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### **Beware—Public Administrators Can Go Hangry**

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This is an author's draft of an article published in the PA Times.

The final version, the version of record, is available online at:

<https://patimes.org/beware-public-administrators-can-go-hangry/>



## Beware—Public Administrators Can Go Hangry

Recently, I watched a documentary on Netflix about the correlation between human hunger and feelings of anger. It sounds like common knowledge. We even have an old Arabic proverb that wisely describes the best way to deal with children and sums it all up in the one sentence: *“If hungry they nag, and if full they sing.”* Raising three kids, I have always strongly believed in this proverb. My children, coming back from school hungry and tired, were always ready for a fight, but right after having lunch and feeling full, they always started laughing and giggling. **This article is not about parenting skills—not at all. It is about the proven scientific evidence that there is a strong correlation between hunger and anger and the implications for work management in the public service. “Hangry” is now an accepted term explaining how a hungry individual may become angry very easily. We do not want to see this happen in our civil service!**

More and more studies are providing evidence about the negative impacts of hunger. There are experiments that prove how a drop in glucose levels can have a negative impact on our mood, and how hunger can affect social relationships and work performance. Specifically, if you get too hungry, you might not only feel tired, but also experience a greater likelihood of making mistakes at work, suffering from poor coordination and inability to concentrate.

Many multinational companies have advanced systems for catering to food requirements for their employees. Services range from scheduled lunch breaks, free or subsidized meals, free beverages, healthy meals, office kitchens or even restaurants and incentive systems for employees who maintain a healthy life style.

What arrangements are there in our public service organizations that take care of employees’ eating requirements? Is it sufficient to allow for lunch breaks? Are lunch breaks standard practice in all public organizations on a global level? It turns out the issue is quite complicated and there are various practices. Differences abound regarding whether the lunch break is formally mentioned in the governing regulations, its duration and its recognition as paid work by the employer.

**The United States Office of Personnel Management** recognized the need for a meal period/lunch during a work day, but allowed flexibility to governmental agencies in figuring out the best way to organize that time. Usually, employees are allowed one hour for lunch, but the exact duration may differ from one agency to another, depending mainly on work requirements and also on whether the employees are part of a union, or not.

**In the United Kingdom**, civil servants are entitled to a minimum of a twenty-minute lunch break if they work for more than six hours a day. An active group of civil servants from across a number of departments refer to themselves as, “Kingfishers.” They recognize that many employees miss lunch and subsequently become overly stressed and less productive at work. These Kingfishers organized an initiative to encourage employees to always take a meaningful lunch. Their motto was, “A lunch a day keeps the misery away.”

**In Singapore’s civil service**, the rule is that a public employee is entitled to a break after six hours of work, but it is not clear for how long. However, if an employee works for eight hours continuously, they are entitled at a minimum to a break of 45 minutes. In the **Moroccan Civil Service**, there is a clear stipulation of a one-hour break for lunch every day from 12 -1 p.m.

**In the South African Labor Guide**, there is mention of a one hour optional and unpaid lunch break, but this can be reduced to 30 minutes based on an agreement between the employer and employee. The one hour lunch break is not counted as a working hour, so if working five days from the office and taking a lunch break, an employee has to be at the workplace for a total of 50 hours per week, instead of the 45 required hours.

**In the Norwegian and Danish public services**, there is a recognized 30 minute paid break per day for all employees. In the **Finnish public service**, the regulations call for a minimum of a one-hour break, but this can be negotiated with the employer, and should not be less than a half hour per day.

**In Egypt**, although the regular Labor Law mentions a minimum of half an hour break during the work day, for praying, eating or resting, the Executive Regulations/Bi-Laws for the governing Egyptian Civil Service Law No. 2016 has nothing about lunch breaks. The system is very flexible. Employees often times improvise by eating at their desks while working or in hallways. This affects their emotional wellbeing and consequently their ability to work, and oftentimes results in uncalled-for anger outbursts and unfriendly behavior towards citizens.

A simple solution would be at a minimum to recognize the need for eating and having lunches as a right for all public service employees. If we want to be more productive, then free healthy lunches should be an option in all public service organizations.