

Individual Differences

I remember a teamwork training module titled “Appreciating Individual Differences.” Its purpose was to emphasize that people should be able to work well together even though they have different personalities, preferences, strengths, and weaknesses. The goal of the training was to encourage people to appreciate one another despite their differences. That is a worthy goal; yet, people have difficulty understanding and accepting that people are different. That is a subject for a teamwork article.

People differ in the areas of sleep and fatigue. As a result, a fatigue risk management system needs to consider individual differences. What are some individual differences that need to be considered?

- **Amount of sleep:** Although most people need about eight hours of sleep in order to function well, some people are so called “short sleepers” and do well on less than six hours. Others may need 10 or more hours of sleep. I think the short sleepers might be well suited to work rotating shifts. The CRM regulations require companies to provide an opportunity for eight hours of sleep. That should be the goal for most of us particularly if we work 12-hour shifts.
- **Larks or owls (chronotypes):** The larks are ones who prefer to rise early in the morning and go to bed early. The owls like to sleep late and stay up late at night. Some control rooms allow people to work straight days or straight nights based on their preferences. The people in the control room negotiate with one another about whether they will work days or nights. As long as the shifts are covered, management is satisfied. Other control rooms prefer that all people suffer equally with the rotating shifts.
- **Age and Experience of Shiftwork:** As we age, the ability to cope with shiftwork may become more difficult. We are also more likely to have sleep problems. Of course, I have worked with younger adults who had to switch jobs because they could not handle rotating shifts. Even if older adults may experience problems working rotating shifts, they may have developed coping strategies through the years. It is important that a fatigue risk management system includes an emphasis on regular physical examinations and treatments for sleep disorders.

- **Personality Traits:** A study from the year 2000 “Sleep Patterns, Shiftwork, and Individual Differences: A Comparison of Onshore and Offshore Control-Room Operators” included neuroticism as a personality trait that affected how people handled shiftwork. It indicated that negativity and anxiety might lead to sleep problems and difficulties in adapting to shiftwork.

A fatigue risk management system should include training and education on how individual differences, including our personalities, can affect our fatigue management abilities. Each of us should select fatigue countermeasures that work for us both on the job and away from the job.

Your fatigue management plan should include:

- The adequate quantity of quality sleep you need
- Exercise on at least five days of each week
- Proper nutrition and plenty of water
- Social and recreational activities with families and friends
- Regular physical examinations with a medical professional
- Ongoing self-study and education about fatigue management, shiftwork, and sleep

Those items are necessary for any of us, even with our individual differences. Appreciate the differences. Accentuate the positive.

