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Original article

A field test of the quiet hour as a time management technique

Un essai in situ de l'instant de tranquillité en tant que technique de gestion du temps

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – This field study tested the effectiveness of quiet hours (an hour free of any phone calls, visitors or incoming emails).

Objective. – Based on interruptions research and on a behavioral decision-making approach to time management, we argue that establishing quiet hours is a precommitment strategy against predominantly harmful interruptions. Furthermore, conscientiousness and the use of other time management techniques should moderate the effects of the quiet hour.

Method. – We tested this by using a two-week experimental diary study with managers as participants.

Results. – Multi-level analyses showed that a quiet hour improved the performance on a task worked on during the quiet hour in comparison to a similar task on a day without a quiet hour. Furthermore, overall performance was higher on days with a quiet hour than on days without one. Conscientiousness acted as a moderator, unlike the use of other time management techniques.

Conclusion. – These results imply that more people should consider implementing a quiet hour, especially if they are non-conscientious.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – Cet essai in situ a mesuré l'efficacité des instants de tranquillité (une heure sans appels, ni visites, ni messages électroniques).

Objectif. – Basé sur des connaissances de la recherche sur les interruptions et sur l'approche de la décision comportementale sur la gestion du temps, nous avançons la thèse que l'établissement d'instant de tranquillité constitue une stratégie prophylactique permettant de réduire considérablement les interruptions nuisibles. De plus, la conscience et d'autres techniques de gestion du temps devraient baisser les effets de l'instant de tranquillité.

Méthode. – Nous avons tenté d'appuyer notre thèse en établissant une étude de journal quotidien avec des managers comme participants.

Résultats. – Des analyses à plusieurs niveaux ont démontré que l'application de cet instant de tranquillité permit aux managers d'obtenir de meilleures performances. Le sens des responsabilités agit comme un modérateur, contrairement à l'utilisation d'autres techniques de gestion du temps.

Conclusion. – Ces résultats montrent qu'il convient de considérer l'implantation de l'instant de tranquillité, surtout quand on constate un manque du sens des responsabilités.

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Time management is a problem for many people. For example, Hawkins and Klas (1997) surveyed teachers, nurses, and social workers and found that many complain about their insufficient time management. What is more, the importance attributed to time management has risen over time (Gentry, Harris, Baker, & Leslie,

2008). It is therefore not surprising that many practitioners (e.g., Lakein, 1973; Mackenzie, 1997; Seiwert, 2001) have written books aiming to help people to manage their time, and have offered time management training.

Although some researchers have shown that time management training may work (e.g., Häfner & Stock, 2010; Orpen, 1994; van Erde, 2003b; but see Macan, 1996), other time management interventions have not been tested. In particular, authors of self-help books (e.g., Seiwert, 2001; Mackenzie, 1997) have advised their

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readers to establish a quiet hour, which is an hour during a person's workday that is free of any phone calls, visitors or automatic notifications of incoming emails. However, no field study has evaluated whether this time management intervention actually works.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to experimentally test in the field whether or not the quiet hour is an effective time management technique. Furthermore, we will put forward arguments as to why the quiet hour should work that are deduced from research on interruptions (e.g., Cellier & Eyrolle, 1992) and from behavioral decision-making research (e.g., Koch & Kleinmann, 2002; König & Kleinmann, 2007). Moreover, we will argue that there are two important moderators of the effectiveness of quiet hours: people who are less conscientious or who use fewer other time management techniques should particularly benefit from establishing a quiet hour.

1. Theory

Practitioners in the field of time management often give the advice to lock oneself in the office for an hour or so and ask that nobody interrupts (e.g., Mackenzie, 1997). For example, people should keep the office door closed throughout and equip it with a "Do Not Disturb" sign; they should redirect all phone calls to a secretary or mailbox and switch off the option on their email software that automatically checks for new mail on a regular basis. This constitutes a quiet hour, and people have been advised to use this time of concentrated work particularly for working on important non-urgent tasks (e.g., Mackenzie, 1997).

1.1. Why a quiet hour should work?

The behavioral decision-making perspective on time management (Koch & Kleinmann, 2002; König & Kleinmann, 2007) offers an explanation of why it is difficult for people to work on non-urgent but important tasks: people's time discounting. Time discounting means that delayed events have psychologically less value than immediate events (e.g., Frederick, Loewenstein, & O'Donoghue, 2002), and not only does it therefore matter how valuable the consequence of a task is, but it is also important when this consequence is experienced. Consequently, non-urgent tasks can be of high value, but their value is often experienced in a more distant future and is thus discounted (Koch & Kleinmann, 2002). For example, an employee knows that she has to prepare a presentation for a meeting with the top management in two weeks, and if the meeting goes well, her project idea will be funded. Thus, she knows that this meeting has important consequences, but she also knows that she still has two weeks time. Due to time discounting, it is highly likely that she will consider the preparation of the presentation as non-urgent and will therefore postpone the preparation because of this temporal distance.

Time discounting also specifies which alternatives are particularly attractive and tempting, especially if people are working on important non-urgent tasks: alternatives that offer immediate rewards – and these might be offered by interruptions (or at least people presume that they might). For example, an email might bring important news (or just some gossip) and at least some welcomed distraction even if reading the email disturbs the work flow, and the (presumed) immediate reward might be the reason why emails are typically read immediately (Jackson, Dawson, & Wilson, 2003). Thus, interruptions can be understood as temptations that are particularly powerful if people are working on important non-urgent tasks.

The behavioral decision-making perspective on time management (Koch & Kleinmann, 2002) also explains why it is not enough just to plan to resist such temptations: time discounting research

(e.g., Kirby & Herrnstein, 1995; Rachlin & Green, 1972) has shown preference reversals to be common. In the time management context (Koch & Kleinmann, 2002), a preference reversal means that people plan to resist tempting interruptions and to concentrate on working on a non-urgent but important task, but do not stick to their plan when an interruption occurs.¹ In other words, people will resist interruptions in the future, but when the future arrives (i.e., when time has passed), they find interruptions too tempting to avoid reacting to them. Thus, people might be aware that interruptions can harm their performance, especially if they are working on complex tasks (e.g., Cellier & Eyrolle, 1992; Gillie & Broadbent, 1989) and that interruptions can produce stress (e.g., Johansson & Aronsson, 1984). Therefore, they prefer not to be interrupted, but still find it difficult to ignore, for instance, the arrival of a new email.

However, the behavioral decision-making perspective on time management (Koch & Kleinmann, 2002) also suggests how preference reversals can be prevented: by precommitment (Ariely & Wertenbroch, 2002; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002; Read, 2001). Precommitment means that people make early decisions that are binding. In the time management context (Koch & Kleinmann, 2002), precommitment leads people to arrange their work environment in such a way that they are hindered from switching their attention to interruptions, and they do this before they start working on an important but non-urgent task (and before interruptions can occur). This is precisely what is achieved by implementing a quiet hour: it allows the individual to concentrate on non-urgent important tasks by shielding interruptions. For example, if the email program is switched off, there cannot be any signal that a new email has arrived.

In summary, the arguments put forward so far are as follows: establishing a quiet hour is a precommitment strategy against interruptions, and working on a non-urgent important task should therefore be more efficient if people work on it during a quiet hour than during normal office time. Similarly, a day on which people take a quiet hour should be more productive than days without a quiet hour. More formally, we can state:

H1a: People report better performance on a task if they have implemented a quiet hour than if they have not implemented a quiet hour.

H1b: People report better day performance if they have implemented a quiet hour than if they have not implemented a quiet hour.

1.2. Who benefits more from a quiet hour?

Some people might benefit from a quiet hour more than others. In particular, we will argue that the effectiveness of a quiet hour is moderated by individual differences in the general use of other time management techniques and in conscientiousness.

1.2.1. Use of other time management techniques

Typical time management techniques include making lists, scheduling tasks, setting goals, and monitoring progress (e.g., Macan, Shahani, Dipboye, & Phillips, 1990). These techniques can be found both in the academic and the practitioner literature on time management (e.g., Macan et al., 1990; Mackenzie, 1997; Seiwert, 2001), and using these techniques have been found to be positively related to performance (e.g., Nonis & Sager, 2003). If people already use a large number of time management techniques, they might not benefit a great deal from a quiet hour because they already

¹ It has been mathematically shown that preference reversals are the consequence of the way in which people discount future outcomes (e.g., Kirby & Maraković, 1995; see also König & Kleinmann, 2005).

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