

Not an Early Bird?

How Night Owls Can Crush It at Work

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Crack-of-dawn conference calls, breakfast meetings or even the fact that the office coffee maker is always turned off by noon are just a few examples of how the work world really is designed for early risers. You know the type—those perky folks who leap out of bed with the sun and begin winding down as evening falls.

Night owls, on the other hand, flourish on a different timetable, typically riding a wave of energy and alertness from afternoon to well

into the night, says Robert Matchock, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Penn State Altoona, who researches circadian rhythms in physiology and behavior.

Biological differences between early birds and night owls exist, says Matchock. The hormone melatonin, whose rise makes the body feel less alert, decreases later in the morning for night owls. Night people also have a higher core body temperature in the afternoon, which can be a sign of increased energy at that time, he adds.

Most of us aren't extreme early birds or night owls but fall somewhere in the middle of these categories. But the time of day each of us tends to thrive in appears to be partly influenced by genetics. "Morning types wake up relatively early with little 'sleep inertia,' or grogginess," he explains. "They have their peak productivity early in the day." Night types "tend to wake up later in the morning. If they have to get up early, there is generally a more severe sleep inertia," and they reach higher productivity later in the day.

Unfortunately, you can't redesign the contemporary workday to suit your mole person ways, nor can you rewire the internal clock you were born with. But the good news is that you can still ace your job by doing a little shifting of certain habits and routines. Here's how to tap into your biology—and use a little strategy—to come out on top.

1. Create a Work Cheatsheet the Day Before

If you're a night owl with a day job, you likely arrive at work before your brain is fully alert, fuzzy about what tasks you need to accomplish. Instead of wasting the morning hours in an unproductive haze, create a morning to-do list the afternoon before, when you're energized and focused, suggests Anita Bruzzese, workplace expert and author of "45 Things You Do That Drive Your Boss Crazy ... And How to Avoid Them."

Make it as detailed as possible and prioritize what you need to get done. “Note where you left off, who you need to call, anything you can do to put things in order until your brain clicks on,” Bruzzese says. With a concrete roadmap for your morning, you’ll be able to make it through your a.m. lull.

2. Streamline Your Morning Routine

Take a shower, lay out your clothes, pack your briefcase and make your breakfast and lunch the night before the workday. Taking care of these routines can shave an hour off your morning and score you an extra hour of sleep every night. That can lead to dramatic improvements in a.m. reaction time, alertness, mood and productivity, says Matchock.

Though it's not a feasible solution for everyone, you may want to consider moving closer to your workplace, so your commute is only from the bedroom to your home office and you create more opportunity for morning sleep. “I once rented an apartment next door to my office and woke up at 8:30 for a 9 a.m. start time,” says Alexandra Levit, leadership consultant and author of “They Don't Teach Corporate in College. “A commute makes all the difference in terms of how early you actually have to get up.”

3. Do Auto-Pilot Projects First

Not all job responsibilities require the same amount of brain power, says Levit. Night owls should use the a.m. hours for robotic tasks that don’t require a lot of thought—like answering certain emails, bookkeeping, expense reports, looking at blogs or websites you follow, posting on LinkedIn and returning calls. When you get the mundane, but necessary, stuff behind you, you’ll be primed to do your most productive work once your body and brain have had a chance to kick into gear.

4. Schedule Tougher Tasks During Peak Performance Times

Pair work that requires you to put your thinking cap on—a crucial report, presentation or brainstorming session with your team—with your peak energy windows. For night owls, that means the late afternoon and evening, but there is flexibility.

“Even scheduling difficult tasks during the late morning hours is better than early morning for night owls,” says Matchock. “I recommend the late morning before lunch or the very late afternoon, since there can be a drop in alertness, body temperature and glucose levels after eating a large meal—what we call the postprandial dip—making the early afternoon tricky.”

5. Bring Some Work Home (Sorry!)

From 7 to 9 p.m., many night owls are firing on all cylinders. Take advantage of your biology by reserving these hours for heavy-lifting tasks. That means taking work home, true, but it's worth it because you'll be more productive than if you tried to accomplish it at 10 a.m., says Elene Cafasso, founder and president of Enerpace, Inc. Executive Coaching in Chicago.

Dedicating one to two hours in the evening to tackle deep-thinking work tasks from home makes sense for a night owl—but put a limit on how late you’ll stay up. “Working after midnight when you have to be in the office by 9 a.m. is counterproductive,” says Matchock, and it leads to sleep deprivation. That increases the threat that you won't be able to function at full throttle in the office the next day.

6. Ask for a Later Start Time or Even Work-From-Home Days

Since even an extra hour of shuteye can help a night owl function better in the morning, it may be worth it to see if you can change your work hours from 9 to 5 to 10 to 6. “Rather than fighting biology to match occupational time, we can change occupational time to match biology,” says Matchock.

While not all bosses will be understanding, it's not out of line at most workplaces these days to ask for a slightly different schedule to accommodate personal and family needs. “Sometimes folks request adjusted hours to avoid rush hour traffic or to accommodate child care,” says Cafasso. “What really matters is that you explain how this will help you get your work done more efficiently.”

Even better for a night owl is working from home, she says, even if for just a few days a week, so you have no commute and can take 20-minute power naps (research shows they help boost performance, says Matchock). Depending on your office culture, it can be a reasonable request in today's work environment. “As long as somebody knows how to get a hold of you, your boss might be open to occasional work-from-home days,” Cafasso says.

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