

HEALTH

# How Much Is Bad Sleep Hurting Your Career?

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Chronic sleep deprivation is **common** in the workplace. About 25% of U.S. adults reportedly suffer from **insomnia**, and a **similar number** report regular patterns of excessive sleepiness. Unsurprisingly, sleep disturbances **increase the risk** of cancer, depression, and heart problems. They also **decrease** productivity. **Meta-analytic studies** show that sleep deprivation is a strong inhibitor of workplace performance, primarily by deteriorating mood and affect. Lack of sleep **leads to detriments** in job performance, productivity, career progression and satisfaction, and an increase in job-related accidents, absenteeism, and counterproductive work behaviors. Conversely, better sleep has been

linked to improved [memory](#), [knowledge acquisition](#), and [learning](#). Even [short naps](#) have been found to have significant positive effects on work performance.

At the same time, there are systematic [individual differences](#) in both the quantity and quality of sleep people typically get, which are not enough to explain performance differences between people. Much like any other psychological trait or behavioral disposition, these differences can partly be attributed to [genetic factors](#). This suggests that, general parameters aside, the amount and type of sleep people may actually need to be productive depends on their own individual disposition (including not just their age and general state of health, but also their unique personality and biological configuration). Unsurprisingly, we often hear that exceptional achievers tend to sleep [very little](#) — with [Indra Nooyi needing just 4-hours of sleep per day](#), and [Tom Ford merely 3](#). As Ari Onassis famously [noted](#): “Don’t sleep too much or you’ll wake up a failure. If you sleep three hours less each night for a year, you will have an extra month and a half to succeed in.”

However, such anecdotes are rarely backed by science — the plural of anecdote is not data. So, what do we know about the actual connection between [sleep and work](#)? Assuming we spend roughly 1/3 of our adult lives on each of these two activities, what’s the relationship between the two? Here are three key lessons from science:

- *Sleep problems predate employment.* A great deal of psychological research suggests that prior to the well-documented impairments that poor sleep has on job performance, sleep disturbances are rather prevalent during the [school and university years](#). These studies — and [related research](#) establishing strong causal links between sleep problems and clinical problems even during childhood — suggest that [school and academic performance](#) are significantly lower in students who suffer from sleep problems, and that such students exist in large numbers. Since educational attainment, including how well students do in their school and academic exams, is a major gateway to [subsequent employment](#) — even [when it arguably shouldn’t be](#) — there are clearly long-term consequences of lacking a healthy sleep routine, including a high career cost. Interestingly, [meta-analytic reviews](#) suggest that simply delaying the starting time of classes can lead to significant improvements in students’ sleeping patterns, presumably because young people are naturally inclined — or enticed — to stay up late and sleep later.
- *Sleep boosts employee engagement.* There is a [multibillion dollar](#) industry devoted to boosting organizations’ engagement levels — the degree of enthusiasm, satisfaction, and productivity employees and managers show at work. Although much of this money goes to improving office designs, cafeteria food, and person-job fit — and that’s ok — there is no comparable awareness among firms of the importance that sleep quality has as a driver of [employee engagement](#). Importantly, unlike many drivers of engagement, including the competence levels of your boss (see next point), sleep is often in your control, and there are clear rewards for [improving your sleep patterns](#).

- *As always, leadership plays a big role.* Whereas **incompetent leaders** will tend to stress and alienate their employees, ruining their quality of sleep, **good leadership** will mitigate some of the detrimental effects that poor sleep habits have on performance. For this to occur, leaders must not just be competent, they must also ensure that they are not **sleep-deprived** themselves, and that they avoid **inconsistent patterns** of sleep. Even decent leaders are more likely to engage in unethical or abusive behavior if they are **sleep-deprived**. Unsurprisingly, there appear to be **multiplicative effects** of both having good quality sleep and good quality leaders — and lacking both can be particularly destructive.

So, yes, more (and better) sleep is generally much better for your career, and the earlier you start improving your sleep habits, the more you can expect to accomplish. For all the heroic showing-off underpinning claims — and bragging — about how little we sleep, even if you are using that awake time for something productive, chances are your performance and career will take a hit in the long run — not to mention your personal life. One of the best ways to ensure a productive day at the office is to make sure you're getting a good night's sleep.

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