

STOP THE

How Employers Can Curb Workplace Fatigue and Drive Productivity

by | Lawrence Epstein, M.D.



GRIND:

Sleep-deprived workers are not only less productive but also less healthy. How can employers help workers get the sleep they need?

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Yawning during a shift. A third cup of coffee before noon. Falling asleep at their desks. All are signs of fatigue in the workplace. Unfortunately, many workers wear these signs of sleep deprivation as badges of honour. However, today's "always on," hyperconnected culture can have damaging effects on workplace performance.

Sleep deprivation is widespread across Canada. According to a Statistics Canada report, 31.9% of Canadian adults are not sleeping seven or more hours per night, as recommended by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM).^{1,2} What's more, the Statistics Canada report suggests Canadians are currently sleeping about an hour less than they were in 2005.

Think about the typical sleep schedule. How many people sleep at least seven hours a night on a regular basis? Chronic insufficient sleep leads to an increased risk of several serious health problems, including cardiovascular disease, hypertension and type 2 diabetes.³ Research also suggests that poor or insufficient sleep may contribute to the development of Alzheimer's disease.⁴ The increased health problems of fatigued workers can drive up employer supplemental and prescription drug health care costs, a trend that can be reversed by screening for and treating sleep disorders.⁵

Poor sleep affects more than just workers' health. It also decreases productivity, which is a hidden threat that organizations should pay attention to if they want to maintain the well-being of their staff while gaining a competitive advantage. In addition, being mindful of employee fatigue can help prevent possible catastrophic events. Take for example the Chernobyl nuclear explosion,⁶ the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill⁷ or the most recent New York Metro-North railroad crash.⁸ Each of these incidents could have been prevented, and lives saved, had steps been taken to address healthy sleep and treat sleep disorders.

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FIGURE

Impact of Sleep Deprivation on Canadian and Global Economies



Note: Globally, the impact of sleep deprivation has a large impact, costing more than \$680 billion per year.

Source: RAND Corporation. *Why Sleep Matters: Quantifying the Economic Costs of Insufficient Sleep*. November 30, 2016.

Mounting evidence suggests that workers are tired. A U.S. National Safety Council survey found that nearly 90% of employers have been negatively impacted by tired employees, with half of employers having a worker fall asleep on the job.⁹ What's more, 43% of employees admitted that they may be too tired to function safely at work.

Understanding the Impact of Sleep

To stop the grind and help employees wake up, it's important to understand the full impact of sleep and the effect it has on absenteeism, accidents, incidents and mistakes, which cost the Canadian economy up to \$21.4 billion each year (Figure).¹⁰

Research shows that improving sleep quality and quantity can increase both physical performance and stamina.¹¹ It's a fact that professional sports players, like NFL quarterback Tom Brady, know well. Brady has said, "Sleep is important because I break my body down so much with my sport. It's the only place I get the recovery I need."¹² Proper sleep is relevant whether the workday is on a field, in an office, in a vehicle or on a warehouse floor. The physical effects of fatigue can be significant and keep employees at home.

Lack of sleep also has a profound impact on feelings and mood. According to a review published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, there

are direct correlations between lack of sleep and the occurrence of anxiety and depression,¹³ which have negative effects in the workplace. Conversely, regular, healthy sleep can help drive a more positive outlook, enhancing the ability to recognize the emotions of others, in turn improving relationships at work and at home.¹⁴ The cognitive and mental effects of sleep deprivation can be felt across the employee spectrum, regardless of seniority. Notably, Microsoft founder Bill Gates has spoken about the effect sleep has on his mental state, admitting, “I like to get seven hours of sleep a night because that’s what I need to stay sharp and creative and upbeat.”¹⁵

When workers are tired, they risk more than poor interpersonal communication. Drowsy driving and workplace injury are increasingly common dangers, with the National Safety Council reporting that 13% of workplace injuries can be attributed to fatigue.¹⁶

Fighting Fatigue in the Workplace

Despite the overwhelming impact of sleep deprivation, research suggests that 74% of employers underestimate the prevalence of fatigue in the workplace, and only 27% communicate with their employees about fatigue.¹⁷ Employers across all industries might consider implementing a workplace wellness program to help workers get more sleep. This program should include dedicated sleep components to ensure employees regularly achieve the recommended sleep quantity and sufficient quality without compromising workflow.

When evaluating a wellness program, four steps are essential to make real change. The first is education. Before a lifestyle change can occur, it is

Takeaways

- Almost one-third (31%) of Canadian adults don’t get the recommended seven or more hours of sleep per night.
- A National Safety Council survey found that nearly 90% of employers have been negatively impacted by tired employees, with half of employers having a worker fall asleep on the job.
- Shift workers, including medical professionals, law enforcement officers, emergency responders and transportation operators, may be more prone to having sleep disorders.
- Employers can address lack of sleep among workers through a workplace wellness program that starts with education and may include assessments of sleep habits and incentives for getting a healthy amount of sleep.

important for employers to speak with employees about the value of healthy sleep—and the costs of sleep deprivation. This can come in multiple formats, such as an on-site seminar or an online webinar led by a sleep expert.

The second step involves offering tips and feedback based on participants’ tracked sleep data to improve overall health and sleep habits. Sleep data can be recorded in numerous forms, such as a wearable health tracker or simply self-recordings in an online diary.

Once employees understand the value of sleeping seven or more hours on a regular basis, the third step is to take note of any potential sleep disorders that could prevent healthy sleep. While an estimated 5.4 million Canadians are afflicted by obstructive sleep apnea, many warning signs of this sleep disorder and others go unnoticed.¹⁸ A simple online assessment tool can help employees understand their risk factors and recognize the warning signs of a sleep disorder.

Obstructive sleep apnea and chronic insomnia can cause problems at work, including daytime sleepiness. Untreated, sleep apnea puts individuals at risk for several health problems, including heart failure and stroke.^{19, 20} However, with treatment, individuals can see improve-

ment in their health and even reverse these risks. Offering employees a way to connect with a board-certified sleep physician, such as an interactive physician locator, can help create dramatic improvements in their health and work quality.

For added benefit, as the final step, employers can increase the chance of employee participation by offering incentive programs as part of a sleep wellness program. Promotional items, gift cards or even extra paid time off can serve as positive reinforcement and motivation for employees. This can go a long way to encourage workers to participate in the program when they otherwise believe their sleep habits are fine or do not want to share sleep health details with employers. Data privacy is very important, and each employer should determine the level of data needed to monitor employee participation. When working with an outside wellness partner, for example, all of the sleep data should be funneled directly through the vendor without employer involvement.

Workplaces around North America are creating a movement toward healthy sleep. Some companies are offering employees online programs with tips for better sleep, complimentary yoga classes, meditation seminars

and on-site fitness programs to help cope with stress.²¹ To promote healthier behaviours, employers and even insurance companies are encouraging employees to record data, including sleep, with activity trackers.²²

Employee sleep monitoring tools aren't restricted to wearable devices. Employers can now partner with online wellness platforms that offer individualized programming and resources to help employees master their sleep patterns and, if needed, direct them to a board-certified sleep physician for help.²³

Those seeking nondigital options to fight fatigue in the workplace could consider sleep pods. Companies around the globe, including Ben & Jerry's, Google, Mercedes-Benz, PwC, Uber and Zappos, are installing sleeping hubs to help employees get a midday jumpstart.²⁴ Napping can help supplement nightly sleep and can be a nice refresher.²⁵ The goal should be to sleep seven or more hours at night on a regular basis to avoid feeling the need for a nap; however, if needed, a 20- to 30-minute nap can help workers regain concentration and boost productivity. These nap pods are designed for quick naps, and it is important to make this clear to employees. To make this a success for employees, the sleep pod needs to be respected and the rules understood. This includes establishing a sign-up protocol as well as parameters on how to recoup billable time.

Shift Workers: The Biggest Hurdle

When considering who struggles the most with healthy sleep, it is important to remember shift workers. This includes medical professionals, law enforcement officers, emergency responders and transportation operators. The Workers Health and Safety Centre reports that one in four Canadians does shift work, and one in five works nights.²⁶ Overnight, early-morning hours and rotating shifts can create upheaval for the body's circadian rhythm and its natural sleep/wake cycle. According to AASM, shift workers may sleep up to four hours less per night than those working traditional hours, increasing the risk for injuries, accidents and drowsy driving.²⁷ The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that serious long-term health problems, such as an increased risk for type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and obesity, are a concern for people who are chronically sleep-deprived.²⁸

Surprisingly, professional athletes also can be categorized as shift workers. While these employees may bring in millions of dollars, consecutive performances in different time

BIO

Lawrence Epstein, M.D., is the president and CEO of Welltrinsic Sleep Network. He is a past president of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) and is board-certified in sleep medicine, pulmonary disease, critical care medicine and internal medicine.



Dr. Epstein is an instructor in medicine at Harvard Medical School and program director of the Sleep Medicine Fellowship Program at Brigham and Women's Hospital. He has expertise in sleep disorders including obstructive sleep apnea and circadian rhythm sleep/wake disorders. Dr. Epstein completed his fellowship in pulmonary disease, critical care medicine and sleep medicine at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles and his residency in internal medicine at West Los Angeles Veterans Affairs Medical Center. He earned his medical degree from the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences.

zones can wreak havoc on their circadian rhythms. The adrenaline generated during and after a night game, for example, directly impacts an NBA player's ability to fall asleep. As such, many organizations, including the Toronto Raptors, are hiring sleep coaches to help ensure players can optimize their sleep to enhance recovery and improve performance.²⁹

In addition to third-party sleep coaches, dedicated wellness departments, such as ones established by police departments, have helped foster stronger law enforcement organizations.³⁰ With 40% of officers in one U.S. city reporting at least one sleep disorder, and one-third of those individuals suffering from sleep apnea, the city knew that a lack of sleep posed a serious threat to public safety and proactively took steps to address it, including increasing overall sleep education among officers.³¹

For shift workers and others, it can be helpful to use a sleep tracker to monitor sleep over 24 hours. Naps are especially important for shift workers to stay refreshed, whether during a 20- to 30-minute break or right before a shift.

To the Future of Productivity

The benefits of sleep cannot be stated enough. Both employees and employers have a vested interest in maintaining and improving a high standard of workplace wellness. Employers may realize immediate benefits in terms of higher productivity; better product quality; and reduced conflict, absenteeism and presenteeism. Improving worker well-being, work engagement and job satisfaction can enable employees to be more active and productive.

Providing employee wellness programs that foster healthy sleep habits can help ensure workers are successful at the office and at home. When employees make healthy sleep decisions, it can create a trickle-down effect on other lifestyle choices, in turn possibly decreasing the cost of health care expenses down the line. Companies that have implemented sleep screening programs report reductions in health care costs that more than make up for the cost of sleep wellness and screening programs.³²

Sleep may be the key to stop the grind at work. Promoting healthy sleep can produce a healthier, happier and more productive workforce, as well as a safer workplace. ☼

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