

Study finds small scheduling improvements boost health and well-being

March 4 2019



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Improving schedule stability in the retail sector means better sleep for sales associates, according to a new study co-authored by a leading UChicago scholar of work-life issues.

The study was a randomized experiment conducted at Gap Inc., designed to improve multiple aspects of scheduling practices in hourly retail jobs—from predictability to consistency to workers' input. The report focused on sales associates' health and well-being—both before and after the intervention was implemented.

The report examined the effects of a scheduling intervention held at 28 stores—15 in the San Francisco Bay area and 13 in the Chicago metropolitan area. Researchers found that following the experiment, sales associates reported their sleep quality improved by 6 percent to 8 percent.

"We found that even modest improvements to work schedules can make a meaningful difference to workers' health and well-being," said Susan Lambert, associate professor at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, who studies how to create a better model of work for both hourly low-wage employees and employers. She co-authored the report with scholars from the University of California Hastings College of Law and the University of North Carolina Kenan-Flagler Business School.

Poor [sleep quality](#) and sleep deprivation have negative short- and long-term effects on health and impede the ability to learn. According to the study, many sales associates support themselves and lack necessities such as food and housing and are financially stressed due to the inability to secure a minimum number of work hours. Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that they also have a hard time sleeping.

"Employers may not be aware of the ways unstable schedules produce significant financial and health hardships on many of their valued employees," said study co-author Joan C. Williams, Distinguished Professor of Law and director of the Center for WorkLife Law at University of California, Hastings College of the Law.

Highlights of the study include:

- 47 percent of workers reported that their work schedule interfered with their sleep.
- 51 percent of workers reported at least moderate food insecurity in the past month.
- 26 percent were late on utility payments in the past three months.
- 19 percent delayed going to the doctor or getting prescriptions filled because of financial concerns in the past three months.
- The effects of the intervention on other health outcomes varied by subgroup. For example, the intervention reduced stress among parents and workers holding a second job.

"This important research sheds light on the challenges experienced by people with unstable work schedules," said Claire Gibbons, senior program officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "The findings show that a more predictable work schedule can improve workers' sleep and stress levels—both of which are key factors in living a healthy life."

The findings provide evidence for businesses and for legislative efforts of the potential health benefits of improving the stability and predictability of scheduling in retail and beyond.

"It has been well known that management practices can have an impact on workers' [health](#). What our study shows is that it is possible to have sensible management policies that improve workers' lives without compromising on the bottom line," said Assoc. Prof. Saravanan Kesavan, the Sarah Graham Kenan Scholar at the University of North Carolina Kenan-Flagler Business School.

A previous report from Lambert, Williams and Kesavan found that stable scheduling at the Gap produced a 7 percent boost in median sales and a 5 percent increase in labor productivity. The latest study highlights

the idea that stable scheduling is not only a matter of profit margin, but of corporate social responsibility.

More information: Stable Scheduling Increases Productivity and Sales. worklifelaw.org/publications/Stable-Scheduling-Study-Report.pdf

Provided by University of Chicago

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