

# White Paper

---

## It's the Little Things That Matter: An Examination of Knowledge Workers' Energy Management

Charlotte Fritz  
College of Liberal Arts & Sciences  
Portland State University

Chak Fu Lam  
Sawyer Business School  
University of Suffolk

Gretchen Spreitzer  
Stephen M. Ross School of Business  
University of Michigan



## Introduction:

Often, when we talk about ways to combat the energy crisis, we are told to unplug our appliances or use more energy-efficient light bulbs. Yet, these same strategies are not being applied to the human energy crisis employees feel at work. Employees are being asked to work more hours, stay more connected to work, and be more efficient. With less time outside of work to unwind and unplug, organizations must now examine how employees can maintain and restore energy at work.

Organizational and management scholars have begun working to understand how organizations can be built more sustainably, not for the environment or economy, but for their employees. Because human energy is the fuel that powers organizations, creating a sustainable environment for employees is necessary for the success of an organization. Sustainable energy management at work not only allows for employees to contribute to organizational success but to organizational and individual thriving: when individuals and organizations go above and beyond typical standards for success.

Human energy includes two important components: 1) the experience of vitality, which is the experience of feeling enthusiastic and alive and 2) a lack of fatigue, which is the experience of not feeling tired or depleted. Much like natural energy, human energy is a resource that is limited and depleted over time. There are a number of factors that reduce human energy in the workplace. Employees may be faced with longer hours, feel more tethered to work with technology, have fewer employee benefits if their organization is downsizing or financially strapped, or have an increasingly interdependent job and work schedule. While each of these factors may be necessary components of a specific work environment, they take a major toll on human energy levels and one's capacity for success.

Recent research by Spreitzer et. al. on human energy has examined how time at-work is spent and how it can be managed to re-energize employees. While activities outside of work, like restful sleep and psychological detachment from work, can be restorative, they do not account for employees who must work increasingly longer hours. These employees may not have access to ample time outside of work to re-energize. New research seeks to understand the maintenance and restoration of energy at work through effective break taking.

Spreitzer et. al. examine the power of breaks at work to re-energize employees. They examine two main types of breaks: micro-breaks and work-related strategies. Micro-breaks are moments of rest from work activities. These breaks are constituted by non-work activities and would include activities like taking a bathroom break, getting coffee, and eating a snack. Work-related strategies are activities related to work and work responsibilities. Examples of these breaks would include changing the task you are working on, responding to emails, and seeking feedback about work.

To understand what kinds of breaks are used at work and how they impact human energy levels (vitality and lack of fatigue), employees across hierarchical positions and departments in a large organization were surveyed about the rate at which they used certain micro-break and work-related strategies and the levels of vitality and fatigue associated with these strategies.

Researchers found that while individuals do engage in breaks, they do not engage in strategies that actually maintain and restore energy effectively. While many individuals engage in micro-breaks, work-related breaks tend to be better and more restorative. Yet, not all work-related breaks are helpful. Some have no impact on energy levels. The best breaks for increasing

energy levels are those that are work-related and reflect notions of learning, creating relationships, and meaning making at work. These results indicate that it is not the time that you take in between work activities that supports high-energy at work but the way in which you go about doing your work that promotes energy at work.

Figure 1:

Top 10 Most Used Work-Related Break Strategies			
Rank	Strategy	Effect on Vitality (+ = increases vitality; - = decreases vitality; 0 = no significant impact)	Effect on Fatigue (+ = increases fatigue; - = decreases fatigue; 0 = no significant impact)
1	Check e-mail	0	0
2	Switch to another task	0	0
3	Make a to-do list	0	0
4	Offer to help someone at work	0	0
5	Talk to a co-worker/supervisor	0	0
6	Learn something new	+	0
7	Focus on what gives me joy at work	+	0
8	Set a new goal	+	0
9	Do something that will make a colleague happy	+	0
10	Make time to show gratitude to someone I work with	+	0

Figure 2:

Top 10 Most Used Micro-Break Strategies			
Rank	Strategy	Effect on Vitality (+ = increases vitality; - = decreases vitality; 0 = no significant impact)	Effect on Fatigue (+ = increases fatigue; - = decreases fatigue; 0 = no significant impact)
1	Drink water	0	0
2	Have a snack	0	+
3	Go to the bathroom	0	+
4	Drink a caffeinated beverage	-	+
5	Do some form of physical activity (take a walk or stretch)	0	0
6	Talk to someone about common interests (like sports or hobbies)	-	+
7	Check in with a family member or friend	0	0
8	Listen to music	-	+
9	Surf the web	-	+
10	Show compassion to someone who needs help	0	0

# So, how can I maintain my energy and my employees' energy at work?

**Strategies for yourself:** These are eight of the top individual strategies for increasing and maintaining energy and vitality at work. All of these strategies are work-related and reflect notions of learning, building relationships, and meaning making.

- 1. Learn something new:** Take collaborative projects as an opportunity to ask questions about how other departments work, so you can better understand the company as a whole and how different components are integrated.
- 2. Focus on what gives you joy in your work:** Try to obtain projects or components of projects that allow you to do what you enjoy. Even if your project does not include something you enjoy, be creative and try to go above and beyond to infuse your own talents into your work.
- 3. Set a new goal:** Envision your ideal self 10-20 years from now. Make concrete goals and milestones so that you can achieve your long-term goals.
- 4. Do something that will make one of your colleagues happy:** Reflect back on a conversation that you had with a colleague at work. Send them a nice handwritten note about something you recently talked about or plan a surprise party to celebrate a colleague's achievement.
- 5. Make time to show gratitude to a colleague:** Actively try to thank several colleagues a day for their work or kindness by writing them a note or email or thanking them in person.
- 6. Seek feedback on your work performance:** Ask collaborators, mentors, supervisors, or co-workers for feedback on your work performance. Ask them for both positive feedback and areas of improvement.
- 7. Reflect on how you make a difference at work:** Reflect each day for 15 minutes about what you have done that day at work, thinking about the work that you have done and interactions that you have had with co-workers. Think about what went well, what did not, and what actions you can take to improve in the future to make a bigger impact.
- 8. Reflect on the meaning of your work:** Think about the impact that your work has on others. Think about how you can create a more positive or powerful impact on those around you and the audience your organization serves.

**Strategies for your organization:** Often organizations try to provide revitalization to their employees by providing special amenities and perks for their time off, but as employees find that they have less time off and feel more tired at work, employers need to begin to think about how to revitalize employees at work by allowing them to re-energize while they work. To do this, employers are best off focusing on how to increase intrinsic motivation and reward, meaning employees desire to work hard for themselves and the greater good, rather than because you want a particular award or perk. Here are three strategies that will enhance employee vitality and reduce fatigue.

- 1. Create an environment where employees continuously learn:** Employees grow and develop when they learn. This increases and strengthens their psychological resources and aids in feeling a sense of vitality. Xerox has created a lifelong learning program to encourage and allow employees to continue to learn and grow throughout their company.
- 2. Allow employees to create high quality connections and relationships with one another:** Relationship building has both physical and emotional benefits, like enhanced cardio and immune responses. Eli Lilly and Company has created numerous affinity groups to increase multi-cultural competency and an inclusive environment in which relationships between all co-workers can form.
- 3. Encourage employees to engage in meaning making while they work:** Individuals who feel that their work has meaning are more creative, satisfied, engaged and committed at work. This helps to promote a thriving work environment. Burt's Bees Inc. encourages all employees to rewrite and craft their own job description to match their skills, competencies, and job components. To find more information about how to encourage job crafting, explore The Job Crafting Exercise™ (<http://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/cpo-tools/job-crafting-exercise/>). This research-driven tool gives employees and organizations a better understanding of how to create meaning within their own jobs.

\*This white paper was written by Kaitlin Keane based on “It’s the little things that matter: An examination of knowledge workers’ energy management.”

Citation: Fritz, C., Lam, C.F., & Spreitzer, G.M. (2011). It’s the little things that matter: An examination of knowledge workers’ energy management. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 25(3), 28-39.

## About the Authors:

**Dr. Charlotte Fritz** is an Assistant Professor in Industrial/Organizational Psychology and a faculty within the Occupational Health Psychology Graduate Training Program at Portland State University. She graduated with her Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from the University of Braunschweig, Germany, in 2005 and then held a position as Assistant Professor in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at Bowling Green State University from 2005 to 2009.

**Chak Fu Lam** is Assistant Professor of Management and Entrepreneurship at the University of Suffolk's Sawyer Business School.

**Gretchen M. Spreitzer** is the Keith E. and Valerie J. Alessi Professor of Business Administration and Professor of Management and Organizations at the Ross School of Business. Her research focuses on employee empowerment, leadership development, positive deviance, and how organizations enable employees to flourish. Spreitzer also is a core faculty member of the Center for Positive Organizations at Ross.