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5

Clocking off - the companies introducing naptime to the workplace

One of the more annoying habits of highly successful people is their tendency to tell us how little sleep they need. Former Yahoo boss Marissa Mayer can operate on four hours, Apple CEO Tim Cook is at the gym by 5am and designer and film director Tom Ford gets three hours a night.

But it's not just those at the top of the corporate ladder who feel under pressure. Most of us are getting less sleep. While sufficient sleep is generally defined as between seven and nine hours, a National Sleep Foundation survey found the average adult in the UK is getting just six hours and 49 minutes, in the US that's six hours and 31 minutes, and Japan is worse again at six hours and 22 minutes.

For Matthew Walker, neuroscientist and author of 'Why We Sleep', we are in the midst of a "global sleep-loss epidemic" and that demanding work schedules and commutes are among the contributing factors.

Sleep loss can seriously damage your health. the impact it has on productivity is starting to make some companies revise attitudes to sleep and rest. Lack of sleep costs most developed nations 2% of their GDP, which for the UK equates to £40bn.

Employers are starting to recognise the importance of sleep. Google has installed sleep pods in its offices. The high-tech beds, include a built-in sound system for those who like to drift off to relaxing music. An afternoon nap can help improve performance without interfering with night-time sleep, according to Rita Aouad, psychiatrist and sleep specialist at Ohio State University. "Lots of research shows that a nap of about 20 minutes in the afternoon has a positive effect on attention vigilance mood and alertness," she says. Nike's headquarters in Portland, Oregon has rooms where employees can sleep or meditate. The company is among those offering flexible work times to employees to suit their Chrono type – the internal clock that programmes your ideal sleep time.

But will efforts like these have much of an impact?

Organisational, societal and structural change is what's required, Walker says, adding that moves like the French government's decision to impose a law that gives workers the right to disconnect from emails out of hours should be encouraged.

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