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More workers work through lunch or eat at their desks

By Larry Muhammad, The (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal, 4/13/2012, usatoday.net

LOUISVILLE — Today's fast-paced work environment and sluggish economy have left many employees with more work and less time to do it, making the once-cherished midday lunch break a disappearing option.

As general sales manager for Clear Channel Communications here, Mary George Meiners used to take leisurely lunches with clients and associates — until an increasingly busy schedule robbed her of the time. Now Meiners usually just buys a sandwich and eats it at her desk.

"Everyone's busier all the way around," she said. "A lot of our clients are business owners, and they're slammed; our media buyers are slammed. Everybody's trying to be more productive." Recent national surveys underscore the change.

Only a third of American workers say they take a lunch break, according to a Web survey conducted last year by Right Management, a human resources consulting firm. The survey also found that 65% of workers eat at their desks or don't take a break at all.

CareerBuilder, another employment consultant, found that less than one-fifth of executives surveyed ate lunch at a sit-down restaurant, about 40% take a brown-bag lunch and 17% eat fast food.

Lawyer Keith Hunter agreed that lunches with colleagues seem like a thing of the past. "Years ago, partners would go to lunch with associates, make a point of saying, 'Hey, let's do lunch,' not one but a whole group of lawyers, and I just don't see it as much," said Hunter, who works at the Zielke law firm.

Susan Crook, a marketing and advertising consultant, said she remembers fondly the carefree lunches she ate with her co-workers at the old Colonnade Cafe and Stewart's department store downtown. "It was the high point of our day," Crook said. "All those same people, I know now don't go out for lunch. Some of them can't afford it and are trying to save money. Others think they're being scrutinized so much — the underlying thing that if you come back from lunch late you're not working as hard. There are so many people who say, 'Let's do lunch,' but they don't do it."

Downtown restaurants here are noticing the change. Reza Dabbagh, owner of Saffron's Persian & Mediterranean Cuisine, said more people are calling in orders for pickup, and shorter lunches seem to be the trend. "We do see our dine-in lunch patrons more on Friday, the end of the workweek. But most of the time they're taking carryout," Dabbagh said. At Bendoya Restaurant, lunch patrons are divided evenly between dine-in and takeout, co-owner Thea Prak said. "Four or five years ago, people did take a lot longer lunch and tended to wander farther," she said. "Nowadays everything is quick, quick, quick."

No federal law requires companies to provide a lunch break, but 22 states have meal-break laws. Christy Morgan, a government clerk, said she often works through her 45-minute lunch break. "Everybody knows the law about uninterrupted lunch, but that doesn't happen, at least not in our organization. I get a sandwich, eat it while I'm at my desk and keep working on my computer. It's not that supervisors don't let us go out, like somebody's standing over your desk, but we do what we have to in order to get our work done."

Joe Phelps, assistant director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 62, which represents about 8,000 government workers in Kentucky and Indiana, said the disappearing lunch break is an issue the council must address.

Most agencies across the country are short staffed and don't have people to relieve workers for lunch, he said. "Sometimes they're required to eat at their post," Phelps said of workers.

Workers not covered by state law, collective-bargaining agreements or mutual understandings with management that allow a meal break are out of luck — a sign of the times when millions of workers don't have jobs, said Lyle Sussman, a University of Louisville professor and chairman of the Business College's department of management.

Experts say taking an uninterrupted meal break is healthy, increases job efficiency and improves morale, benefiting both employees and their companies. Research on creativity and productivity "shows a lot of good stuff comes about when employees get away from their work and their desks, and smart managers and smart companies find a way to make that happen," Sussman said.

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