

Employee Benefit News

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Nap breaks needn't be so alarming

Benefitzzz to sleep on

By Bruce Shutan

How fitting that it took an architectural firm to realize square footage could double as an employee benefit.

When Gould Evans Goodman Associates in Kansas City, Mo., moved into new digs about three years ago, the interior designer figured something was missing. Associates needed a comfortable place to rest their eyes, she surmised, after noticing someone nodding off at his desk.

Her idea: why not pitch a tent in a secluded part of the office? In time, two more “spent tents,” as they fondly call them, were set up for harried associates. They feature sleeping bags, mats, pillows, eye shades, stereo headsets that play relaxation music — even alarm clocks. There’s also a nearby air duct whose “white noise” lulls people to sleep.

“At first people were apprehensive about it,” recalls Lora Menka, a company spokeswoman. “They kind of laughed.” After all, she adds, “You’re raised to believe you should never sleep on the job.”

Not anymore — at least for Gould Evans Goodman associates, who are now so used to the tents that “it doesn’t even cross our minds anymore.”

While the tents aren’t necessarily used every day, they come in handy during deadlines. Apparently it’s not unusual for architects to pull all-nighters — a pattern that’s learned in architectural school.

“It is really relaxing,” according to Menka. “Even lying down for just five minutes makes a big difference. We just think it makes our people a lot happier to have the opportunity to nap at work.”

Dirty little secret?

Just don’t expect a similar scene to be playing out across corporate America, where napping often is seen as a dirty little secret.

42 IS, a California software firm, allows employees to nap at the work site but declined to share details about the arrangement following what a spokeswoman characterized as an avalanche of publicity about the unusual perk. Moreover, repeated calls to Teco Energy Inc. in Tampa, Fla., to discuss the company's so-called sofa room were not returned.

Bill Anthony, who runs the Napping Company in Redding, Mass., with his wife and is working on a book entitled "Workplace Napping," knows several high-placed executives who refuse to acknowledge that they nap at the workplace for fear that "they'll be made fun of ... They're touchy about it."

There's also a fear among rank-and-file workers that they'll lose their jobs, reputations or both if they're caught napping at work or that they'll be viewed as malingerers, reports Anthony, who's also executive director of the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston University.

An important distinction, he says, is that people be allowed to nap during lunch or coffee breaks versus on the job.

Attitudes about workplace napping show "the need for a cultural change," he believes. "I think employers are more concerned about health and comfort than ever before, and napping at work is a health and comfort issue that can lead to improved productivity."

Anthony and his wife are currently conducting an online survey to gauge the prevalence of workplace napping (www.napping.com).

A matter of safety

In some industries, particularly those that involve the public's safety, napping may be indispensable. Conrail, for instance, tested on-duty napping under certain controlled and appropriate conditions to address fatigue on a pilot basis, explains Marcia Comstock, M.D., former assistant vice president for health services at Philadelphia-based Conrail, which was recently acquired by Norfolk Southern and CSX Transportation.

Crews were allowed up to 40-minute naps on trains as long as someone was manning the controls. In addition, sound-proof nap rooms with darkening shades and vibrating paging devices were set up at four or five at-home terminals to help promote alertness and safety.

What's important to realize, she says, is that napping arrangements can't be pursued in isolation. It's also necessary to educate people about sleep deprivation and identify employees who are at risk for developing such behavior.

"It's a complicated issue," Comstock observes. "There are tremendous stresses and demands on people's lives. We have never managed sleep the way we've managed other aspects of our lives. Sleep is always traded in."

It's estimated that roughly 70 million Americans have trouble sleeping, while nearly two-thirds of the nation's workers report that sleep deprivation affects their work.

The National Sleep Foundation in Washington, D.C., conducted a recent survey that found only 14% of the 1,027 people polled by telephone passed a sleep IQ test. Consider some of the findings:

- 42% of respondents believe that fewer hours of sleep are needed the older one gets when, in fact, sleep needs remain unchanged in adulthood.
- About half the respondents mistakenly believe that snoring isn't harmful as long as it doesn't disturb the body's need for sleep. Fact is, snoring may indicate the presence of sleep apnea — a potentially life-threatening disorder that causes severe daytime sleepiness.

Naps are thought to play a critical role in improving the lives of some 21 million Americans who work nights or rotating shifts. Many of these workers have difficulty sleeping past noon after an overnight shift because of the morning waking effect on the body's circadian rhythms. Experts say building on morning sleep with a brief afternoon or evening nap can mean the difference between a safe drive home and falling asleep at the wheel.

"We have found that stress is the No. 1 reason people report sleep disabilities and obviously much of that is work-related," notes Joan Rachel Goldberg, a spokesperson for the National Sleep Foundation in Washington, D.C. The result, she says, is that it impairs relationships with co-workers and family.

Goldberg described napping at work as "an idea whose time has come" and a healthy alternative to ingesting caffeine to promote short-term alertness.

Work-life imbalance

Might sleep deprivation be a sign of poor work-life balance?
“I think that life has gotten more demanding,” muses Ellen Galinsky, president of the New York-based Families and Work Institute.
“Certainly work has gotten more demanding — and instant. We know from our national study that people are working longer hours.”

They’re also doing more multitasking functions both at home and work, as well as cramming more responsibilities into a fixed number of hours, she says. Translation: “The time for self and sleep is dwindling.”

While “you can’t require that people sleep,” Galinsky suggests that wellness can play a vital role in helping show employees how sleep deprivation may affect them. —B.S.