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Sleepless in Singapore

Sleeping habits may improve with flexi-work arrangements

Greater flexibility in managing work in a world with rising demands on time will help Singapore workers get better rest and become more productive.

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How many times have we heard our family and friends lamenting that work is taking away precious time from sleep? And how many of us have gone through that agonising crawl out of bed at the crack of dawn to begin our morning commute?

Well, by year's end, employees can formally request changes in their work arrangements to get more sleep and employers should fairly consider such requests.

This will be possible through the recently unveiled Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests. Under these guidelines, workers will have greater flexibility in where and when their work is conducted.

A goal must be to help employees achieve better work-life balance so that they can be more engaged and productive at work. Getting better sleep is consistent with this and can be facilitated by such arrangements.

WHY GOOD SLEEP IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS

Employers are required to respond to flexible work arrangement requests by considering only the impact on their business. Cost and productivity are key considerations, as are managerial control.

But instead of focusing on what is lost, managers should focus on what is gained. Here, improving sleep in workers can create a healthier, more engaged and productive workforce, saving costs. Quality sleep has been linked to better physical health, well-being, and productivity.

Insufficient sleep increases the risk of health problems that contribute to lost work time and absenteeism. Additionally, sleep-deprived workers show reduced performance on the job which lowers work efficiency and increases mistakes and accidents. This may be especially important for Singapore which ranks among the top sleep-deprived countries in the world.

The economic burden of insufficient sleep has been estimated to be about 1 per cent to 3 per cent of a country's gross domestic product. This could

mean that Singapore is losing about \$10 billion per year due to a lack of sleep.

Healthy sleep is also important for learning new skills. Our ability to pay attention, process information, and apply what we have learnt depends on the quality of sleep. This has important implications for Singapore's efforts to upskill the workforce to adapt to industry changes and adoption of digital technologies.

Despite the importance of good sleep for good work, work itself has often stood in the way of obtaining healthy sleep. Long work hours, long commute times, and early or late work shifts are common barriers to getting enough sleep.

WHY FLEXI-PLACE WORK ARRANGEMENTS WILL BENEFIT SLEEP

Flexi-place work arrangements allow work to take place at home or other locations outside of a designated workplace, which can allow workers to sleep in longer when they do not have to commute, or do not need to commute as far.

The Covid-19 pandemic spurred a revolution in remote working that changed sleep behaviour. Early Covid-19 mitigation strategies, including work-from-home policies, led to an increase in nightly sleep duration by about 20 minutes relative to pre-pandemic sleep.

During the "circuit breaker" period in Singapore, working parents and children slept more when work and schooling took place from home. When restrictions were eased, these gains were reversed in Singaporean workers who returned to the office but were maintained in those who continued working from home.

WHY FLEXI-TIME WORK ARRANGEMENTS WILL BENEFIT SLEEP

Flexi-time work arrangements also allow work to take place at different timings without changes to total work hours. This is relevant for sleep because workers can choose to work and sleep at times that fit best with their body's natural rhythm.

Adjusting our working hours to

when we are most alert and productive can help us be more efficient at work. Some of us are morning larks and others are night owls. Individual differences in preferred sleep-wake timing are strongly influenced by our underlying biology.

Flexible work hours may provide some relief for night owls currently forced to conform to an early person's world. Such employees sleep less and have poorer-quality rest when they have early work start times because they must depend on an alarm clock rather than waking up naturally at a later time. At the same time, morning larks can choose to start and end work earlier in accordance with their preferred sleep and work routine.

Staggered work hours that allow variable start times appear to be an ideal solution. While this requires teams to work asynchronously at the beginning and end of work shifts, there would still be ample overlap in working hours when all team members are present at the same time.

Redistributing work hours may also allow for more sleep. Splitting working time into chunks within a day can allow for a recuperative nap before returning to work. Compressed work schedules such as a four-day work week have also been shown to benefit sleep and health by giving employees more personal days when they can choose to sleep longer and spend their time in a more flexible manner.

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS CAN ADVERSELY AFFECT SLEEP

That said, having greater flexibility in working hours can lead to maladaptive behaviours that result in later or more irregular sleep. This can negate or reverse the otherwise beneficial effects of flexible work arrangements on sleep and performance.

While the premise of flexi-time work arrangements is to reallocate work hours while keeping total work time constant, this may be difficult to achieve in practice. A South Korean survey conducted from 2020 to 2021 found that setting one's own work hours was associated with sleep problems. Given greater autonomy, workers may feel obliged to take on irregular work hours, added work demands, and extended work hours, leading to irregular sleeping hours.

Working from home and starting work later are also often associated with later bedtimes.

There is a tendency to go to bed later when a person knows he or she can wake up later. This "bedtime-drift" attenuates the benefit of waking up later on sleep duration.

Employees should be encouraged to maintain regular work and sleeping hours. These hours may be flexibly chosen, but they should not vary substantially across the week. Flexibility is good, but variability is bad. Irregular work and sleep patterns are associated with poorer performance and well-being.

THE FUTURE OF WORK ARRANGEMENTS AND SLEEP

We are at the dawn of a new age of work practices that have changed where, when, and how we conduct work. These changes, accelerated by the pandemic and facilitated by technological advances, will undoubtedly influence lifestyles and sleep.

The roll-out of flexible work arrangements in Singapore may be a watershed moment for sleep health. To be sure, not every job or employment sector has the flexibility to change the location or timing of work. Nonetheless, a large segment of the working population may benefit, including office workers and job sectors such as education, science and technology, and advertising and marketing, which may be more able to accommodate remote work and flexible work hours.

In modern society, work practices may be the largest barrier to sleep. Sleep scientists have long argued that greater work flexibility and later work start times are key strategies for improving sleep.

To be sure, the tripartite guidelines were not developed with sleep health in mind, but we'll take the win. Here, however, a giant caveat applies: flexible work arrangements are expected to benefit sleep only if employees take advantage of the opportunity to maintain a stable and healthy sleep pattern, and if employers ensure that the timing and amount of work does not deviate substantially from the original plan.

For so long, working professionals have adjusted their sleep to fit the schedule of work. It's time we do the reverse.

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