

Media Release

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Fatigue management takes off

22 October 2009: As evidence mounts that Australians are increasingly working longer hours, professional services firm Deloitte has highlighted the importance of managing fatigue as a key risk for organisations seeking to maximise workplace performance while minimising the workplace accidents that currently cost millions of dollars a year.

According to Deloitte partner Janet Lewell, understanding exactly when performance starts to be impacted by fatigue, the need to compare downtime to shiftwork for all workers, the relationship of work hours and sleep debt levels and the ability of workers to “self monitor” fatigue are issues currently subject to intense debate by experts.

“Organisations are now starting to quantify their fatigue risk; identify individual levels of fatigue, assess the level of compliance with fatigue legislation and determine the adequacy of policies and procedures,” she said.

With the current focus on optimising performance, fatigue management is generating momentum as organisations start to realise its importance.

Fatigue Science has developed a biometric model to measure and interpret circadian sleep rhythms and other elements that impact on fatigue. People can now wear a ‘sleep band’. This is essentially a wrist watch which measures wrist movement – like a pedometer but for the wrist. The band defines a person’s level of activity, and based on that activity, can then determine whether a person is awake or asleep. The scientists equate fatigue to blood-alcohol levels: if a person has been awake for 18 hours, it’s the equivalent of having a .05 level of alcohol in their body; if they have been awake for 21 hours, it’s equivalent to a .08 level.

“These sleep bands allow us to see patterns once the data is entered into a Self Organising Map. You can pull out profiles of people who have had the most incidents or the people who haven’t had a single incident and then look for patterns in their sleeping habits. Further data on sleep patterns and accidents, employee age for example, can then be added or extracted.

We can then advise people about what can be an optimum performance and the standards you need to maintain to mitigate risk. A company might then want to design ideal roster patterns and shift lengths; setting a standard on how many hours straight their employees at risk might be able to work, or how much of a break they need between shifts,” Ms Lewell said.

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Fatigue management has also become more prominent since the introduction of legislation in September 2008. This placed the onus on organisations to be responsible for the welfare of their employees, by making sure they understood potential workplace risks and exerted controls to minimise them.

“Companies are just starting to realise the real cost of not taking action. Accidents attributable to fatigue cost hundreds of millions of dollars globally, each year. If companies aren’t doing the right thing by their people – providing a safer environment and heightening awareness of potential risks to the firm and employees, there are serious consequences,” said Ms Lewell.

“By bringing objective, evidence-based data about fatigue risk we can reduce fatigue risk, protect organisations as well as their employees, reduce the number of workplace incidents and create a safer, healthier and more productive workplace. Companies can change by designing better roster patterns, altering shift lengths, setting a standard on how many hours straight their employees are able to work and how much of a break is needed between shifts,” concluded Ms Lewell.

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