

# Flexible work schedules improve health, sleep

26 January 2015



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Giving employees more control over their work schedules may help curb sleep deficiency, according to health researchers.

"In the absence of sufficient sleep, we are not as attentive or alert, we process information more slowly, miss or misinterpret social and emotional cues and decision making is impaired," said Orfeu M. Buxton, associate professor of biobehavioral health, Penn State. "For example, we may misjudge risks by undervaluing negative consequences and overvaluing potential rewards."

About 30 percent of U.S. adults reported not regularly getting a sufficient amount of sleep, a 2012 Centers for Disease Control survey found. Sleep deficiency has been linked to increased risk of automobile crashes, chronic disease and early mortality. Improving adequate sleep within the population is a goal of Healthy People 2020, a federal initiative that sets national objectives and monitors progress concerning the health of the nation.

Buxton and colleagues looked to see if a

workplace intervention, designed to increase family-supportive supervision and give employees more control over their work time, improved sleep quantity and quality. They report their results in an article published online today (Jan. 21) in the journal *Sleep Health*.

The researchers followed 474 employees as part of a Work, Family and Health Network study conducted at an information technology company, with about half of the employees serving as the control while the other half experienced the study intervention. Both employees and their supervisors participated.

The intervention was designed to reduce conflicts between work and personal life, and focused on two main cultural shifts: allowing employees to decide on when and where they worked and training supervisors to support their employees' personal lives. Those who were assigned to the intervention were encouraged to be completely flexible about when and where they would work—at the office, from home or elsewhere—while still working the same number of hours as the control group. All of the participants wore a sleep-monitoring watch, a device that tracks movement to monitor periods of sleep.

Interviews and data collection occurred three times throughout the study. Baseline was determined with the first set of data collection, prior to the intervention. Six months after the program began, the researchers observed work-related variables that they hoped to change with the intervention. A year after the intervention, Buxton and colleagues followed up to observe outcomes, including changes in the amount and quality of sleep employees were getting.

"We showed that an intervention focused on changing the workplace culture could increase the measured amount of sleep employees obtain, as well as their perception that their sleep was more

sufficient," said Buxton.

At 12 months, the researchers found that employees who participated in the intervention experienced an average of eight minutes more sleep per night, which is nearly an hour more sleep per week, than the control group. Intervention participants' perceptions of their sleep sufficiency also improved.

"Work can be a calling and inspirational, as well as a paycheck, but work should not be detrimental to health," said Buxton. "It is possible to mitigate some of the deleterious effects of work by reducing work-family conflict and improving sleep."

The researchers plan to continue this line of study and connect future workplace interventions with personalized interventions to help individuals improve their sleep.

**More information:** "A workplace intervention improves sleep: Results from the randomized controlled Work, Family, and Health Study," by Ryan Olson, PhD, Tori L. Crain, MS, Todd E. Bodner, PhD, Rosalind King, PhD, Leslie B. Hammer, PhD, Laura Cousino Klein, PhD, Leslie Erickson, BA, Phyllis Moen, PhD, Lisa F. Berkman, PhD, and Orfeu M. Buxton, PhD. It is published in *Sleep Health*, Volume 1, Issue 1 (January 2015), [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sleh.2014.11.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleh.2014.11.003)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

APA citation: Flexible work schedules improve health, sleep (2015, January 26) retrieved 9 November 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-01-work-family-conflicts-workplace-people.html>

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