



Sick, Unsafe, and Unproductive: Poor Employee Sleep Is Bad for Business

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Introduction

Recently, the public and the media have taken an interest in the importance of sleep in the workplace. For example, some leaders in the business world have begun to tout the importance of sleep for productivity (Raphael, 2016) and effective leadership (Van Dam & van der Helm, 2016). An estimate of 70 million individuals in the United States have a sleep disorder or experience chronic sleep restriction from work and other lifestyle factors (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2011). This situation suggests that American workers are tired, unhealthy, and not performing at optimal levels. Should organizations, therefore, be prioritizing sleep? Is there a payoff for leaders who place a high value on sleep in the workplace? What strategies are most effective for promoting sleep?

Sleep is a basic biological need, and not getting enough sleep (i.e., anything less than seven hours for the average person) has serious detrimental consequences for individuals' long-term health, safety, and performance (Watson et al., 2015). Some estimates even indicate that insomnia alone (i.e., difficulty falling asleep or maintaining sleep throughout the night) results in approximately 11 days of lost work performance per individual in a given year, ultimately costing the US workforce \$63.2 billion annually (Kessler et al., 2011). The federal government has even identified the improvement of sleep health as a primary objective within its HealthyPeople.gov 2020 initiative (<https://www.healthypeople.gov/>). Below, we highlight why organizational leaders should be promoting sleep because poor sleep is bad for business.

When considering sleep, both *sleep quality* (i.e., ease in falling asleep, maintaining sleep throughout the night, and/or feeling refreshed after waking up) and *sleep quantity* (i.e., the number of hours slept per day) are critical. An employee who sleeps 8 hours per night may still have poor sleep quality, preventing the individual from showing up for work at peak performance. Additionally, *sleep hygiene* refers to the individual behaviors (e.g., exercising or not consuming caffeine too close to bedtime) and environmental characteristics (e.g., quiet, dark bedroom) that promote good sleep quality and quantity. Moreover, a number of work, nonwork, and individual factors besides sleep hygiene play a role in whether we get enough sleep and quality sleep (see Figure 1). Employers can help employees identify factors to improve their sleep and ultimately health, safety, and performance.

Sleep is necessary to sustain both our physical and mental health. Without sleep, body tissues, organs, and systems are less able to repair and regenerate themselves. For example, a lack of adequate and sufficient sleep is linked with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, pain, and even early mortality (Watson et al., 2015). Poor sleep also reduces the body's ability to fight infection, as studies have found effects on lowered immunity and increased susceptibility to common colds (Watson et al., 2015). Additionally, poor sleep is linked to more negative work attitudes and more mental health problems. For example, sleepy people evaluate workplace stressors more negatively (Barber & Budnick, 2015), and rates of depression are higher when sleep is not maintained (Watson et al., 2015). Organizations could support better health standards by protecting and promoting sleep quality and quantity among employees.

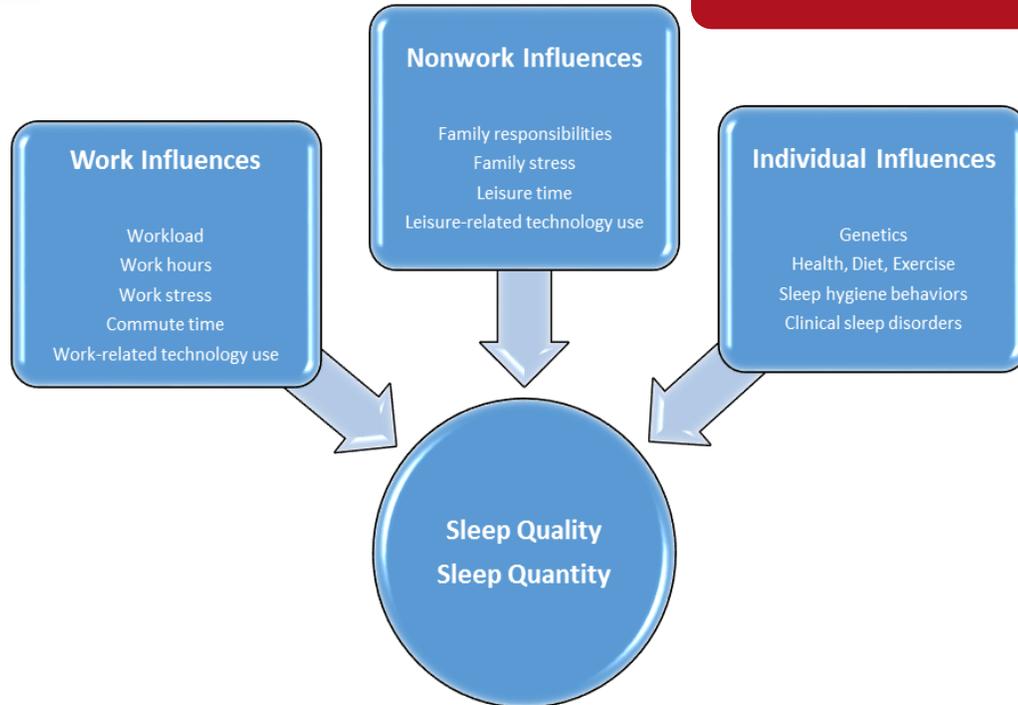


Figure 1. Influences on sleep quality and quantity.

Sleep also influences safety in the workplace, as fatigued employees experience major declines in cognitive functioning and physical abilities. Estimates suggest that sleep problems account for 13% of all work injuries, and employees with sleep problems are 1.62 times more likely than healthy sleepers to be injured on the job (Uehli, et al., 2014). Some interesting work has examined the impact of daylight saving time on workplace injuries. These studies find that employees experience a greater number of injuries and more serious injuries on the Monday following the transition to daylight saving time, when just an hour of time is lost and employees sleep 40 fewer minutes on average (Barnes & Wagner, 2009). Other studies from the healthcare sector show that physicians-in-training working 24-hour shifts are 300% more likely to commit a fatigue-related error that results in a patient’s death (Barger et al., 2006). Thus, sleep is important for the safety of employees and the individuals with whom they work.

Sleepy workers are also unproductive. One national survey of U.S. workers found that 12% reported being late to work due to sleepiness, and 29% said they fell asleep or became very sleepy at work over the past month (National Sleep Foundation. 2008). Sleepy workers are likely to engage in other counterproductive work behaviors, such as surfing the web for personal reasons instead of working

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(Wagner, Barnes, Lim, & Ferris, 2012) or being uncivil toward others at work (Barnes, Lucianetti, Bhave, & Christian, 2015). Therefore, poor sleep appears to be a noteworthy risk factor contributing to productivity issues and negative interactions with coworkers .

Implications for Practice

Next, we highlight a number of recommendations for both organizations and employees that can be effective in promoting and protecting sleep (see Figure 2).

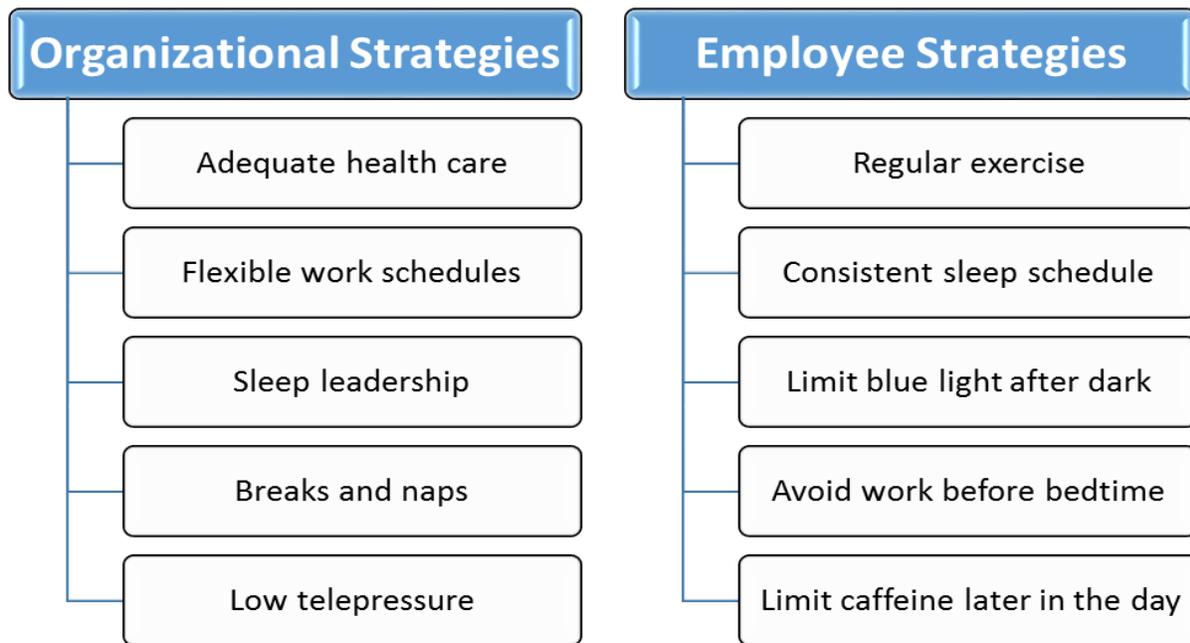


Figure 2. Organizational and employee strategies for improving sleep.

Organizational Strategies for Better Sleep

- Provide adequate health care coverage and invest in wellness programs.** Prior research indicates that employer-provided insurance is associated with increased employee productivity and organizations' ability to attract and retain high quality workers (O'Brien, 2003). Additionally, research suggests that prevention and wellness programs have a strong return on investment; a comprehensive review of past studies found that medical costs decrease by approximately \$3.27 and absenteeism costs decrease by approximately \$2.73 for every dollar spent on such programs (Baicker, Cutler, & Song, 2010). Employees may be better able to maintain healthy sleep if they have access to affordable healthcare services and prevention resources. Ensure that employees have access to sleep clinics and have adequate coverage for diagnostic testing. Moreover, chronic

health conditions, mental health disorders, and stress often co-occur with sleep problems. These health problems may require more holistic care and easy access to healthcare providers and employee assistance programs.

- **Give employees flexibility to choose their work schedules.** Flexible scheduling will afford your employees time and opportunities to manage nonwork demands, such as childcare and housework, which can otherwise cut into sleep time and/or produce stress that disrupts sleep quality. Commute time is another primary life activity exchanged for sleep time. Allowing your employees to avoid high traffic hours or work from home on certain days can also result in more sufficient sleep. If flexible scheduling is not a feasible option, provide employees with control over when they complete work tasks during a shift, so that more critical or safety-sensitive tasks can be completed when employees feel more alert and less fatigued.
- **Leadership should involve sleep.** Leaders in your company should role model good sleep behaviors for employees (Gunia, Sipos, LoPresti, & Adler, 2015). Avoid sending and responding to emails late at night, and resist the urge to brag about how very little you sleep. As a leader, you should also encourage healthy sleep behaviors and inquire about your employees' ability to get sleep while proactively developing workplace solutions that reduce stress and facilitate optimal sleeping opportunities (e.g., workload adjustments, scheduling changes).
- **Allow for breaks and napping on the job.** Brief naps are especially important when employees are working nightshifts and when flexible hours are not an option. Your company should provide both time and ideal locations for rest in the workplace (e.g., cool, quiet, and dark spaces). Nap times between 10-20 minutes can be effective for boosting performance (National Sleep Foundation, n.d.). Longer naps can backfire and actually make employees groggy at work, yet they can be important in some situations, such as when an individual is severely sleep restricted or needs rest to prepare for a nightshift (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2011). When encouraging naps, use caution and be careful not to communicate that naps allow employees to work harder for longer. Instead, explain that naps can be used to counteract fatigue when necessary but that naps are not a replacement for normal nighttime sleep.
- **Reduce workplace telepressure.** Set clear expectations for technology use so your employees do not feel they need to respond immediately to emails 24/7. Employees who experience high amounts of workplace telepressure from their employers—the preoccupation and urge to immediately respond to email or text messages—tend to have poor sleep quality and high rates of work exhaustion (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015).

Employee Strategies for Better Sleep

- **Get some exercise.** Exercise is a great way to combat fatigue, especially when you need to effectively cope with workplace stress. A regular exercise routine can also help you sleep better at night (National Sleep Foundation, n.d.). However, make sure to avoid exercising right before bedtime because it

can potentially make it difficult to fall asleep (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2011).

- **Keep it consistent.** When possible, keep similar bed times and wake times throughout the week. Our bodies crave consistency for cycles of sleep and wake periods, and disrupting these “circadian rhythms” can make us feel unfocused and sluggish. Make sure that your consistent sleep schedule also helps you get enough sleep. Most adults need around seven hours of sleep to feel at their best, although the exact amount does differ based on individual sleep needs (Watson et al., 2015).
- **Limit blue light after dark.** Exposure to blue light (smartphones, television, e-readers, computers, etc.) in the evening makes it difficult for your body to wind down appropriately before bedtime (Gunia, Sipos, LoPresti, & Adler, 2015). Because of this, about an hour before bedtime, opt for low-tech relaxing activities, like listening to music or reading a paperback book. If you find it impossible to be gadget free in the evening, you can download a free application for your devices that automatically makes adjustments to your screen settings based on the time of day to lower blue light exposure in the evening.
- **Avoid working before bed.** Working from home in the evening can disrupt your sleep if you do not put strict limits on when you will work on tasks (Barber & Jenkins, 2013) For instance, thinking about all the things you need to do at work can interfere with your ability to relax when it is finally time for bed. To resist temptations to check in on work on your devices, turn off or silence notifications for work email/texts before bed (and during sleep periods) using the “do not disturb” function.
- **Limit caffeine intake later in the day.** Because caffeine is a stimulant, it increases your alertness and can even lead to insomnia symptoms if you have caffeine-containing products (e.g., coffee, tea, soft drinks, some protein bars, and chocolate) close to bedtime (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2011). Moderate caffeine use earlier in the day, however, can be effective at helping to combat fatigue in the workplace, but it should not be used as a replacement for actual sleep.

Poor sleep appears to be a noteworthy risk factor contributing to productivity issues and negative interactions with coworkers.



Next Steps

Alarming numbers of workers in the United States are not getting enough sleep or good quality sleep. This situation poses serious problems for our workforce, leaders, and organizations given that poor sleep has negative effects on health, safety, and performance. Organizations should prioritize employee sleep to provide quality services, retain workers, and minimize health care costs. We hope that information provided will motivate leaders, HR professionals, and employees to learn more about the important benefits of sleep. Additionally, anyone having difficulty sleeping should consult their primary care physician for expert and personalized medical treatment. For additional information, you may visit the National Sleep Foundation's website (<https://sleepfoundation.org/>) and begin a discussion about sleep in your workplace.

**Sleep is necessary to sustain both our
physical and mental health.**



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