

Sleepy employees are less effective

Q: As a human resource manager at an SME, I am concerned with ensuring our employees' continued productivity as well as their welfare. They are dedicated to their work and put in long hours to get the job done. But, at the end of the day, it still seems like they are not very productive. Why are their efforts not yielding results, and what can I do about it? Besides examining our work processes, are there any HR aspects we should consider?

A: In the pursuit of increasing productivity, many managers understandably push their employees, trying to maximise the amount of their workers' time. While the rationale for this approach is simple enough – more time should result in more work being done – the reality is potentially very different. This is because such an approach can have the costly side effect of reducing the time that employees have to sleep. Although it is sometimes popular to portray sleep as a crutch for the weak – with the sleepless among us wearing all-nighters like a badge of honour – a growing body of research demonstrates alarming outcomes that await employees who get insufficient rest.

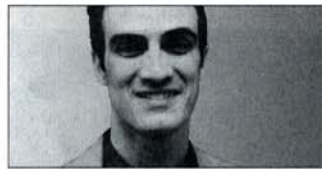
Clinical research has provided ample evidence of connections between sleep and individual states such as motivation, alertness and attention. In short, when people are sleepy, they are not in a condition to perform at their best. Recently published research, including my own, has also begun to show that inadequate sleep has rather powerful effects on a range of outcomes that might make managers wake up and pay attention.

For instance, a study recently conducted here in Singapore has shown that a mere one hour of disrupted sleep in an otherwise restful night can result in workers cyberloafing – that is, surfing the Internet instead of working – during 20 per cent of their scheduled work time. Results from this study demonstrate that this relationship is even more dramatic for people who are generally less conscientious, with these people cyberloafing for more than 30 per cent of their work shift.

One explanation for this is that people make decisions every day which require self-control. For instance, we often face decisions such as exercising versus watching a movie, or focusing on work projects versus surfing the Internet while at work. When we exercise self-control in one decision, the region of the brain driving self-control is depleted, much like a muscle is depleted after exercise. This makes it increasingly difficult to practice self-control when facing subsequent decisions. Exercising self-control is necessary for any effective individual. Thus it is important to replenish our stockpile of self-control. Evidence indicates that an excellent way to do this is to get suffi-

cient sleep. Individuals who do not get enough sleep will have diminishing levels of self-control, making them less likely to stay focused on their tasks.

Furthermore, research conducted abroad has shown that sleepy individuals are less able to suppress their prejudices towards racial minorities, and thus make discriminatory decisions more often than well-rested individuals. Another set of studies illustrated that when faced with an opportunity to engage in unethical behaviour, sleepy individuals are much more likely to cheat than those who are well rested. The crux of this research is that if employees are sleepy, they will lack self-control and not only are they likely to do less at work, but the things they do might be discriminatory or unethical.



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In addition to increasing the likelihood of undesirable behaviours, insufficient sleep also drives undesirable employee attitudes about their jobs. For example, sleepy employees are prone to experience negative moods during the workday and to report low satisfaction with their jobs. This might not worry some managers, but it should because reduced job satisfaction makes employees more likely to seek employment elsewhere. Given the high cost of turnover, managers would do well to protect against employee dissatisfaction.

To bring these ideas closer to home, I note that my own research in Singapore clearly indicates that when employees face a time crunch, sleep is often the first domain to be sacrificed. That means that rather than shortchanging family or social demands in order to work longer, employees tend to shortchange sleep. The irony is that by sacrificing sleep for work, employees actually become less productive and demonstrate less desirable emotions, work attitudes and behaviours because they have not slept enough to replenish their self-control resources. The end result is that employees potentially produce less by doing more.

So one might ask: "What's a manager to do?" That question might best be answered after re-

flecting upon one's work environment and practices. I will offer a few questions to get you started: Are employees in your company required to be present in the workplace, even if their efforts are not being fully utilised? Do employee performance evaluations primarily reflect time spent in the office, or do they reflect objective work outcomes? Does your company culture dictate that employees should stay until the boss has turned out the light, even if the employees have successfully completed their work for the day? Are employees implicitly taught to work inefficiently throughout the day so they have an opportunity to show their commitment by working yet another late night at the office?

If you find yourself answering "yes" to some of the questions, then there is a good chance that your organisation is requiring unnecessary time from employees, with the potential implication that employees are less effective at work. There are several things managers could do to reduce the negative effects of sleepiness on productivity and satisfaction. For instance, management should base employee evaluation on how well employees accomplish tasks or complete projects, rather than placing undue emphasis (implicit or explicit) on face time or time spent in the office. Managers may also discover that employees are effective at different hours of the day; instituting a flexible work schedule can take advantage of these differences among employees, while keeping the focus on output and productivity. Finally, research shows that employees are more productive, satisfied and motivated when they have autonomy over how, when and where they do their work.

Of course, the problems that organisations face are complex and multifaceted, and it's unlikely that any one decision will result in the drastic improvement in productivity that you might be looking for. However, the evidence is clear that sleepy employees are less effective employees. Wise managers will wake up and make the changes that will allow their employees to be more effective.

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