out that online break activities should be exercised in a self-disciplined way. Consider this example:

Yeah. I mean at times [online breaks can be beneficial]. I think the breaks just have to be done correctly in kind of a disciplined manner … When I’m working in the middle of something and I lose my focus and I take an online break, then it’s hard for me to come back and re-focus. That’s [why] I think it can be a distraction. So I think that online breaks are good, but I think that you need to try to use them in a disciplined way. *(02-F, Director of Internal Audit)*

As this quote suggests, absent self-regulation (i.e., “disciplined manner”), an online break can be distracting and derailing.

Similarly, the following participant suggests that online breaks become dysfunctional when he fails to regulate his time and involvement online. While the online break begins as beneficial, once the involvement and duration online move past a certain threshold (to “abuse” and “too much time”), the break becomes counterproductive:

I think [online breaks are] beneficial in that it’s like any other break where I think every now and then you have to let your mind have a break from what you’re working on. I think it can be counterproductive if you kind of abuse it and take too much time, and you’re looking at getting too involved in things online, so it’s kind of getting that … moderation I guess. *(04-M, Senior Researcher, R&D)*

Another participant discussed how failure to regulate his online break behavior may lead to what he calls a “snowball effect”:

I go to Yahoo a lot and I’ll read one article and then I’ll go back to the main page, and instead of going back to what I was working on, I’ll see another article and I’m like, “Oh crud, I got to read that one.” And then sometimes it will be a little bit of a snowball effect where I’ll read a sports article and then, “Oh, I haven’t checked ESPN today, maybe I should go do that next before I get back to my activity that I’m working on.” *(08-M, Services Director)*

Thus, what started as a functional online break “snowballed” into a dysfunctional break because this individual lacked the discipline to self-regulate. If individuals become lost in their online breaks, the breaks may threaten job performance. The following participant discusses the impact of online breaks, due to a lack of self-regulation, on productivity and wasting excessive time at work:

I guess [online breaks] can maybe decrease productivity because I might be on there a little too long, especially with Facebook. Somebody might have posted a status update and there’s like multiple comments and it might start some argument, a dispute of sorts online and you’re just like “I can’t stop reading it.” Because if you go back a few hours later it might not be on the newsfeed. You have to go to the person’s page to actually see it. You might get caught up into reading something that maybe be a few minutes longer than it’s supposed to be for an online break because it gets interesting right when you have to go back and actually do work. *(17-F, Marketing Communications)*

Collectively, the preceding examples suggest that self-regulation may play an important role in distinguishing between functional online breaks that help individuals recharge and learn and dysfunctional breaks that lead to excessive time loss and diminished productivity, the outcomes often associated with cyberloafing.

**Discussion**

Although mounting evidence suggests that employees increasingly use technology during work breaks, little research has examined online work breaks in terms of their nature and consequences. Our findings provide rich insights into online breaks. First, we identified situational (organizational policies and norms) and personal factors (personal values and preferences) facilitating online breaks. In terms of the nature of online breaks, they can permit individuals to time slice, taking much shorter (but perhaps more frequent) breaks to quickly recover lost resources. Further, the versatility of technology allows for a wide variety of non-work-related tasks to be done at work, thus blurring the boundary between work and personal lives. Online breaks may also focus on content which blurs the boundary between work and break. Finally, online breaks are often utilized to modulate work, helping employees cope with a heavy or light workload or changing the tone of work situation.

In terms of the consequences of online breaks, evidence in this paper challenges the management literature assumption that online breaks are universally
counterproductive (e.g., Lim, 2002; Weatherbee, 2010). We found that online breaks yield both positive and negative outcomes largely dependent on an individual’s ability to self-regulate. Through a grounded theory approach, our results produce a rich description of these phenomena as well as a model of online work breaks that can help guide future research.

**Theoretical contributions**

First, we make a unique contribution to the work breaks literature by expanding inquiry into breaks occurring via technology while working. Findings reveal that online breaks may differ from offline breaks in several ways that challenge existing preconceptions of work breaks. Most notably, the current breaks literature tends to view breaks as occurring at discrete and identifiable points in time during a work day, such as a lunch break, or after hours when work is not accomplished, such as on weekends or during a vacation (e.g., Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005; Sonnentag et al., 2008; Trougakos et al., 2014; Westman & Eden, 1997). Findings here, however, reveal that technology enables individuals to take micro-work breaks on an as-needed basis in shorter “bursts” of time due to convenience and accessibility. That is, the duration of online breaks may be shorter as well as more frequent, and the timing of those breaks may not be pre-planned or designated ahead of time, but rather occur on a more spontaneous, as-needed basis. Although research on offline breaks has emphasized momentary recovery, or the importance of recovering from work demands by scheduling frequent breaks during a work day (Trougakos & Hideg, 2009), offline breaks may not provide individuals with an adequate opportunity to recover as needed due to situational and temporal constraints. Thus, the ability to take micro breaks (i.e., time slice) via an online break can give individuals a mental break whenever necessary, capturing the real meaning of momentary recovery.

This study also advances the management literature’s understanding of within-day work breaks by explicating when breaks can be beneficial or detrimental. In doing so, it addresses a call by Trougakos et al. (2014, p. 418) to examine the relationship between break activities and their effects. Self-regulation emerged as a critical boundary condition that affected whether online work breaks were functional or dysfunctional. Many participants discussed the potential pitfalls of taking online breaks in an undisciplined manner as they may become counterproductive. Our findings are consistent with research suggesting lack of self-regulation is a predictor of deviant workplace behaviors (Marcus & Schuler, 2004). Our findings suggest the pivotal role of self-regulation in keeping online breaks from transgressing into cyberloafing – a form of deviant workplace behavior (Bennett & Robinson, 2003; Weatherbee, 2010). Thus, not all online breaks are deviant. Indeed, these breaks can lead to a variety of positive outcomes particularly when taken in a disciplined manner.

Future research may further elucidate the effects of self-regulation during online break activities. For instance, individuals with low self-regulation, as a stable trait, may be more susceptible to immediate gratification (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), e.g., frequently visiting fun or interesting websites while working, or excessive online break taking. Indeed, research demonstrates an inverse relationship between self-regulation and addiction to smartphones (Gökçearslan, Mumcu, Haşlaman, & Çevik, 2016) and the internet (Larose, Lin, & Eastin, 2003). While the individuals in our sample did not seem to report addictive use of technology, comments such as an online break taking “too much time” or “a few minutes longer than it’s supposed to be” suggests that in the absence of some level of self-regulation, addiction may manifest.

Self-regulation has also been examined from a state perspective. Specifically, ego-depletion theory (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000) suggests that self-regulation as a state draws upon a limited pool of energy that can be depleted. When individuals engage in behaviors that consume considerable regulatory resources, their level of regulating ability is reduced. We found that lack of self-regulation contributed to negative outcomes from online breaks. Future research might explore the extent to which reduced self-regulation may be a result of inadequate recovery from work demands, as well as test the level of self-regulation needed to avert negative behavior – such as excessive use of online breaks at work – to avoid further energy depletion. An exciting avenue for future research would be to consider how much variance in the outcomes of online breaks is explained by trait versus state self-regulation.

**Practical implications**

The study’s findings have several implications for organizational practice. First, managers should be aware of both the potential benefits and costs associated with online work breaks. Managers tend to view the use of technology for non-work-related reasons negatively (Ugrin, Pearson, & Odom, 2011; Weatherbee, 2010). However, as found here, online work breaks may be beneficial to both the employer and the employee,
through recovery from work and knowledge gain. Therefore, managers should not dismiss online breaks as dysfunctional, particularly those that are taken in a measured, self-regulated way.

Organizations should allow employees to choose a type and timing of breaks according to their personal preferences and needs. Some participants noted that company policy prohibited them from going online for breaks as needed. Given previous research suggesting the pivotal role of autonomy and control over how breaks are taken (Bosch et al., 2018; Trougakos et al., 2014), too much restriction might backfire and prevent employees from replenishing their resources.

However, individuals may fail to appropriately disengag e from online breaks and return to work, potentially hindering job performance. Thus, managers also should find ways to minimize the dysfunctional outcomes resulting, in part, from employees’ lack of self-discipline. For example, organizations may want to provide an allotment of time to engage in online breaks so that employees can have the discretion to take online breaks when most critical, such as when they feel tired and stressed due to a draining affective event or a particularly boring or monotonous work assignment. The time-based quota approach allows employees to take online breaks at any time and for any duration within the daily time limit while internet management software enables HR to monitor the usage. Further, organizations might provide training on effective break-taking strategies. Previous research has found that self-regulatory training, such as time management and prioritization techniques, helped salespeople achieve higher performance (Leach, Liu, & Johnston, 2005). Thus, employees might benefit from training designed to help regulate their patterns of online breaks in a way that minimizes the costs while maximizing the benefits. Moreover, previous research reported the importance of the type of breaks (e.g., low-effort versus chore activities) and the sense of control over the choice of breaks in the positive recovery experiences (Sonnentag, Venz, & Casper, 2017). Accordingly, employees should be mindful of what they do during their online breaks and if the breaks feel mentally taxing they should stop and switch to more relaxing ones immediately.

**Limitations and directions for future research**

Participants were drawn from a wide range of industries and occupations, which allowed for a variety of examples of the phenomena studied. However, given the study’s focus on better understanding how breaks are taken, and with what effects, differences between industries or occupations were not analyzed. Thus, future research might investigate industry or occupational differences that influence the choice and effectiveness of online work break activities.

One such an avenue would be to compare knowledge workers, or employees who have latitude in performing their job duties and setting performance goals, with others who perform tasks with clearly defined daily performance expectations and predetermined rules. The normal work day for knowledge workers was found to consist of an average of 88 work episodes per day, 90% of which lasted for a duration of only 10 minutes or less (Wajcman & Rose, 2011). In the knowledge workers’ fragmented work environment, the way that online work breaks are triggered, and their effects, might differ from the way these breaks affect other types of workers. Moreover, previous studies on knowledge work have suggested that the job performance of knowledge workers relies heavily on their ability to build and maintain a broad network inside and outside of their organizations (Cross & Cummings, 2004; Gargiulo, Ertug, & Galunic, 2009). This ability often enables them to acquire the right information to solve novel, challenging problems. Thus, it is possible that knowledge workers may benefit more from online networking activities during a break than other types of workers.

Another limitation inherent in the inductive method used concerns the generalizability of findings. The model and relationships presented here help elaborate theory, thus likely have analytic generalizability in “expand[ing] and generaliz[ing] theories” rather than “enumerate[ing] frequencies” (Yin, 2003, p. 10). As a next step, quantitative researchers might operationalize and test the model reported here with a broader spectrum of samples. For example, future researchers might test the effects of online breaks using a diary study where they explore how the length and types of online breaks affect the individual’s well-being (e.g., vitality, fatigue) and productivity on a daily basis. Further, our findings are based on self-report qualitative data. A review of research on recovery over the past 15 years (Sonnentag et al., 2017) reveals that a majority of recovery studies have relied on self-report data, making it difficult to tease out the effects recovery processes have on perceptions versus other substantive consequences. Sonnentag et al. urge future researchers to collect physical data, such as cortisol and cardiovascular measures; these types of measures may be deployed in testing quantitatively our emergent qualitative model.

A final limitation of our study was that we did not assess the age of our participants and thus could not
examine our findings from the perspective of generational differences. This might be important for several reasons. First, research demonstrates that media usage and brain plasticity (i.e., the ability to learn) vary across the life-span (Bavelier, Green, Pouget, & Schrater, 2012; Van Der Goot & Beentjes, 2008), likely influencing the manner in which individuals will adopt and use mobile technologies throughout the work day. Second, an emerging literature from the education sector suggests that (younger) generations raised with access to online technology (e.g., internet, gaming) may have shorter attention spans than older generations (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Shorter attention spans may require individuals to use micro breaks or task switching more frequently as a means of managing their cognitive resources (Rosen, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013). Finally, we did find that some of the individuals in our sample did leverage mobile technologies to manage non-work demands, particularly those relating to communication with or managing family demands. Unfortunately, without data relating to age we could not explore the possibility of generational differences and patterns in online break-taking behaviors. We believe this would be a fruitful area for future research.

In summary, our study provides a rich description of the nature and effects of online work breaks, and points to practical implications for managers. The insights gained from this qualitative study provide a strong starting point for future research to test findings quantitatively.

**Note**

1. The numbers following quotes represent the identification number assigned to each study participant. The letters refer to gender: M = male; F = female.

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**References**


Appendix A

Questions from the Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about the people you work with. How do they use technology?
2. Is there any norm in your immediate workgroup regarding the use of technology?
3. These days, employees often take a break not only by drinking coffee or chatting with colleagues, but also by using technology for personal purposes. During a typical work day, to what degree do you take online breaks as opposed to offline breaks?
4. Think about your typical work day and tell me about what types of things make you go online for non-work-related reasons.
5. What’s the primary purpose for you to use technology at work during a break?
6. To what degree do you think it is beneficial or detrimental to your productivity to take online breaks? Why do you think so?

* Interviews were semi-structured. While asking this standard set of questions, the interviewers also asked a variety of follow-up questions to explore and build on interesting themes and comments as they unfolded.