

Sleep your way to success

Cutting back on sleep as way to fit more work into your day may hinder rather than help your performance. **THEA O'CONNOR** reports.

The notion of “sleeping your way to the top” probably raises negative images: workplace sex scandals, unscrupulous bosses and compromised workers. Taken literally, however, it actually offers sound advice for advancing your career.

We've known for decades that sleep deprivation, especially fewer than six hours per night, undermines health and leads to dangerous accidents in blue-collar work environments. But what about the cumulative effects of smaller amounts of sleep loss on white-collar professionals?

Although many executives don't see a connection between lack of sleep and their performance – 46 per cent of business leaders surveyed by McKinsey & Company didn't (“McKinsey Quarterly”, February 2016) – the evidence tells a different story

Emerging research shows measurable deficits in workplace performance from skimping on sleep. In some cases, foregoing even one or two hours of sleep has a noticeable effect. However,

tired workers simply don't realise how compromised they are, because sleep deprived people are poor judges of their own performance.

To help wake you up to the importance of sleep, here are some findings that examine the effect of sleep loss on some key performance-related skills.

Influencing others

Positively influencing others is important for leaders. According to research conducted by Christopher Barnes (University of Washington, US), which was published in the August 2016 *Journal of Applied Psychology*, tired leaders are less charismatic than those who get a good night's rest. Leaders who had their sleep interrupted over the course of a night were rated as significantly less inspiring and motivating the next day than their well-slept counterparts.

Effective communication

The ability to tune in and “read” what another person is feeling plays a critical

role in effective communication – as does the ability to manage your own emotions so you don't react without thought when triggered. These are the foundational skills of emotional intelligence (EI), which are gaining increasing importance in the workplace, including finding that positive moods result in increased productivity.

Research indicates that lack of sleep shatters your EI. Even just a few nights of only five hours of sleep can put you in a bad mood, make you less empathetic and less able to accurately identify the facial expressions of others (“Sleep Deprivation Impairs the Accurate Recognition of Human Emotions”, *Sleep*, March 2010). This leaves you prone to misinterpret their cues and more likely to express your feelings in a negative tone. You couldn't create a better recipe for conflict.

Integrity

Ethical behavior in the workplace is crucial to an organisation's brand and



image; misconduct can be tweeted around the world within minutes.

The moral code of leaders and employees isn't the only factor that determines whether they will resist temptation. It also depends on their energy levels. Good – but tired – people do bad things according to Barnes' 2011 research, which concluded that fatigue is the enemy of virtue. The study found that small amounts of sleep reduction were strongly associated with a greater incidence of cheating in the workplace. The author surmised that lack of sleep resulted in reduced self-control, which is needed to resist temptation. In the study, honest participants averaged less than eight hours of sleep per night, while cheaters averaged seven-and-a-half hours sleep – only 22 minutes of sleep separated the moral from the weak.

Delivering results

Achieving results in a busy work environment requires keeping an eye on your priorities. You need to discern

what's important, what's not and to filter out the many irrelevant distractions that come your way during a typical working day. Some studies are finding that sleep deprivation can impair the ability to focus on specific information while blocking out other incoming data.

Together with the long-established findings about the need for sufficient hours of sleep in order to pay attention, learn new material and recall it, it's pretty clear why those night-time hours of shut-eye are crucially important for your career.

So the next time you find yourself thinking that a couple of hours less sleep will help you get ahead, think again. **LSJ**



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How much sleep do I need?

7–9 hours

Results of a multi-year study by the National Sleep Foundation for adults aged 26-64

6 ways to better sleep

1. Stick to a regular bedtime

Even on weekends.

2. Avoid alcohol and caffeine

A glass of wine or beer might evoke an initial feeling of drowsiness, but it tends to impede sleep. Experts suggest avoiding alcohol at least three hours before heading to bed. And remember that caffeine lurks in many unexpected places, from chocolate to pain relievers.

3. Exercise daily

Just make sure you finish exercising at least four hours before going to bed.

4. Switch off

Turn off all digital devices 30 minutes to an hour before bed; light from the screens can reset your body's circadian rhythm, making it harder to fall asleep. Avoid using your phone as an alarm to mitigate temptations to read your messages.

5. Eat dinner earlier

It takes your body three to four hours to digest food. Heavy, rich meals can cause indigestion and heartburn, making it even harder to fall asleep.

6. Follow a routine

Create a relaxing wind-down ritual before sleeping, such as a bath or shower, listening to relaxing music or meditating.