

Got up on the wrong side of the bed? Your work will show it

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A new study of telephone customer service representatives shows just how important it is for employees to start the workday in a good mood.

Researchers found that employees' moods when they clocked in tended to affect how they felt the rest of the day. Early mood was linked to their perceptions of customers and to how they reacted to customers' moods.

And most importantly to managers, employee mood had a clear impact on performance, including both how much work employees did and how well they did it.

"We saw that employees could get into these negative spirals where they started the day in a [bad mood](#) and just got worse over the course of the day," said Steffanie Wilk, associate professor of management and human resources at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"That's why it is so important for companies to find ways to help their workers start off the day on the right foot."

Wilk conducted the study with Nancy Rothbard of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Their results appear online in the *Academy of Management Journal* and will be published in a future print edition.

The study involved 29 customer service representatives who handled phone calls made by customers to a large U.S. insurance company. Over

the course of about three weeks, the participants filled out measures of their mood at the beginning of the workday and two other random times during each day. At those two other points in the day, they also indicated how their latest customer seemed to them, such as whether they were rude, calm, insulting or cheerful.

Independent coders listened to the calls and also provided more objective ratings of customers' moods as well as rated how well the representative handled calls. In addition, the researchers measured how many calls the representatives took each day, number of calls transferred, and the percentage of time that representatives were available to customers.

The results showed that when employees started the day in a [good mood](#), they tended to rate customers more positively through the day. They also tended to feel more positively themselves as the day progressed.

"Starting off at work wearing rose-colored glasses – or gray glasses – shapes the way we perceive events the rest of the day," Wilk said.

However, while the start-of-the-day mood sets a tone, the results showed that employees' moods could and did change, Wilk said. And the good news is that employees were more likely to see an improvement in a bad mood than the loss of a good mood.

In 17 percent of the cases studied, employees who started the day with a higher positive mood than normal would later move to a below-average mood after one of their calls.

But in 40 percent of the cases the opposite occurred: an employee in a below-average mood for themselves moved into an above-average mood after a call.

"Positive customers were related to workers' positive moods," Wilk said.

But, perhaps surprisingly, negative customers didn't hurt employees who were already in a bad mood.

"We call it the 'misery loves company' effect," she said. "If you're in a bad mood, it seems to help to talk to someone else who is feeling as bad as you. Maybe the employees were able to blow off some steam by reacting to rude customers."

Companies have a reason to be concerned about employee moods – they affect performance, the study showed. But the effects may be different depending on the mood.

For these [customer service](#) representatives, a good mood generally meant that the quality of their work improved. A higher-than-normal positive mood was related to greater verbal fluency on the phone – minimal use of pauses in speech and fillers such as "um" and "uh" and less verbal fumbling, such as tripping over words or mumbling.

A higher-than-normal negative mood was related to employees doing less work – they tended to answer fewer calls and needed more breaks between calls when they were feeling bad.

"Employees knew that they were being monitored and that their supervisors knew when they weren't taking calls. Still, when they were in a bad mood they tended to be less available, which suggested they needed time away," Wilk said. "They just couldn't sit there, take the calls and pretend."

The research has clear implications for managers: do everything you can to help your [employees](#) start the day in a good mood.

"We've all heard of companies that start the day with calisthenics or some team-building exercise. Many of us laugh at that, but there may be something to it," Wilk said.

On the other hand, Wilk said she has worked with companies that will dock pay or give a demerit to an employee who is even one minute late.

"So if you've had a rough commute and you have to rush to your desk, and you know you're going to be in trouble, that's not a good way to start your [workday](#). Once an employee starts that way, it could have negative consequences for the company the whole day."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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