

The business of sleep: The wake-up call for organizations

Our 24/7, global, 'always on' business culture appears to be contributing to a sleep-deprived workforce. Vicki Culpin shares the findings of our recent research which suggests organizations need to make sleep their business.

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Busy professionals experience many pressures that impede their ability to obtain optimal amounts of sleep. Working according to shift patterns, working across different time zones simultaneously and international travel¹ are all common causes of sleep loss. In addition, the use of artificial lighting and hand-held technologies at night², ever increasing pressure to perform (and to be 'seen' to perform) and the lengthening of the working day all make the challenge of getting optimal sleep more difficult for employees.

Traditionally, organizations seeking to enhance their effectiveness have focused on developing their leadership capabilities, strategically managing their talent pipeline, increasing employee engagement and motivation and streamlining their operations. However, there is now a significant body of evidence to suggest that poor sleep (both quality and quantity) can affect individuals in a range of ways pertinent to organizational success. Given the increasing cognitive and physical demands on individuals within a now VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) organizational world, having a workforce that participates in working life fully, is of paramount importance. It could be argued, therefore, that those organizations which are willing to engage with, and address the issue of poor sleep within an individual and organizational culture context, will be at a competitive advantage.

Our research provides an opportunity to, firstly, understand whether working professionals are really suffering from a 'sleep debt', and secondly to gain an insight into how this sleep loss manifests itself within an organizational context.

Research objectives

The study, which builds upon previous Ashridge³ research into the sleep patterns of managers, asked the following questions:

1. How much sleep are professionals getting on average per night?
2. Does this quality and quantity change with seniority and with age?
3. How does sleep loss affect working populations in relation to:
 - o Work performance?
 - o Social and emotional life?
 - o Physical health?
4. Does this change with seniority and/ or age?

Research findings

Quality and quantity of sleep

The American Academy of Sleep Science⁴ recent research states that the minimum number of hours of sleep required for a healthy adult is 7, (with a recommended range between 7hours - 9hours) yet those individuals who took part in the survey achieved an average of only 6hours 28minutes. The most senior individuals, those holding CEO, chair and senior manager level positions, slept on average for only 6hrs 20minutes per night, with more junior colleagues (middle managers, professional specialists, front line managers and those with no management responsibility) managing an extra 10 minutes in bed (6hours 30minutes). Whilst more senior leaders did sleep for less time than their junior colleagues, the difference is smaller than one might expect, and both groups, regardless of seniority, were sleeping less than the recommended daily amount for a healthy adult.

Looking at the amount of sleep reported across the different age categories, the trend is much clearer, with individuals aged 20-34 years reporting the highest amount of sleep (6hours 47minutes), those aged 35-49 years averaging at 6hours 24minutes, and those aged 50+ years getting the least amount of sleep (6hours 19minutes).

Work performance

Many of the working professionals who completed this survey reported that they were affected by sleep loss, particularly when engaged in tasks that required sustained

attention. From the 30 aspects of cognitive behavior assessed in the research, the results indicate that the executive control functions of decision-making, creativity, processing, adaptability, learning and control of emotions, performed by the pre-frontal cortex within the brain, are all highly impacted by sleep loss.

Social and emotional life

As well as the more task-orientated aspects of performance, working within organizations depends heavily on one's ability to work with others. Thus, the way individuals express themselves has real consequences, not only for their personal wellbeing, but also for the way they perform within and across teams. An overwhelming number of respondents who found the interpersonal aspects of their role particularly challenging when suffering from sleep loss said that, in particular, communicating with others in ways that require more energy, such as interacting with challenging colleagues, and being flexible with their communication style, were most affected.

The research suggests that employees may socially withdraw when experiencing sleep deprivation. Withdrawn staff will not add to corporate cohesion and external relationships may suffer. Additionally, there may also be bottom-line consequences as tired employees, or their ignored colleagues, leave the organization.

Physical health

Feeling lethargic all the time, having a slower reaction time and poorer vision are dangerous symptoms for those whose role depends on physical reactions, such as drivers and surgeons. However, feeling lethargic will impact the performance of all people in the workplace. In addition, all age groups reported that they had less energy during the day, ranging from 78% of Baby Boomers through to a massive 93% of Generation Y.

Sleep deprivation is having a major physical impact on employees of all levels, and all ages. Not only were physical symptoms noted, but mental health issues were reported too. An average of 77% of respondents reported higher levels of stress and 61% recorded feeling anxious, which supports the sleep literature documenting a relationship between sleep and mental health.

Generational and seniority differences in the effect of poor sleep

Interestingly, workers over 50 years old reported getting less sleep than younger colleagues, they also consistently reported that sleep affected their work performance, physical health and social and emotional life substantially less than younger workers. In addition, workers who were more senior in the organization with senior management responsibilities, also reported that their professional performance, physical health and emotional and social wellbeing were affected less than those lower down in the organizational hierarchy.

Business impact

Sleep deprivation appears to be an increasing characteristic of today's working environment for professionals across organizations. This research further highlights the need to challenge a corporate culture of sleeplessness. The most important actions that can be taken are to raise awareness, communicate the challenges of sleep deprivation and bring discussions on sleep into the open.

It is common for managers and colleagues to look at a lack of focus or motivation, irritability and bad decision-making as being caused by poor training, organizational politics or the work environment. The answer could be much simpler – a lack of sleep. This report is a call to action and provides an opportunity for individuals, those responsible for developing others and organizations to both understand the ways that sleep loss affects employees, and to begin to address them to enhance individual and organizational longevity and success.

For further detail see the full article in the Spring 2016 360° Ashridge Journal.

[See full article >](#)

References

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