

Napping at work? Some say when you snooze, you produce

Forget about the national debt. There's another type of liability that may more profoundly affect many of us on a day-to-day basis.

As commerce stretches around the globe, valley workers are stretching their workdays to satisfy the needs of a 24/7 schedule. And long work hours and less sleep can build up to what experts call "sleep debt."

In fact, 51 percent of the American work force said sleepiness hampered their job performance, according to a March 2000 poll conducted by the National Sleep Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit sleep research and education advocacy group. The cost of sleepiness and lost productivity in the workplace, the study found, is approximately \$18 billion.

"If you're not paying attention to worker fatigue, you're already paying a price," says Mark Rosekind, president of Alertness Solutions, a consulting firm in Cupertino that develops strategies to improve safety, performance and alertness in aviation and transportation organizations.

Mr. Rosekind, a former NASA scientist, says "fatigue management" is an inexpensive way for organizations to give themselves a competitive edge. "A nap is a powerful strategy, and it requires no equipment or training," he says.

Companies in the valley are starting to pay attention, taking different approaches to combat fatigue such as allowing flexible work schedules and napping on the job.

At OP Contract, an office furniture company, the nap room is popular among employees, says spokeswoman Nanci Scoular. In the room, employees of this San Francisco company can rest on a chaise longue, snuggle up with a comforter, slip on an eye pillow and listen to relaxation CDs. An alarm clock helps prevent oversnoozing.

Ms. Scoular says she has used the room herself. "When I feel my energy draining, I head for the room and come out feeling really relaxed and recharged," she says.

Likewise, at Babowal Consulting, a San Jose agency that specializes in workplace communications, use of the nap room is encouraged.

"We work in a creative environment," says company president Chris Babowal. "As long as you meet deadlines or projects, you can take naps or soak-outs any time you want." The company has a "soak-out room," an enclosed area with a spa, for employees' use.

Sleep experts extoll the virtue of a nap and its effectiveness. "Businesses will pay thousands of dollars to increase their bottom line, and I say it's just a nap room away," says Camille Anthony, a fiscal consultant in Reading, Mass., who has written a book, "The Art of Napping in the Workplace," with her husband, William, a psychologist.

The book discusses the benefits of napping and presents techniques for workers and their bosses to introduce the idea of napping in the workplace.

However, equating less sleep with accomplishing more on the job is a misconception, says Mr. Rosekind. "That strategy only works for one day," he says. "Humans need eight hours' sleep."

The fewer hours of sleep one receives, the more dramatically his or her productivity dips, he adds. Compared to seven hours of sleep, six hours resulted in a 17 percent drop in productivity, five hours produced a 43 percent reduction and four hours led to a 62 percent reduction, according to Alertness Solutions.

Dr. William Dement, director of the Sleep Disorders Research Center at Stanford University, says that while naps are restorative, "they won't make up for big losses of sleep."

He says prevention of "sleep debt" is most important over the long haul: "If your sleep debt is high, the only real overall solution is to lower it."