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# Become a Sleep-friendly Employer

Why sleep matters to employers and how becoming a Sleep-friendly Employer promotes a healthier, happier, and more productive workforce.

EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY



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Is sleep missing from  
your workplace  
wellbeing programme?

◆

# When employees sleep better, they perform better

Can businesses suffer from a lack of sleep?  
Should employers help their employees sleep better?

In short – yes. Evidence shows that poor sleep adversely affects individual health and organisational performance. Yet sleep is often overlooked in conversations about employee health and wellbeing, which could be costing businesses big.

Most employee health and wellbeing programmes focus on diet, exercise, and mental health, leaving sleep out of the picture. But there is no health and wellbeing without sleep. Sleep deprivation leads to rising absenteeism and staff turnover, undermines productivity, and contributes to workplace accidents and errors. There's a significant opportunity for forward-thinking employers to embrace the benefits of sleep by creating a sleep-friendly workplace and building a thriving team.

## What's inside?

This paper looks at why sleep matters to businesses and what employers can do to help staff sleep better – such as becoming accredited as a [Sleep-friendly Employer](#).

Sleep Action's Sleep-friendly Employer Programme gives businesses the tools they need to understand sleep as a strategic asset and build a well-rested and high-performing workforce.

# Why sleep matters



Sleep is the foundation of good physical, mental, and emotional health.

Experts agree that working-aged adults need between seven and nine hours of sleep a night, though this is different for everyone<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, a 2022 YouGov poll shows that 35% of UK adults struggle to hit the minimum, while half say they don't get enough sleep<sup>2</sup>. Nine out of ten Britons said their lives would improve if they got more sleep. So why is sleep overlooked in discussions of health and wellbeing?

Many of us simply accept that sleeping badly is “just one of those things” or that when life gets busy, sleep is the first thing to go. Skipping sleep to get more done is sometimes seen as a badge of honour. Getting up early is framed as a life hack to squeeze more hours in the day. And if someone has small children, well, don't even mention sleep to them.

But sleep matters. Research shows that sleep is essential for mind, body, and performance. Sleeping well has been shown to reduce the risk of diabetes, obesity, stress, and depression<sup>3</sup>. It affects our immune system, appetite, cognitive functions, memory, emotions, and more.

## A lack of sleep has a major impact on health and wellbeing:

**<6 hours** Adults who sleep <6 hours a night have a **13% increased mortality risk** compared to people who sleep >7 hours

**<5–6 hours** People who sleep <5–6 hours a night are **38% more likely to develop obesity**<sup>1</sup>

## Poor sleep quality is linked to an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease and cognitive decline<sup>4</sup>

**7–8 hours** Adults who sleep 7–8 hours each night are more optimistic and report **higher self-esteem** than people who sleep <6 hours or >9 hours a night<sup>5</sup>

The truth is, there is no health and wellbeing without sleep. While diet and exercise are top of mind in discussions about health, sleep is often forgotten. The link between sleep and health is often independent of other lifestyle factors, such as whether someone smokes or drinks alcohol. If someone's not getting enough sleep, they're also likely to be missing out on other health-promoting behaviours, like eating well and exercising.



## During sleep, vital processes for our brain and body take place, including:



**Memories** are filtered, consolidated, and stored; helping us to learn and retain information.



**Growth hormone** is released, which aids repair and renewal of cells, promoting healing.



**Muscle mass** and bone density is improved.



**Emotions** are processed, supporting better mental wellbeing and interpersonal relationships.



**Toxins** are cleared from the cerebral-spinal fluid.



**Appetite** resets, helping us maintain a healthy appetite and make better diet choices.



**Cognitive functions** are restored, including our ability to concentrate, communicate and perform complex tasks.



**Immune systems** are boosted, helping us fight off infections successfully.

1 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36280789/>  
 2 <https://yougov.co.uk/health/articles/42961-yougov-sleep-study-part-one-sleeping-patterns>  
 3 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6934314/>  
 4 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9590398/>  
 5 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4323377/>  
 6 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23055029/>



## What causes poor sleep?

Duration and quality of sleep are affected by many factors, including age, gender, health, lifestyle, and family circumstances<sup>6</sup>.

What we eat, how often we exercise, and whether we smoke, use drugs or take prescription medications can all play a role. Pregnancy and symptoms of perimenopause (like fatigue, hot flashes, bladder weakness, brain fog, and anxiety) can also make it harder to fall asleep.

Stress and mental health have a major impact on sleep. Stress promotes cortisol production, which inhibits sleep, while depression can lead to decreased daytime activity and disrupt circadian rhythms. Shift work, long hours, and changing work patterns can make it difficult to follow a consistent sleeping routine. Today's fast-paced, screen-obsessed culture certainly doesn't help.

Many of these factors have a reciprocal relationship with sleep<sup>7</sup>. For example, worrying about family, money or work is likely to keep you awake at night, but if you're tired, you're more vulnerable to feeling stressed. Likewise, unhealthy habits affect sleep quality, but waking up tired makes it harder to stick to a healthy diet and keep active.

### What can people do to improve their sleep?

Everyone experiences poor sleep from time to time, but certain behaviours and routines can make a big difference. Following the same daily routine by going to bed and waking up at the same time each day and sticking to regular mealtimes helps regulate sleep patterns. In the longer term, being mindful of lifestyle factors such as a healthy diet, physical activity, and alcohol/nicotine consumption are likely to improve sleep quality. Limiting screen time before bed reduces exposure to blue light, which suppresses production of the sleep-promoting hormone melatonin.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5627640/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7202382/>

# Why employee sleep matters to employers

Poor sleep isn't just a personal pain, it's a public health issue. But what does it mean for employers? Sleep deprivation undermines individual productivity and organisational performance, making it an issue that should be on every employer's radar.

## When employees struggle with sleep, their work suffers.

Poor sleep inhibits clear thinking, decision-making, creativity, confidence, and motivation<sup>9</sup>. The result is a gradual decline in work quality that eventually hits the bottom line, not least because sleep-deprived staff are more likely to call in sick.

**The hidden costs of employee sleep deprivation run into millions each year.** Absenteeism, presenteeism, accidents, poor performance, and low morale leave employers footing the bill. A RAND Europe study found that sleep-related absences and reduced productivity cost the UK economy more than £40 billion per year.<sup>6</sup>

**Lack of sleep also contributes to more workplace accidents, including traffic accidents, industrial mishaps, medical errors, and operational mistakes<sup>6</sup>.** According to an analysis by Hafner et al., "sleep loss and sleep-related disorders have been linked to a number of accidents and catastrophes, including the Chernobyl nuclear explosion, the Three Mile Island nuclear incident, the Exxon Valdez spill, and the Space Shuttle Challenger tragedy."<sup>6</sup>



## The challenges are even greater for shift workers

Night shift employees are 25-30% more likely to injure themselves at work than day shift workers<sup>9</sup>. Some even develop Shift Work Sleep Disorder, where disrupted circadian rhythms cause physical and psychological symptoms.<sup>10</sup>

**70% increase** in risk of workplace accidents due to employee fatigue

Poor sleep costs businesses **£1,248 per employee per year**

**200,000 working days** are lost each year in the UK due to tiredness



“If employees haven't had enough sleep, they're more likely to be off sick, they're more likely to make poor decisions, and they're more likely to make mistakes. In industries like construction or transportation, that could result in serious physical accidents. But even in office environments, it could lead to poor working relationships, arguments, and stress that weaken productivity and create financial strain.”

Alyson O'Brien, Head of Service, Sleep Action

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9301247/>  
<sup>10</sup> <https://www.rand.org/news/press/2016/11/30/index1.html>  
<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5627640/>  
<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5627640/>  
<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ioshmagazine.com/2020/06/12/shift-work-can-increase-risk-injury-third-study-indicates>  
<sup>14</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38509807/>

# The business case for a sleep-friendly workplace

Sleep is central to productivity, performance, and profits. When employees sleep better, their experience and performance at work improves. Giving your team the skills and knowledge to sleep better enhances their wellbeing, morale, and productivity while reducing operational risks, including accidents, mistakes, sickness, and turnover.

Here's why it makes sense to invest in a sleep-friendly culture:

1

## Happier and healthier employees

Better sleep improves mood, morale, and engagement, resulting in a more productive workforce. Leaders with more energy can better motivate and support staff, leading to better working relationships and stronger teams.

2

## Recruitment and retention

Organisations that demonstrate a commitment to health and wellbeing attract enthusiastic, high-performing candidates and reduce turnover. Addressing chronic sleep deprivation and resulting health challenges can help retain staff for longer.

3

## Productivity and performance

Well-rested employees are more focused, efficient, and capable of handling complex tasks. They're less likely to make mistakes that could cost time and money.

4

## Innovation and creativity

A good night's sleep boosts problem-solving skills and creativity. Tired staff are more likely to opt for 'the path of least resistance' instead of thinking critically and generating bold ideas.

5

## Safety and risk management

Fatigue is one of the biggest causes of workplace accidents. Better sleep improves concentration, potentially reducing the risk of accidents.

6

## Absence management

While staff are unlikely to call in sick just because they're tired, sustained sleep deprivation reduces immunity and leads to other health issues that can increase absences.

7

## Customer experience

Tiredness affects communication skills and emotional regulation, making staff irritable or with customers. Well-rested employees are more likely to be patient, helpful, and good-humoured, which is important for customer satisfaction and organisational reputation.

**Bottom line?**  
Sleep matters to your business

# How to turn sleep into a strategic asset and boost productivity and performance

Workplace culture and support are vital in promoting healthy sleep. Shift patterns, staffing levels, flexibility, and understanding of sleep issues all affect how well employees sleep at night.

While more businesses are recognising the importance of sleep on employee wellbeing, few actively support healthy sleep as part of their employee wellbeing strategies.

Some may not see it as their responsibility or consider it too time-consuming or expensive. However, as we've seen, sleep is everyone's business. Overlooking it could put both staff and businesses at risk.

## What is the role of business in relation to sleep?

### The legal bit

Firstly, employers have a legal responsibility to make sure staff get enough rest. Under the Working Time Regulations<sup>11</sup>, staff are entitled to a 20-minute break for every six hours of work, 11 hours off in any 24-hour period, and 28 days of holiday each year. Employers may be failing in their duty of care if working conditions cause staff to lose sleep and no reasonable adjustments are made.

### Sleep-friendly HR policies

Beyond the legal obligations, businesses can promote healthy sleep habits through organisational policies and work culture. While there's no getting around the fact that some jobs are innately stressful or require staff to work anti-social hours, research shows that taking steps to promote wellbeing and reduce on-the-job tiredness can benefit staff and businesses.<sup>12</sup>

### Specific countermeasures to address fatigue might include:

- Flexible scheduling to accommodate individual circumstances and sleep patterns
- Time to adjust to changes in shift patterns or time zones
- Nap breaks for those working long shifts
- Access to artificial light that mimics sunlight for night workers.<sup>13</sup>

### Changing organisational thinking and culture

Attitudes and awareness are vital to set the tone for a sleep-friendly workplace, and this may require a change

in organisational thinking and culture<sup>18</sup>. Employers should discourage behaviours that glorify sleep sacrifice and marathon work sessions, which puts pressure on others to do the same when they should be disconnecting. Encouraging staff to take breaks and reminding the team that quality sleep boosts creativity and productivity will foster a healthier (and more inclusive) work culture.

Leaders play a major role in modelling sleep-friendly behaviour and encouraging teams to do the same. "Sleep leadership"<sup>14</sup> involves managers setting an example by being well-rested themselves, and addressing working conditions that could be causing staff to lose sleep.

## How can workplace wellbeing initiatives help staff sleep better?

Workplace wellbeing initiatives often focus on diet, exercise and mental health, but sleep is a less common component<sup>15</sup>. Emerging evidence suggests that employer-led interventions can improve staff sleep habits and employers who encourage better sleep habits and general fitness see their teams report better sleep, reduced absenteeism, and overall boost in quality of life.<sup>16</sup>

### For example:

- A Japanese study of **information system workers** found that a single 30-minute education session led to self-reported improvements in sleep. Greater improvements were seen in participants who received an additional session with individualised advice.<sup>17</sup>
- A study of **school teachers** in Canada and the US found that mindfulness training improved sleep duration, insomnia symptoms, and sleepiness.<sup>18</sup>
- A program offering alertness strategies, shift scheduling, and sleep education to **flight crew members** significantly increased sleep duration and reaction times among participants.<sup>19</sup>
- **Firefighters** working 24-hour shifts followed by 48 hours off took part in a 30-minute training session that included screening questionnaires and follow-up, leading to 46% fewer disability days and 24% fewer injury reports.<sup>20</sup>

15 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7005570/>

16 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38281025/>

17 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7005570/>

18 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5627640/>

19 <https://www.hr-magazine.co.uk/content/comment/are-your-sleepless-nights-damaging-the-bottom-line-and-your-team>

20 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9035216/>

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25 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6084754/>

## Three key ingredients for effective sleep-friendly initiatives include:

- 1 Awareness**  
Staff training to ensure everyone understands the importance of good sleep.
- 2 Culture**  
Fostering attitudes and norms to encourage discussions about sleep (peer influence is an important factor in encouraging better sleep habits).
- 3 Support**  
Identifying HR policies that support flexible schedules and work-life balance.

Just like our individual sleeping patterns, what works for one company might not work for another. Though what's clear is that including sleep on the wellbeing agenda helps managers and leaders understand its vital role in building a happier, healthier, and more productive workforce.

**That's exactly what the Sleep-friendly Employer Programme is designed to do.**

### Here's how this might benefit organisations in different sectors:

#### Preventing burnout among stressed out **software engineers**

In the tech industry, a company whose software engineers struggle with long hours, late-night coding, and tight deadlines could see improvements by implementing flexible hours, hybrid working options, and more balanced workloads. Offering training on sleep habits could also help build a more creative and productive team.

#### Keeping **delivery drivers** alert and accident-free

A logistics company that needs delivery drivers to meet targets without getting fatigued might introduce mandatory rest periods, sleep education, and comfortable rest facilities. Annual workshops might be a good option for staff that aren't regularly on-site together, to promote awareness of good sleep habits. These measures would result in fewer accidents, timely deliveries, and improved customer service.



#### Supporting **healthcare workers** to rest and recover

Healthcare facilities that face the challenge of preventing staff fatigue while maintaining high-quality patient care could take small but meaningful steps to improve staff sleep. These could include training managers to recognise the links between work and sleep, consider individual needs when assigning shifts, and provide one-to-one support for those struggling. Regular breaks and rest areas with healthy food options with staff input to streamline processes could further boost morale.

#### Boosting **rail network** efficiency through sleep

A rail network looking to improve safety and efficiency could adopt sleep-friendly practices such as controlled shift rotations, rest areas and self-paced training modules. These would help to reduce operator fatigue, enhance safety, and improve punctuality and efficiency.



## Sleep-friendly Employer

“ This was great! Informative, nicely chunked information, not too much.”

Participant in self-led training pilot

# Introducing the Sleep-friendly Employer programme

Sleep Action’s Sleep-friendly Employer programme is a three-year workplace wellbeing initiative designed to embed a sleep-friendly culture and give your employees the tools and resources for better sleep.

The programme supports organisational health and wellbeing and absence management initiatives by addressing sleep-related issues experienced by staff. By mitigating the negative effects of poor sleep on your business performance, it turns sleep into a strategic asset by helping your team thrive.

For employers that take an active interest in their employees’ health and wellbeing, the Sleep-friendly Employer programme complements existing workplace wellbeing initiatives like healthy eating, physical activity, and mental health to amplify the impact of each one.

“ I was shocked to read my afternoon cuppa could be delaying my sleep for as long as 10 hours!!”

Participant in self-led training pilot

### Discover the benefits of healthy sleep for your organisation

As a Sleep-friendly Employer, you’ll receive support to help your employees in the following ways:

#### Training for Sleep Champions (at least 1 per 100 employees)

Identify Sleep Champions within your team to promote healthy sleep and support staff to sleep, feel and work better. Our training, trusted by the NHS, equips them with the knowledge and confidence to deliver 1-2-1 support and in-house workshops to spread the word that sleep matters. Sleep Champions participate in a half-day online workshop and get exclusive sleep resources and toolkits tailored to the workplace.

**Duration:** One half-day online session

**Ideal for:** HR staff, managers, or supervisors

#### Employee sleep training

Train staff to understand how sleep works and how to improve it. All staff get access to self-paced online training to give them evidence-based practical tips for healthy sleep habits and strategies for a good night’s sleep.

**Duration:** 1.5-hours, self-paced

**Ideal for:** All staff

#### Sleep-friendly HR policies

Foster a sleep-friendly culture with flexible policies that recognise the impact of age, work patterns, stress, pregnancy and menopause on sleep. The programme offers guidance on how to implement policies that work for your organisation, benefit staff, and improve your reputation as an employer.

#### Annual sleep workshops

Maintain momentum with interactive refresher sessions to help managers and supervisors support sleep-friendly attitudes and behaviours. Delivered by Sleep Action’s expert team, these workshops are an opportunity to discuss real-life scenarios and challenges specific to your organisation, and seek advice from the Sleep Action trainer.

**Duration:** 30-min introductory video followed by 1-hour online session (at roughly 6 months, 1.5 years and 2.5 years into the award)

**Ideal for:** Line managers and supervisors, senior managers



# It's time to invest in good sleep

Investing in your employees' sleep is investing in the future of your business. Choose from two levels of accreditation:

**Sleep-friendly Starter**

Introduce your organisation to the basics of good sleep

**Sleep-friendly Employer**

Supercharge your team's wellbeing with better sleep

✓	Sleep training for all staff	✓
✓	HR policy guidance	✓
✓	Sleep Champion training (1 staff member)	✓
✗	Sleep-friendly Employer accreditation	✓
✗	Annual manager workshop	✓
✗	Exclusive sleep resources	✓
✗	Regular comms packs	✓

Number of employees

Number of employees

50 - 100 <b>£449</b>	101 - 200 <b>£849</b>	201 - 300 <b>£1549</b>
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50 - 100 <b>£659</b>	101 - 200 <b>£1399</b>	201 - 300 <b>£2499</b>
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## As a charity, Sleep Action's priority is not profit

When you participate in the Sleep-friendly Employer programme, the benefits go beyond your organisation. For less than the cost of a commercial consultant or occupational health audit, your organisation will be improving the wellbeing of your own staff and supporting the wider community, too. Money spent on accreditation packages also helps support Sleep Action's Sleep Support Line and our network of Sleep Counsellors who work with children and adults with additional needs in the UK and Ireland.

### Discounted rate available for registered charities and non-profit organisations.

Sleep-friendly employers are accredited for three years. The re-accreditation fee is £250 after this period. At that time, employers must evidence they still meet accreditation requirements, and fees may apply for additional Sleep Champion training if required.

Sleep Action reserves the right to amend prices and availability due to errors or omissions without notice. Prices are correct at the time of publication but may be subject to change.



# Making a sleep-friendly culture a reality

To ensure you see a genuine and lasting impact, the programme is designed to be flexibly and easily implemented. It's structured to embed a sleep-friendly culture at all levels:

- All staff get accessible, engaging, easily digestible training to understand why sleep matters and how to improve it.
- Managers and supervisors get extra support to help them reinforce the message and address specific sleep-related challenges within their own teams.
- Sleep Champions get additional training to give them the confidence to lead the way and advocate for sleep-friendly attitudes and behaviours throughout the organisation.
- And all of this is underpinned by appropriate sleep-friendly HR policies that signal a real commitment to helping staff sleep better.

## Here's what some of our Sleep Champions have to say:

“ I would definitely recommend this training to anyone! It gives you great insight into the science of sleep and the impact it has on personal and professional life. I feel much more equipped to understand my own sleep and also how to support others in the workplace. I can see this as a national programme!”

“ It was insightful and allowed me to gain a greater understanding of symptoms of lack of sleep, as well as tools to suggest to those struggling with sleep”

“ The training was thoroughly worthwhile and informative and will change the way we all think about sleep!”

## Sign up to become a Sleep-friendly Employer today

When employees sleep better, they perform better.

Take the first steps to creating a sleep-friendly culture in your organisation today:

**1**  
Visit website and enquire

**2**  
Receive a tailored quote

**3**  
Become a Sleep-friendly Employer

Visit [sleepaction.org/sleep-friendly-employer](https://sleepaction.org/sleep-friendly-employer) to get started.

**About Sleep Action**  
Be the best you

Established in 1998, Sleep Action (formerly Sleep Scotland) is the UK's oldest sleep charity and leading provider of sleep support, training, and resources. Sleep Action aims to ensure everyone can thrive through healthy sleep by working with professionals, families, and employers to promote healthy sleep. With a network of over 1,500 Sleep Counsellors, we connect our clients with unrivalled expertise from professionals in multiple disciplines. Sleep Action is a division of Capella Charity.

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