

TO SLEEP, PERCHANCE TO WORK

Cigarette-break junkies have been thrown out onto the street. The nap break is the up-and-coming replacement, says Alice Tozer

The Western world is chronically deprived of sleep: only a quarter of Britons get the recommended eight hours a night. Divorced male London lawyers, aged 55, are the UK's biggest sleep scrimpers, bagging a mere four hours a night. That, bosses might be interested to learn, is the equivalent of being legally drunk.

Suffice to say that in the West we generally do not respect or

understand the magic of sleep; we are risking obesity, heart disease, strokes, depression and decreased sex drive, along with flattened creativity and mood, just for starters, by turning a blind eye to sleep. It is mystifying why workplaces leave it by the wayside and yet prioritise other health aspects, with onsite gyms and canteens serving nutritional delights.

When was the last time you saw a few beds lined up in the

corner, to enable a bit of good old fashioned power napping on the job? More fool Management: a quarter of Britons have taken days off sick due to exhaustion caused by a lack of sleep (study by Crampex), leading to millions of pounds lost in productivity.

Enter MetroNaps, a company aiming to spread the word about how and why we should sleep and nap properly. The nascent UK branch has operated since 2007 from a small office off Borough High Street, whilst its mother company was created in New York in 2003. The US pioneers were a Wall Street banker and a Health Care Economist who

sought a solution to the farcical and sad reality of American professionals napping on the job in all manner of unsuitable nooks and crannies. The answer was the EnergyPod: portable napping stations for installation in offices, gyms, call centres, hospitals and universities... anywhere there were people but not enough sleep.

Managing Director of MetroNaps UK, Marcus de Guingand, was attracted to the UK branch because – as an ex-London banker himself – he had observed that his colleagues “were just not working hard or smart; working long hours and propping themselves up with



» twelve cups of coffee a day.”

The triumvirate operating the UK branch all seem sparky, and I wonder if they practice what they preach. My eyes flitter towards the shining spaceship hiding modestly in the corner and I ask if they take a daily nap in one, which apparently they do. The pods are the result of two years' research and built to ergonomic perfection; this is why they cost a neat £7,250 to buy, although they can be rented for £299 a month. In terms of office machinery, “it's cheaper than a franking machine or a photocopier”, says Marcus – and arguably a wiser investment.

Not really beds, the pods are places of rest (you wouldn't need a shower afterwards) and could be described as glorified aeroplane seats with overhead-positioned 1950s-style globe-shaped hair dryers. I rested well for a programmed twenty minutes in the pod and could have slept if I hadn't just had a coffee. The pod was soundproof without being claustrophobic, and surprisingly comfortable, considering there was no blanket or pillow. Having my feet elevated – a circulation aid – was powerfully relaxing.

The current financial climate doesn't help to propagate a napping culture; the credit crunch, coupled with the bonus phenomenon, means that to be seen away from one's desk can signify, for many, putting oneself at a competitive disadvantage. The EnergyPods have been installed to roaring applause from staff and players alike at the Lawn Tennis Association, as well as at the Virgin Active gym in Broadgate, but have only just started spreading their seed across the business world.

Managers, in particular, would do well to stop focusing on bottoms-on-chairs time and instead start thinking more about how workers are using that time in terms of their productivity and performance. Studies show that a brief nap instantly halts our inevitable natural daily decline in performance. “Imagine the

situation”, says Marcus, “where a highly-paid executive is working ten hours a day and earning £500 per hour. If he takes twenty minutes out of his working day to have a nap, the cost will be £167 (in time forgone). Harvard and NASA figures put improved performance post-nap figures at between 30 and 34% (for up to eight hours). Even using the lowest figure for productivity improvement for each hour worked after a nap (30%), the man in question's productivity will improve by £150 per hour.”

British attitudes towards working hard are fundamentally flawed. “Whilst our perception of the French might be that they never work more than 35 hours a week (and that much only if they are not on strike)”, says Marcus, “research from the London School of Economics indicates that French workers' productivity is actually 20% higher than their UK counterparts.” Then there's Japan, where claustrophobic ‘sleep capsules’ abound. Dozing anywhere from Parliament to business meetings is viewed as

exhaustion from working hard and sacrificing sleep at night. Highly revered, many people feign so-called *inemuri* (literally meaning “to be asleep while present”) to look committed to their job.

Installing EnergyPods would be an uncharacteristically liberal step for many firms in The City and Canary Wharf, who are traditionally conservative in their ways. Marcus foresees concern from HR departments too, concerned about workers feeling like their bed was now at work – rendering the odd tongue-in-cheek suggestion from their boss that they might as well move into the office frighteningly feasible. So, MetroNaps UK is channelling a large proportion of its energy into simply educating workplaces about fatigue prevention, via seminars and individual assessments. The assessment (a series of questions) reveals an employee's so-called ‘chronotype’, which can theoretically allow the business traveller to organise his meeting abroad for the time when his unique body is likely to have

recovered from jet lag and is at its peak for mental clarity.

Why are so many of us Westerners having to relearn how to sleep? I suspect that it's partly because we don't know what sleep actually does for us. Sleep's purpose goes far beyond ridding ourselves of a feeling of tiredness: hormonal maintenance, enhanced learning ability, better heart functioning and cell repair, help with living longer, staying more active, and looking younger can result – and that's just scratching the surface. Dreaming even has a role in our daily lives, enabling us to play out different scenarios in our heads, in turn enhancing our emotional balance. Offering psychological balance and lowering our stress levels, sleep is a cheap and simple solution to a plethora of problems.

With a daytime nap in our tanks, instead of simply collapsing after work, we can foster our work-life balance. The all-round rewards will likely be dramatic, given many of us are so used to skimping on sleep. And yet, the famous adage of needing eight hours a day is frequently challenged by individuals who claim they only need four or five. Do we all have different needs? Unlikely, thinks Marcus.

“Objective studies indicate that these individuals are likely to be underperforming without realising it.”

Alas, MetroNaps doesn't trial its pods because the benefits won't necessarily show within a week's trial, although I beg to differ: just one rest at their Borough office and I'm feeling sparkier, and all this talk of sleep's rewards is deliciously enticing.

It's 5pm and the team at MetroNaps (daily naps under their belts) are leaving the building on the dot. How marvellous it must be to work for a company with sleep and health at its heart – rather than as clause number twelve in the contract that binds you. ■

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Businesswomen in MetroNaps EnergyPods

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