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IN DEPTH: THE BEST OF SILICON VALLEY

If you spend a lot of energy doing, there's no time to think

Kate Reynolds

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Throughout history great thinkers have pondered three mysteries:

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If a word is misspelled in the dictionary, how will we know?

Why do we say something is out of whack? What is a whack?

How did a fool and his money get together before they were parted?

Nowadays, however, many of us don't take the time to think or make a chance to get away from workday problems. And experts say too little private thinking time is a mistake -- for reasons that have decidedly serious personal and business repercussions.

If you don't take a break, you are pulled toward always thinking in the same way, and that makes an employee less efficient and more stuck in a rut, says Menlo Park psychologist Gail Price.

"Moving around physically changes stimulation and breathing patterns. It forces a person to use different muscles, including the eyes and different parts of the brain," she says.

She likens the mental process to a weight training regimen in which an

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athlete works different muscle groups at different times. Likewise, getting up from your desk and going outside stimulates different parts of the brain and allows the overused parts a chance to rest.

When rested, the brain is open to new input. Something new is on the workplace horizon, however. micro breaks.

It used to be that 15-minute breaks were taken every couple of hours, but now the trend is toward 20- or 30- second micro breaks every 15 minutes.

In an ideal world, it is better to stand up and leave your desk. But in overworked Silicon Valley, people try to cram 10 hours worth of work into an eight-hour day. A micro break is the reasonable solution, says Steve Marshall, director of Sunnyvale-based Ergonomic Sciences Corp.

Workers can become accustomed to their environment, so they sit improperly. But short breathers -- even doing something as simple as looking out the window -- offer a chance to refocus. "It's the key to avoiding repetitive stress injuries," Mr. Marshall says.

Some companies draw their home-based employees into the office community by fixing a special time for them to chat with co-workers via e-mail, or by hosting a companywide chat room.

However, if an employee has a little more time -- a free afternoon, perhaps -- what kind of break should be taken?

To answer that, first ask yourself what you were doing preceding the afternoon break, Ms. Price says. If your work has been highly intense, you need to find something calming, something soothing, perhaps something familiar.

"In other cases it's time to shake yourself up, do something new and different," she says.

That said, where can a person get some good thinking done around here?

Adrienne Gillespie, a Palo Alto artist who specializes in landscapes, heads for the hills behind Stanford University. A walk there, she says, is uninterrupted and gives her a chance to watch the blue herons and egrets.

"I go to get away," she says, "but it's also entertaining to watch parents with babies rolling their strollers uphill. I see kids on their parents' backs ... I like seeing that.

"It doesn't relax me to go somewhere and sit."

Pam Hardy, a quality assurance specialist who works in Los Altos, prefers a different kind of outdoors -- the patio of Printer's Inc. on California Avenue in Palo Alto.

"There's something about the sunshine, the people, and good coffee that lends itself to a philosophical state of mind.

"Most of the time in the valley is spent working, visiting, or on the way to one of those things. At Printer's Inc. there's an opportunity to be still for a moment and watch the buzz of life around me."

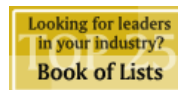
In the endless search for a truly relaxing place to ponder, Virginia Reynolds, a resident of San Jose's Atrium Retirement Community, offers a philosophical answer.

"When I need to think things over, I go to the bathroom," she says.

KATE REYNOLDS is a freelance writer based in Palo Alto. Virginia Reynolds is her mother.

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