

A Hard Day's Night

The effect of night shift work on work/life balance

Introduction

Shift work has always been a part of working life, but in recent years there has been more emphasis on its effects on those who work shifts as we are perceived to be moving towards a ‘24-hour society’.

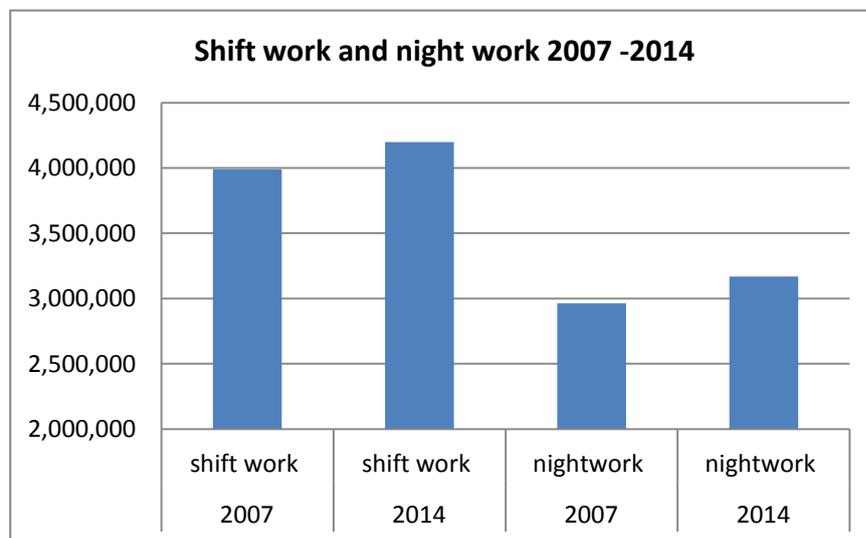
Much of the attention has been on the health effects which can be considerable. There is a significant body of evidence that shift work, and in particular night work, can lead to cardiovascular problems, obesity, diabetes and breast cancer. Shift work is also linked to stomach problems and ulcers, depression, and an increased risk of injury.

However, there is less attention given to the effect that night shifts can have on the work/life balance of those who work them, in particular the way it influences peoples home life and relationships. This report looks at some of the research into the social effects of night shift working and shows that it can have a considerable effect on our lives as well as our health, but that steps can be taken to help reduce the impact.

Extent of shift work

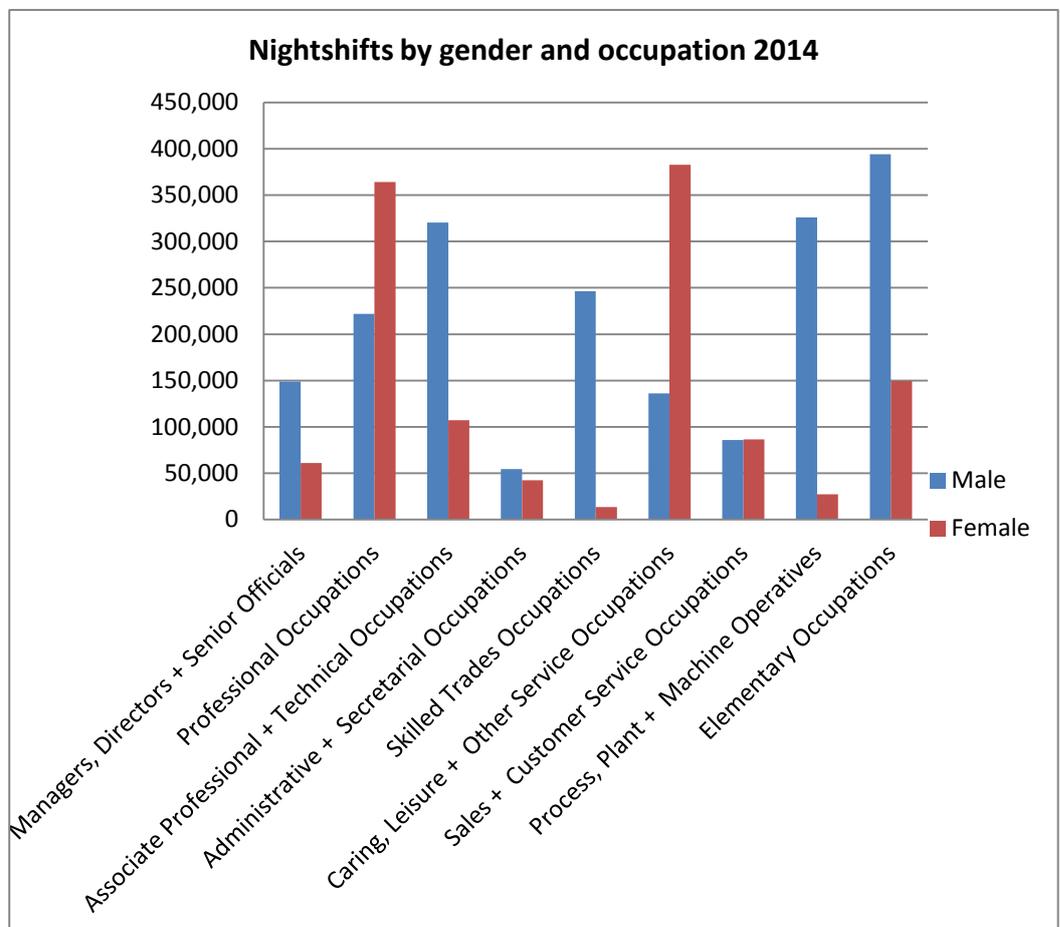
An analysis by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) into figures for 1999-2009¹ showed that the proportion of people engaged in shift work remained relatively constant over the ten year period.

More recent research by the TUC shows that, according to the Labour Force Survey, the proportion of people who work shifts most of the time rose by 5.2% between 2007 and 2014; and the number of employees regularly working night shifts had increased by 6.9%.



The type of people who are working nights has changed. While previously it was mainly men in manufacturing plants where there were continuous processes to maintain, today it is those who are working in healthcare services, the personal protection occupations (such as security guards) and the transport and communications industries that are most likely to work night shifts.

Men are still more likely than women to work shifts, but the number of women working nights is certainly significant, and growing at a much faster rate. 9.7% of women in employment report that they regularly work night shifts compared to 14.9% men, but the number of women working regular nights has increased by 12% since 2007, as opposed to a 4% increase for men. In several sectors, including social and health care, the number of women night workers is considerably greater than the number of men. There are also proportionately more people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds working at night compared to the overall UK workforce².



One of the biggest changes however has been the age profile of those who work shifts. The HSE research found that young people under 24 were considerably more likely to work shifts than older workers, and are now twice as likely to work shifts compared to young people twenty years ago³.

Effect on work/life balance

There can be no doubt that, for most people, working during the night is likely to affect their social or family life. In their guide to flexible working and work/life balance⁴, The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas), states that the majority of families (68%) with dependent children have two working parents. However, in addition there are over 1.2 million families headed by a lone parent who is working⁵, and 10% of the working-age population act as some form of carer⁶. For all of these groups, working nights could have a significant disruptive effect on their family life, on their relationships and on their children or dependants.

As far back as 2001, Professor J.M. Harrington, one of Britain's leading experts in occupational health concluded⁷ that shift work, and in particular night-working could cause "considerable disruption of family and social activities as many of these rhythms of the general population are orientated around the day". He added that "childcare, housework, shopping, and leaving a partner alone at night can all lead to marital strain and family dysfunction."

A number of researchers since then have shown that he was right and shift work in general, or night work in particular, can have a considerable effect on work/life balance.

A Scandinavian analysis of existing research published in 2008⁸, concluded that "there was strong evidence that nonstandard work-hours had negative influence on work/life balance and some evidence that it had a negative influence on children's well-being and marital satisfaction. Amongst the issues that were identified were a greater level of marital problems and divorce⁹, and behavioural and emotional difficulties with children¹⁰. Married night workers also spend less time with their spouse¹¹. Twenty-one of the studies looked at, indicated that night work was more detrimental to a good work/life balance than rotating shifts.

One of the most striking conclusions from a number of studies is that it is not just the shift, but how the shift fits the person that effects outcomes¹². Needs and preferences differ. Some research has shown that a number of couples seek to have one partner working nights because it assists with the child care¹³.

Another factor is the rewards. Where the rewards are greater, the effects appear to be reduced¹⁴. This may be because those with higher incomes can afford better childcare arrangements or can improve the quality time they spend with their partners or children.

The Scandinavian research of 2008¹⁵ concluded that out of 17 studies they looked at, 13 indicated that "Employee influence over work schedule was associated with better work/life balance in several studies", indicating that simple changes such as being able to choose which days you work and influence rosters could have some positive impact. Later research has confirmed this. A special issue of one of the leading occupational health journals was dedicated to work-time control and its editorial¹⁶ concluded that giving employees more control over their shift patterns could be expected to "advance a better work/non-work balance, as (it) enables the

adjustment of working time to meet obligations, needs, and activities in private life.”

In addition there can be significant additional costs involved in working nights for those with children who have to make special arrangements because of their working hours. Although some people with school-age children who work nights can get home in time to do the school run before they go to bed, many are unable to, and single parents with a dependent child cannot leave them alone overnight. Research by the Daycare Trust highlights the major gaps that exist in childcare provision for shift workers, which can exclude single parents from any employment that involves evening or night work¹⁷.

It is also clear that many employers are breaking the law in relation to night workers. The Working Time Regulations state that a night worker’s average normal hours of work must not exceed eight hours for each 24 hour period, and night workers should receive free health assessments. The TUC vulnerable worker project¹⁸ unearthed considerable evidence that many industries were ignoring both these requirements.

What can be done to mitigate the effects of night working?

One way of preventing an adverse effect on work/life balance is simply to try to minimise night working. The NHS is one of the largest employers of night workers with over a quarter of NHS staff regularly working between the hours of 7:00pm and 7:00am. They introduced a “Hospitals at Night” project aimed at reducing the levels of staffing needed at night, in particular by junior doctors, without reducing the service provided. This has proved to be both popular with the staff and also beneficial to patient care¹⁹.

Of course simply not working nights is often not possible, so it is important to seek to ensure that, where people have to work nights, it is done in a way which ensures that it does not adversely affect their family and social life.

Both Acas²⁰ and the HSE²¹ have produced advice for employers on shift patterns that may mitigate against some of the worst problems arising from shift-working, although the HSE advice relates primarily to the health aspects. However a recent report for the Home Office noted that, from the workers’ perspective “there is no such thing as a good shift system”, i.e. there will never be a single approach to night shift work that will suit everyone²².

Some shift patterns are considered to be more beneficial in maintaining a better work/life balance, such as the “compressed working week” whereby longer shifts are worked over a shorter period, such as three twelve hour shifts rather than five shorter shifts²³, but this depends on the circumstances of the individual worker. Nevertheless, changing shift patterns are among the most stressful aspects of night work and rapidly rotating shifts are difficult to adapt to physically and can cause difficulties in managing childcare and coordinating with a working partner.

There are people who prefer working nights, either because of the additional financial rewards which sometimes accompany night-working, or because it suits

their lifestyle. As Professor Harrington said²⁴ “On the positive side, those shift-workers who like relatively solitary leisure pursuits or who abhor the crowds often find that shift scheduling provides them with greater opportunities to do what they want to do in their non-working time”. This helps explain why younger single people are considerably more likely to work nights than those with a partner and/or children. However, these people are in a small minority, and many people work nights because of economic necessity.

The trade union Unison recommends that “Employing people who choose to work regular nights limits the total number of people exposed to the adverse effects of night work and working nights-only is preferable to the body in comparison to changing shifts. However, workers should be made aware of the possible negative consequences of prolonged night work.”²⁵

Another option is to have an element of “self-rostering”. This will depend on the type of workplace as it is necessary to ensure that there is always sufficient staff, but shifwork is likely to be less stressful when it is flexible to employees’ needs so that they can swap shifts²⁶. Many “traditional” ways of working could, in practice, provide flexibility, so where shift swapping among staff is practised informally and accepted by management, this may well provide as much flexibility as possible given the local situation. Self-rostering also allows workers to work the same shifts as any friends they have at work. This can greatly help in maintaining a social life.

In addition, in a number of European countries, in particular Sweden, Germany and, more recently France, night crèches have been set up to assist night workers²⁷. These allow shift workers the flexibility that is missing from standard child-care facilities.

However the key to ensuring that the work/life balance of workers is not completely wrecked by night-working is to ensure that, where it is introduced, it is done with consent and the full involvement of the recognised trade unions. This will ensure that the shift arrangements best suit those that are going to have to work them.

Recommendations

- Employers and unions should seek to ensure that night working is only introduced where necessary.
- Where night working is introduced into a workplace, no existing workers should be forced to work nights.
- There is no ideal shift system but the pattern should be negotiated between the recognised unions and employers to ensure that it meets the needs of the enterprise and the workforce.
- Workers should have some element of control over their rotas, so that they can ensure that the shifts they work are best suited to their individual circumstances.

- Workers should always have sufficient notice of their shift patterns so they can make arrangements well in advance. Changes at short notice should be avoided.
- The remuneration paid to those working nights should properly reflect the likely additional costs of childcare and inconvenience that night shifts can entail.
- Night workers should have access to the same facilities as day workers. This includes hot meals and drinks, rest areas etc.
- There should be greater enforcement of the Working Time Regulations which state that a night workers average normal hours of work must not exceed eight hours for each 24 hour period, and night workers should receive free health assessments.
- There needs to be up-to-date advice on shift-working produced jointly by the HSE, ACAS and the EHRC to ensure that employers and unions have authoritative guidance on what shift patterns are most likely to mitigate against the effects of night working on the health and work/life balance of workers.

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