

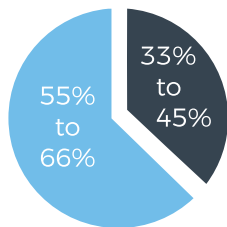
Addressing **Sleep** in the **WORKPLACE**

A summary from SleepFit white paper ‘Using technology and behavioural science to optimise workplace health and wellbeing programs’.

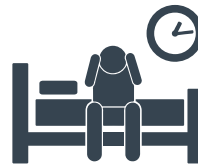
Sleep is just as essential to humans as food and water, however many Australians are falling short of recommended amounts of sleep.

Although many aspects of sleep are still a mystery, it is clear it serves an essential function for most animals, humans included. Sleep helps us restore both physically and mentally, being a period of peak activity for muscle regeneration, toxin removal, immune system function and learning and memory consolidation^{2,3}. Although sleep needs vary across individuals and age brackets, the recommended amount of sleep for adults is between 7.5 – 8 hours of sleep for both men and women².

Alarming, the most recent survey from the Australian Sleep Health Foundation highlights that



Almost half (45%) of Australian adults get inadequate sleep and experience daytime consequences as a result⁴.



In absolute terms, 7.4 million Australians regularly do not get a good night sleep¹.



Within a representative Australian sample, roughly a quarter (24%) believed they had a sleep problem⁴.



As many as 12% of Australians reported sleeping less than an average of 5.5 hours and experience significant interference as a result⁴.

Insufficient sleep causes more than just tiredness, it can impact physical and mental health, even causing premature death.

Insufficient sleep also costs businesses and communities dearly, with reduced mental performance drastically impacting on productivity and safety. Australian businesses bear a majority of the \$26.2 billion cost associated with poor sleep every year.



missed work due to tiredness in the past 4 weeks



fell asleep at work in the past month



made errors at work because of tiredness in the past 3 months



dozed off while driving at some point in their life



had a traffic accident due to tiredness in the past year



missed social activities due to tiredness within the past 3 months



between 18 and 35 reported being likely to fall asleep during daily tasks



Workers with sleep problems in the last month reported they were less productive and made less effort at work

Some workforces are particularly vulnerable to insufficient sleep, including shift-workers, leadership teams and frequent travellers.



Shift-workers. Australian research highlights shift-workers are 60% more likely to have an occupational accident and are up to 36% more likely to regularly fall asleep on the job than the regular workforce⁵. They are also four times more likely to be involved in an accident travelling to and from work⁵ and develop some forms of cancer.



Leaders. Given the magnitude of responsibility borne by leadership teams, insufficient sleep can impact organisation performance and financial position through poor performance in people management, contract negotiation, financial decisions and production outputs^{10,13}. Insufficient sleep amongst leaders can also create a culture of “sleep is for the weak” within their teams and organisations that can have far-reaching effects¹².



Frequent travellers. Short-term interferences include sleep difficulties in new time zones, reduced motivation and performance in physical and mental tasks; as well as increased fatigue, headaches, irritability, difficulties concentrating and gastrointestinal disturbances^{15,16}. Health conditions worsen in regular long-distance travellers, including irregular menstruation, infertility and deficits in cognitive performance, as well as increased risk of psychotic disorders, depression, cancer and heart disease¹⁵.

This highlights that workplaces managing these workforces stand to gain substantially from making sleep a strong focus within their health and wellbeing strategy.

Improving the quality and quantity of sleep in the workforce can improve the bottom line and foster innovative workplaces.

Benefits to business with a more rested workforce include^{7,10,12}

- Increased productivity
- Increased creativity and innovation
- Improved attention to detail
- Improved focus
- Improved mental health
- Increased emotional intelligence
- Improved safety
- Reduced sick leave
- Improved job satisfaction
- Improved team cohesion
- More effective problem solving
- Increased accuracy
- Greater financial returns

The link between rising mental health concerns and increasing sleep disturbances cannot be ignored.

Mental health disorders are rising in Australia, with one in two Australians likely to experience a common disorder such as anxiety or depression in their lifetime³⁵. The relationship between sleep and mental disorders cannot be ignored. Evidence links sleep disorders with increased suicide rates³⁶, depression³⁷, anxiety³⁸ and psychotic symptoms³. This relationship is reciprocal, with trauma, anxiety³⁹ and depression³⁷ all likely to interfere with sleep. Even low levels of stress or anxiety can create thinking patterns that interfere with sleep. A racing mind interferes with the sleep of the nation, with 28% Australian adults reporting being kept awake by stress, 24% concerns about work and 24% nightmares⁶. Sleep also reduces happiness levels, with 73% of people getting 6 – 8 hours' sleep each night rating themselves as happy, compared with only 53% of people getting less than 6 hours sleep⁴⁰. Together this highlights that sleep is an essential component of a cohesive plan for mental health.

Workplaces that take a deep approach will reap the rewards. Workplaces that meaningfully incorporate sleep into their health and wellbeing approach stand to gain from a range of benefits including increased productivity, safety, engagement and innovation. This reflects a radical shift in perspective, from worn-out workforces, to using sleep as a key to competitive advantage in an increasingly demanding and fast-paced market.