

10 Ways...

10 Ways to Minimize Employee Health & Safety Hazards Associated with Shift Work

With increasing levels of technology, today's work force is constantly struggling to keep up with work demands. In order to reach productivity goals, we are required to work 24 hour days. Often these 24 hour schedules can cause strain and negatively affect a worker's safety, health and productivity. While many companies cannot avoid shift work, the following organizational strategies can be implemented to help lessen the potential negative effects of shift work:

1. Consider alternatives to permanent night shifts.

Workers never really acclimatize themselves to night shifts because they often return to a daytime schedule on their days off. In addition, sleeping during the day is lighter, less restful and is often cut short. Therefore, circadian rhythms, which dictate our sleep/wake patterns, never fully adjust. Rotating night shift schedules allows for more normal sleep patterns and may be easier on workers.

2. Keep consecutive night shifts to a minimum.

Some research suggests that only 2-4 nights should be worked in a row before a couple of days off. This keeps circadian rhythms from being disturbed and limits sleep loss (NIOSH: Pub. 97-145).

3. Avoid quick shift changes.

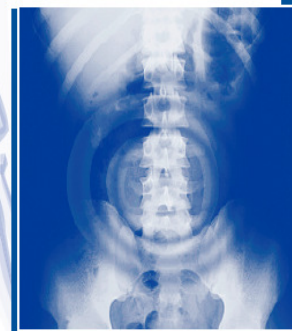
Research recommends that at the end of a night shift, at least 24-48 hours should be provided before rotating to another shift. A work schedule that only allots 7-10 hours before rotating will find many employees returning to work tired, which can lead to accidents and losses in productivity.

4. Plan some free weekends.

In the case where a seven days per week schedule is implemented, it is important to allow 1-2 full weekends off each month. "Loss of contact with friends and family is a major problem for shift workers. Weekends are the best time to meet up with family and friends." (NIOSH, Pub. 97-145)

5. Avoid several days of work followed by 4-7 day "mini-vacations".

The several days on, followed by several days off work schedule can be very fatiguing, especially for older employees. Although this type of work schedule is favorable to younger workers, the recovery time can produce excessive fatigue and potentially damage a worker's health. This type of scheduling should only be used when there is no other option (i.e. when long distance travel is required).



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6. Keep long shifts and overtime to a minimum.

The addition of extra hours onto a night shift schedule can lead to fatigue and health and safety issues. Extra hours contribute to a decrease in recovery time. If 12-hour shifts are scheduled, a 3 days on, 2-days off pattern is optimal for recovery

7. Consider different lengths for shifts.

Adjusting shift lengths to correspond with workloads can increase worker productivity, as the worker's energy levels will be in direct proportion to the work performed. If possible, heavier work should be scheduled for shorter shifts, while lighter work can be given longer shifts.

8. Examine start-end times.

Consider moving start-end times away from rush hour. This will allow for less mental stress. Morning shifts should not start too early (5:00 - 6:00 a.m.) because it will cut into a worker's natural "night sleep".

9. Keep the schedule regular and predictable.

Studies have shown that very irregular scheduling can contribute to accidents as well as possible health damage. Regular scheduling also allows workers to arrange their social schedule.

10. Examine rest breaks.

For night shift work, the common break times are often not long enough to allow for mental and physical recovery. Jobs requiring heavy mental or physical work should be given more frequent breaks to avoid accidents and keep up productivity.

Other organizational strategies that can help relieve the effects of shift work are redistributing workloads, improving work environments and increasing awareness.

"Because such a change is complex, it is a good idea to consult an Ergonomics Specialist for help in work scheduling and evaluation". (NIOSH: Pub. 97-145).

