



# Rutgers study: Unexpected free time feels longer, changes work habits

Kimberly Redmond//April 20, 2026//

The basics:

- Rutgers study explores impact of canceled meetings
- Sought to find out whether gained “windfall time” feels subjectively longer
- Researchers found that unexpected free time leads to choosing longer activities
- Findings highlight burnout and time management trends
- The most productive meeting at work may be the one that never happens. A new study from Rutgers University found that when an hour-long obligation unexpectedly drops off the calendar, it creates an illusion of extra time within an otherwise overbooked day.

Because individuals tend to perceive the free 60-minute block as longer and more flexible, the newfound sense of abundance typically leads them to take on longer tasks than they otherwise would, according to the research.

“An hour gained feels longer than 60 minutes, and that deviation from expectation creates a unique sense of opportunity,” said Gabriela Tonietto, an associate professor of marketing at Rutgers Business School and lead author of the study.

## **Taking on bigger tasks**

For example, an employee with an unexpected free hour might opt for a 45-minute project over a 15-minute administrative task, simply because the time feels longer. Similarly, another worker might choose to walk to a nearby coffee shop for a deliberate break rather than grab a hurried cup in the office breakroom, the study says. The findings are set to be published in an upcoming issue of the Journal of the Association for Consumer Research.

For the study, Tonietto and colleagues at Ohio State University in Columbus, the University of Toronto in Canada and Peking University in China sought to find out whether the gained “windfall time” feels subjectively longer; and if that changes how people use unexpected free time.

For their experiment, the team created and conducted seven surveys measuring psychological and behavioral responses to gaining time. They recruited over 2,300 participants from the researchers' campuses and through online platforms such as Prolific.

Following the first four surveys, researchers learned that respondents believe unexpected free time feels longer than planned free time – even when both are the same length. The next three surveys examined how people use that windfall time. Researchers found that when participants get unexpected free time, they tend to choose longer activities than they normally would.

### **By the numbers**

Roughly **66% to 80%** of Americans report experiencing burnout or significant work-related stress due to job demands and schedules.

– *SOURCE: Moodle, via Forbes report*

When it comes to how individuals choose to spend those newly opened moments, people said they prefer to use it as either an opportunity to catch up on work, take a break or run a personal errand.

According to Tonietto, respondents included a mix of adults who were full-time students and part-time students who also work. Researchers knew the gender and age of participants but did not investigate what kinds of roles they may hold at a workplace, she said.

### **Timely interest**

Since joining the faculty at Rutgers Business School in 2017, Tonietto has focused her research interests on time perception and consumption, scheduling and leisure. Tonietto's studies have included examining the hidden costs of over-scheduling, the impact of constantly feeling like one doesn't have enough time (time famine) and the benefits of having nothing to do.

Besides helping people make better use of their time, her work aims to help businesses improve customer experience. Along with research in publications like *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* and *Journal of Marketing*, Tonietto has been interviewed by outlets like *Time*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.



Gabriela Tonietto, associate professor of marketing at Rutgers Business School

“I’ve always been really interested in how people make decisions about their time and how they perceive their time. But what really led me to time management was a sinking suspicion that, as wonderful as it is, it might also be ruining our lives just a little bit,” she said.

### **Removed from your calendar**

The idea for the latest study stemmed from the observation that most people tend to agree canceled meetings feel great — especially when it was something they didn’t feel like doing at that moment, according to Tonietto.

“This started more from this very practical idea of there’s such a thing as free time that we anticipate and we expect to have. And there’s also gained free time because we schedule so much and inevitably things end early or start late or get canceled entirely,” she explained.

“And now people are left with some amount of free time that they didn’t expect to have. Is it possible that that change from expectation and the unexpected nature of that free time could also change the way we think about it and the way we use it?” she said.

“Sometimes it’s actually something you really wanted to do and it gets canceled and we’re disappointed about it. But, then there’s that silver lining of ‘Oh well, now I have free time.’ So, even if you’re feeling disappointed at gaining the time, we find in our studies that people still react very similarly, whether they’re excited, happy that something got canceled or disappointed that something got canceled,” Tonietto explained.

### **Success**

“And in either case, just having that change from your expectations of going from ‘I don’t have any free time right now’ to ‘I suddenly have some amount’ makes that free time feel bigger in your mind. It feels like more time than if you had expected it all along,” she said. “And that presents an opportunity then obviously for you to do something with it. But our studies suggest that people are more opportunistic, as in they sort of search for somewhat longer activity.”

And although that meeting may be canceled, chances are it'll be rescheduled eventually. "A meeting that doesn't happen today when you're supposed to get started on, let's say some project or something, is just going to get kicked down the road. And then, it might be even more stressful because everything attached to that project is going to be delayed or on a compressed timeline. It could generate stress or a sense that the future time will be lost or current time is being wasted," Tonietto said, adding, "It's a fascinating question."

### **Having an agenda**

Recent workforce surveys show that roughly 66% to 80% of Americans report experiencing burnout or significant work-related stress due to job demands and schedules. Workload, long hours, and blurred work-life boundaries are the top drivers, with many employees regularly working beyond scheduled hours and struggling to disconnect, research has found. As a result, Tonietto believes tightly scheduled Americans are living in "essentially a state of stress."

"To feel that you are existing in a chronic state of what we call time famine is associated with poor mental health outcomes," she said. "I'm a firm believer in breaks and allowing yourself to step back for your own health and well-being. Also, your future productivity is improved by allowing yourself to do that."

Having a meticulous schedule "can also place this greater emphasis on the idea of maximizing your time and always being productive even when it comes to your leisure," Tonietto said.

### **Worker burnout**

"So, you can't just watch TV, you have to have a hobby, and then maybe your hobby should be making money or that you need to find cooler, more impressive or more joyous things to do with your time," she said, adding, "I think it can create this sort of vicious cycle in our minds."

"I think it's part of a broader cultural shift that's been happening over the course of the 2000s, over the past 20, 25 years," she said.

### **'Perception is everything'**

While people aren't necessarily busier nowadays, it seems that way, she said. The constant connectivity, combined with a blurring between personal and work lives, has left many feeling more scheduled, less in control of their time and facing greater demands. "Perception is everything because perception is our reality," she said.

Although many professionals feel constantly short on time, unexpected free time can provide a helpful reset and refresh their perspective, the study found.

***[W]e exist in a state of time famine and feeling like we have too little time and too much to do ...***

***– Gabriela Tonietto, associate professor of marketing, Rutgers University***

Researchers did note that the more abrupt a cancellation is, the more likely it will be that a person chooses to spend their time leisurely instead of being productive. When an individual “gains time,” Tonietto said it should be considered “a gift and an opportunity to align your time with your goals – whether that means ticking something off your to-do list or tackling that task that you’ve been postponing because you just feel like you don’t have the right unit of time to do it.

“But, for a lot of people – and I don’t think it’s the wrong answer – is that they’re going to slow down and take a few more minutes to sip their coffee instead of multitasking and answering email at the exact same time. Or take a 10-minute break in lieu of a five-minute break,” she said. “Because we exist in a state of time famine and feeling like we have too little time and too much to do, I think either response can be healthy,” she said.

### **Action items**

When Tonietto sees an obligation erased from her calendar at the last minute, she tends to “do a nice combination” of being leisurely and productive. “I’ll get a coffee or tea ... and I start with the let’s take a beat reaction, and then I look for those things that I think are what I really want to do and use it as an opportunity to devote my time to what I’m more passionate about in my job,” she said.

Because the findings of the study show how people think about and use their time, Tonietto feels there are several takeaways for businesses. “Don’t be afraid to cancel a meeting that proves unnecessary or lacks a clear agenda. If a meeting is running efficiently, don’t drag out agenda items unnecessarily,” she said.

If a manager must cancel a meeting – or anticipates that it will be canceled or end early – Tonietto recommends having a plan “to guide employees toward desired activities. For instance, if the team could use a break, consider encouraging employees to take some time to recharge as a way to license behaviors like socializing, lingering over coffee or enjoying an extended lunch.

“If there are major targets to reach or back-burner projects that need to be addressed, consider ways to guide employees toward those tasks (e.g., by making suggestions, highlighting targets/goals),” she said.

Finally, Tonietto advised managers to “avoid scheduling meetings with the intent of canceling.”

“First, this could make the gains less unexpected over time,” she said. “Second, it could signal that scheduled meetings systematically lack value.”