

Library Human Resources - Best Practice Guide Scheduling Hourly Employee Breaks and Meal Periods

Library HR created these guidelines to promote consistency across all Library Units. This is a reference for employees not working a typical 7.5 hour shift. Use these guidelines when scheduling breaks and meal periods for hourly employees working an uninterrupted shift, less than 7.5 hours.

Meal Periods:

- Unpaid (at least 30 minutes or 1 hour)
 - Suggested if working more than 5 hours and 3 minutes
 - Required if working 7.5 continuous hours or more
 - Must begin at approximate shift midpoint, within 5 hours after the start of the work period
 - Must be completely relieved from duty (e.g., conversations and tasks)

Break Periods:

- Paid (potentially up to two 15-minute breaks)
 - Suggested when working 3.5 hours or more
 - Not legally required, but stated in Union contracts, subject to operational necessity
 - Considered compensable work hours
 - Cannot be accumulated or used to adjust work schedule (e.g., flextime)
 - Unauthorized extensions are not counted as work time

Hours Scheduled	Unpaid Meal Period Required	Paid Breaks Recommended	When to Schedule
3hrs or less	✗ No	✗ No	Meal Periods: N/A Breaks: N/A
3.5hrs	✗ No	✓ Yes One 15-min	Meal Periods: N/A Breaks: Approx. shift midpoint**
5hrs & 3min*	✓ Yes 30-min	✓ Yes One 15-min	Meal Periods: Approx. shift midpoint; within 5hrs Breaks: Approx. midpoint of 1 st half OR 2 nd half of shift**
7hrs	✓ Yes 30-min	✓ Yes Two 15-min	Meal Periods: Approx. shift midpoint; within 5hrs Breaks: 1 st half of shift approx. midpoint and 2 nd half of shift approx. midpoint**
7.5hrs	✓ Yes 30-min	✓ Yes Two 15-min	Meal Periods: Approx. shift midpoint; within 5hrs Breaks: 1st half of shift approx. midpoint and 2nd half of shift approx. midpoint**

*Based off the Non-Exempt one-tenths of an hour [Conversion Chart](#)

** Subject to operational necessity

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Quick Reference Examples

Example 1:

For an employee scheduled for 8.5 hours total:

- Employee is scheduled 8:30am-5:00pm
 - 15 minute break at 10:00am
 - 1 hour meal period at 12:00pm
 - 15 minute break at 3:00pm
 - Shift ends at 5:00pm
- If they worked 8:30am-5:00pm and took a 1 hour meal period, the employee's timesheet will reflect 7.5 hours paid.

Example 2:

For an employee scheduled for 6 hours Total:

- Employee is scheduled 8:30am-2:30pm
 - 30 minute meal period at 11:00am
 - 15 minute break at 1:00pm
 - Shift ends at 2:30pm
- If they worked 8:30am-2:30pm and took a 30 minute meal period, the employee's timesheet will reflect 5.5 hours paid.

Example 3:

For an employee scheduled for 4 hours Total:

- Employee is scheduled 9:00pm-1:00am
 - 15 minute break at 11:00pm
 - Shift ends at 1:00am
- If they worked 9:00pm-1:00am, the employee's timesheet will reflect 4 hours paid.

Quick FAQs

Q1: When should a meal period be scheduled?

A1: The Library suggests a meal period be provided at approximately the midpoint of a shift when an employee is scheduled for 5 hours and 3 minutes or more.

Q2: Are meal periods paid?

A2: No, meal periods (30+ minutes) are unpaid. During this time the employee is required by law to be fully relieved of their work duties.

Q3: Can employees work through their lunch to leave early?

A3: No, when a meal period is required, it must be taken in its entirety and employees must be fully relieved of work duties.

Q4: Can employees eat at their desk and count it as a meal period?

A4: Yes, but it is dependent on Unit policy, if an employee is allowed to eat at their desk. Employees must be fully relieved of work duties during meal periods.

Q5: What does this mean for scheduling a 5.5-hour shift?

A5: The employee will be paid for 5 hours. Which means, the work shift would be: 5 hours of paid work plus a 30-minute unpaid lunch. Example: Work 8:00 AM–3:30 PM, Lunch 12:30–1:00 PM (unpaid), Total Paid Time: 5 hours.

Q6: Why would I schedule a 5.5-hour shift?

A6: Unit discretion may be used to determine employee schedules.

Q7: What if an employee is scheduled for exactly 7.5 hours?

A7: The employee will be paid for 7 hours. Which means, the work shift would be: 7 hours of paid work plus a 30-minute unpaid lunch. Example: Work 8:30 AM–4:30 PM, Lunch 12:30–1:00 PM (unpaid), Total Paid Time: 7 hours.

Q8: Are breaks required by law?

A8: No, they are not required under Federal law or Illinois State law, but they are best practice.

Q9: How do most Units schedule their employees' breaks?

A9: For shifts lasting 3.5 or more hours, but less than 7 hours, most Units offer one 15-minute paid break, at approximate shift midpoint.

A9.1: For shifts lasting 7 or more hours, most Units offer two 15-minute paid breaks, spread out as evenly as practicable throughout their shift.

Q10: Can employees skip their breaks?

A10: Yes, an employee may choose to skip their scheduled break(s). However, taking scheduled break(s) is best practice.

Q11: Can employees work through their break(s) to leave early?

A11: No, breaks are paid time and cannot be used for flextime (at the start or end of a shift, or to extend their meal periods) or be accumulated.

Q12: Are breaks and meal periods the only time an employee can use the restroom facilities?

A12: No, employees must be afforded reasonable restroom breaks that do not count against their meal or rest periods.