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A Case for Naps in the Workplace

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Introduction

Workplace napping is a natural low-cost way to increase worker productivity. Most employers do not mind a coffee break, but if employees take a nap break they will probably get fired. In today's fast-paced society and cut-throat global-competition, most companies frown on the idea of "napping" in the workplace. But the concept of napping is going through a slow evolution because of the concerns about the "bottom line," reduced productivity, and profits due to sleep deprivation. Sleep deprivation is estimated to cost U.S. businesses \$18 billion annually (Paul, 1998).

Napping has been scientifically proven to boost alertness and creativity. This has interesting implications for the workplace. If managers were to let their employees take a 20–30 minute nap during the afternoon, it could boost productivity. Today's 24/7 culture has created a sleep-deprived nation, with too many people cheating on their sleep to get through all their activities.

Sleep Deprivation and Accidents

Shakespeare called "sleep" the "chief nourisher of life's feast." But sleep is a rare commodity in stressed-out America. Overachievers used to state loudly "Lunch is for Losers" and believed "Sleep is for Suckers." Additionally, social culture glorifies sleeplessness. Encouraging a culture of sleepless is nonsensical and downright dangerous. The ultimate perk for the truly successful is now eight hours of sleep. Nearly two-thirds of adults get fewer than eight hours of sleep at night, according to the National Sleep Foundation, Washington, D.C.

Sleep deprivation is not just an individual health hazard, it is a public one (Czeisler, 2006). Sleepy workers are dangerous, less productive, and a major source of increased health care costs and corporate liability. Studies of the workplace and transportation industries reveal that human error causes up to 90% of accidents, with inadequate sleep representing a major factor in human error (*Time*, 1990). In the United States sleep deprivation is responsible for a fifth of all motor vehicle accidents and 8,000 deaths annually. Estimates are that 80,000 drivers fall asleep at the wheel every day. Ten percent of them run off the road, and every two minutes one of them crashes (Czeisler, 2006). Sleepy employees experience potentially dangerous degrees of impairment, essentially comparable to that of substance abusers.

The National Transportation Safety Board estimates that out of 100,000 crashes, there were 1,500 fatalities and 71,000 injuries due to drivers who drifted off to sleep while driving. Higher rates of motor vehicle accidents occur at

night, rather than during the day. Shift workers report an increased incidence of traffic accidents or near misses due to sleepiness on their commute home.

Sleep Deprivation is a huge issue in the trucking industry where drivers are prone to going in and out of sleep while driving (Dogan, 1998). Disasters such as Three Mile Island, Bhopal, and Exxon Valdez have all been associated with workers suffering from lack of normal sleep. A Presidential Commission concluded that the crew who worked on the Challenger space shuttle was greatly sleep deprived and that this accident may easily have been avoided if the crew had been properly rested so as to not overlook any critical errors in the preparation of the shuttle mission.

Short Naps

A new approach to increasing productivity in the workplace is to allow employees to take naps. Taking naps during the workday has been shown to increase the alertness of employees, which leads to increased productivity. Despite this positive relationship, many employers have been hesitant to allow employees to take naps. In fact, less than one percent of companies allow employees to a nap on the job. Taking a short nap in the early afternoon has been practiced for ages in China, India, Italy, Greece, North Africa, and Latin America. The idea originated from the fact that after eating a large meal, a chemical is released from the brain that makes one tired. Just 30–40 minutes was found necessary to refresh and recuperate. Born out of the siesta culture and now supported by scientific research, a short-nap has proven to improve alertness and mood.

Workplace Napping

Workplace napping is an innovative, low-cost method being introduced by some companies. Businesses with nap rooms are experiencing an increase in production and are seeing fewer human errors.

In Australia, workplaces allow naps for firemen, truck drivers, doctors, and interns. It is interesting to note that David Johnson, managing director of **Deloitte Consulting Company** in Pittsburgh, feels his company has increased productivity due to a "nap-room." "They love it, they lap it up." (O'Connor, 2004) Craig Yarde, President of **Yarde Metals**, feels that napping contributes to higher sales, higher productivity, efficiency, and reduced turnovers. Anthony and Camille of Boston University conducted a survey and found that 70% of the 1,000 respondents admitted that they nap at work and it benefits them. **Gould Evans** installed 10 by 12 foot "nap rooms" and according to its spokesperson, there is no stigma attached to those using it. Workers at Gould Evans found that napping helps them get refreshed and revitalized (Meyer 2001).

Ben & Jerry Ice Cream of Waterbury, Vermont has no formal napping policy but does provide make-shift napping rooms and feels that naps help workers get recharged. Karl Rose, director of **Time Warner Inc.**, states that two beds are used by tired workers who need to catch 40 winks (Haupt, 1993). **Mac World** and **PC World** have “nap rooms” and claim that workers are taking advantage of them. The nap rooms are equipped with two futons, including down comforters and curtains for privacy (Flynn, 1994). Other companies seeing benefits from nap rooms are California consulting firms who have cut down on soda and coffee by 30% (Paul 1998). Jim Lehrer of public television closes his office door every day at 12:30 p.m. for an hour nap while an assistant holds all the calls (Markels, 1995).

Some companies have concerns about the “napping place.” Who should supply pillows, beds, alarm-clocks? Should the “nap place” be gender specific? **Metro Naps**, a company that sells high-tech sleeping pods to organizations for \$12,485, has some answers. The chairs recline to scientific napping position where legs are at the same level as the heart. The pods have a sound-proof dome that provides privacy and a timer. A Metro Naps sleeping pod looks like a recliner that elevates a person’s legs with an overhang that covers a person’s head and torso, providing privacy and blocking out noise and light (Weintraub 2007). The sleeping pods not only put you in a space to nap, they put you in a more fatigue-reducing position. **Vancouver Hospital**, **Procter and Gamble**, and **Cisco Systems** are among the 30 plus clients of Metro Naps.

Sligh Furniture Co., Holland, Michigan offers a \$2,700 File-A-Way-Desk Bed that contains two twin-size mattresses (Markels, 1995). Companies in Japan are investigating using napping as a rejuvenation tactic for their employees. **Matsushita Electric Co.** has invested \$4,700 in a “relax and refresh” chair that has a built-in massager. **Nova Corp.** found that 25% of workers who took a nap did report a feeling of more alertness and less stress at night (Elash, 1998).

Napping has been considered an indulgence, perhaps allowed to idiosyncratic greats like Albert Einstein and Thomas Jefferson. But even Churchill took brief naps. He once scolded his colleagues when he was caught taking a nap, “Don’t think you will be doing less work because you sleep during the day. That is a foolish notion held by people who have no imagination.” A professor of physiology at Harvard Medical School recommends that companies establish napping policies because sleep deprivation can cause short-term memory loss, lack of alertness, and productivity.

Napping in America Today

Baby Boomers are given credit for creating a more relaxed and comfortable work environment. They were the first to wear jeans to school, and now they wear them to work. Baby Boomers created a change in America’s attitude toward

work. Although America continues to focus on work and achievement, more employees today are concerned with balancing work with family and other activities. Work is important, but it isn’t everything. Younger individuals seem to have a different attitude toward napping (Vangen, 1999). For instance, 38% of adults in the U.S., on average, nap at least once during the work week. However, 41% of 18- to 29-year-olds nap during the work week compared to 35% among the 30–64 year-olds.

There are studies that suggest that naps do improve employee performance and productivity. A study from Harvard University indicated an hour-long nap at work resulted in computer programmers writing better code. The study suggested that the brain uses sleep to restore overused brain circuits and consolidate the memories of actions and skills learned during the day. Harvard concluded that any amount of sleep, even a short nap less than an hour, appears to improve our ability to process information and to teach (Jackson, 2003). The Harvard researchers indicated that 15–30 minute naps revive and refocus sluggish employees, thus improving their productivity and overall job performance. The researchers concluded that for some employees such as pilots, truck drivers, and night shift laborers, taking a nap should be mandatory. Despite the developing evidence, American employers continue to resist napping in the workplace.

Napping a world wide phenomena

Napping is an established part of the culture in many countries such as India, Italy, Mexico, Spain, Germany, Japan, and Portugal. For example, Spaniards take siestas, Germans enjoy *ein Schlafeen*, Japanese professionals like to *power snooze*. The actual Spanish word *siesta* is derived from the Latin word *sexta*, which stands for the sixth hour or the middle of the day. Argentinean workers begin work at eight in the morning and work until noon. Then they have their *siesta*. Argentinean workers are not required to return to work until four-o’clock and finish their day at eight in the evening. Naps are a time-honored part of many cultures and 40 to 60 percent of the world’s adult population naps in one form or another.

Our societies should have an open-minded attitude allowing for planned workplace napping. ■

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