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Why Inner Work Is the Ultimate Retention Strategy

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The world of work is changing at a dramatic pace for both employers and employees. To keep up, we must reimagine what the future of work looks like. But this reimagining exercise involves thinking outside the box, and exploring how our experiences as human beings (and not just employees) affect our outlook, engagement in our work, and ability to innovate.

Recently, our team of researchers conducted a rigorous study, surveying a group of 3,000+ working individuals about their [inner work](#) (defined as “mental acts or activities focused in your inner world to achieve a purpose or result”) and self-care habits. BetterUp behavioral data scientist Andrew Reece, a Harvard PhD whose expertise lies in using machine learning and statistics to gain new insights into human psychology and decision-making, poured over hundreds of pages of research in organizational and behavioral science to come up with a

framework for understanding what is inner work? And how does it manifest across the American workforce?

We asked survey respondents, "On average, how many days per week do you take time to do the following activities?" Respondents reported doing each activity between 0-7 days per week.

Our survey uncovered some fascinating insights, both from an individual and organizational perspective.

Geographic impact on inner work activities

At a high level, we discovered that inner work is dictated not only by *who we are*, but *where we live*. For example, we found out that:

- The #1 inner work activity in Alabama was **prayer** (3.06 prayer breaks per week)
- The #1 inner work activity in Hawaii was **meditation** (1.44 meditation breaks per week).
- Idaho is #1 for **walking** (4.18 walking breaks per week).
- **Reading** ranked #1 in Mississippi (3.13 reading breaks per week).
- **Journaling**, is #1 in New Mexico (1.13 journaling breaks per week)

These findings were interesting, for sure, and had our team comparing notes on how we practice inner work. But as it turned out, there were even more mind-blowing correlations between inner work and both organizational and personal outcomes, including:

- **Inner work is positively correlated with subjective levels of happiness**
- Our survey found **a positive correlation between inner work breaks and employee promotions**





Speaking at [Shift](#), our conference on the topic of reimagining meaning at work, our CEO said, *“Inner work is the ultimate retention strategy.”* Not only is inner work positively correlated with individual happiness and professional growth, but our team’s research has shown that it contributes to increased engagement and retention.

What does this mean to employers? Investing in people — as human beings — isn’t just something that sounds good. It has undeniable consequences on culture and the bottom line.

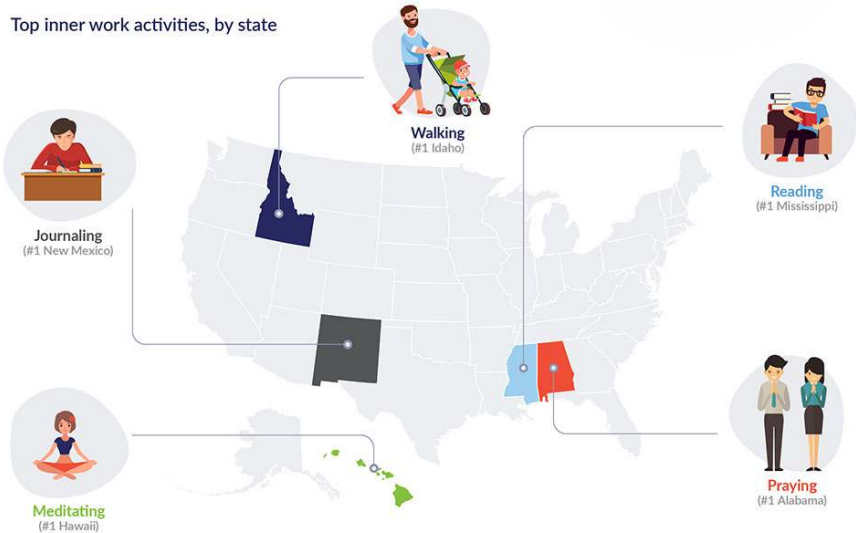
Check out all of our findings from this survey, in the embeddable infographic below.

Inner Work and Self-Care Activities of American Workers, State by State

For the vast majority of professionals, outer work is where most people spend the majority of their work day. We devote so much time to outer work, we hardly even think about it — and that's part of the problem. When we're buried deep under a pile of outer work, it's difficult to get to think creatively. That's because good knowledge work is about how you think, not just what you do. And, how you think isn't outer work. It's inner work.

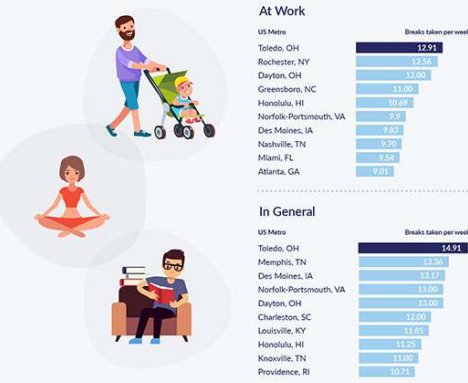
Inner work = mental acts or activities focused on your inner world to achieve a purpose or result. We interviewed over 3,000 working individuals and asked them about their inner work activities.

Top inner work activities, by state



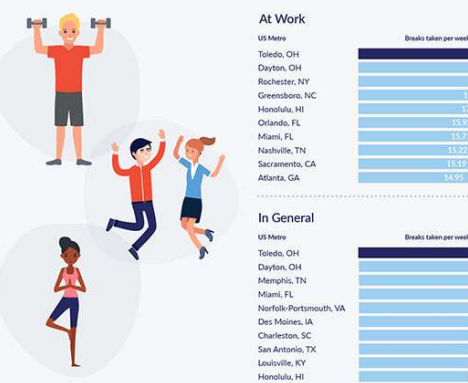
Top 10 metro areas that practice inner work

Inner work includes: Journaling, leisure reading, meditating, praying, walking



Top 10 metro areas that practice self-care

Self-care includes: Working out, napping, handiwork, yoga, dancing, drawing PLUS all inner work activities



Key Takeaways

Most popular self-care activity: **Working out**

92% of respondents take at least 1 self-care break at work per week.

89% reported doing at least 1 inner work activity at work per week.

Our survey found employee promotions are positively correlated with inner work breaks.

Inner work is positively correlated with subjective levels of happiness.

“Companies that offer better quality of life, by giving workers a high level of flexibility and permission to work, have employees...”

Why Inner Work Is the Ultimate Retention Strategy - BetterUp

a high level of flexibility and permission to unplug, have employees who are more engaged, more satisfied with their jobs, less likely to leave, and in better physical and mental health.

—SHRM



Fun facts

- Charles Darwin's inner work activity of choice? Walking
- Bill Gates read one book a week during his career
- Warren Buffett, invested 80% of his time in reading and thinking during his career!
- **Taking time off is critical to reconnecting with your values, your passions and interests**
- Exercise is a known well-being booster: it relieves stress, improves memory, and reduces depression and anxiety

1. CNBC <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/11/16/warren-buffett-reading-routine-could-make-you-smarter-suggests-science.html>

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Special thanks to BetterUp behavioral data scientist Andrew Reece.

Original art by Theo Payne.

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