

MANAGING FATIGUE IN THE WORKPLACE



On 19 August 2022, the BBC published an article about two Ethiopian Airlines pilots overshooting the runway after falling asleep.

According to the article, the pilots fell asleep at 3 ,000 ft (11 000m), missing an airport runway before waking up and safely landing the plane.

Air traffic tried to contact them after they overshot the point of descent into Ethiopia's Addis Ababa airport. The pilots eventually woke up and landed the plane on its second approach, the Aviation Herald said.

Fatigue is a complex state characterised by a lack of alertness and reduced mental and physical performance, often accompanied by drowsiness, sleepiness, exhaustion, reduced or lack of energy. It is associated with spending long hours awake, an inadequate amount of sleep over an extended period, or insufficient quality of sleep.

A fatigued employee has a higher risk of incidents or accidents at the workplace. Working while fatigued can be dangerous. The effect of fatigue on the brain is as harmful as drunk driving. Fatigue affects employees' memory, balance, concentration, decision-making, and driving skills.

From a practical viewpoint it is doubtful whether fatigue in the workplace can be eliminated altogether, but it can certainly be controlled and limited by proper management. To achieve this objective, a holistic approach, based on best practices, is required.

In a previous article we discussed *the importance of ergonomics in the workplace*, in this article we identify some of the causes of fatigue and give guidance with the development of a Fatigue Management Plan.

What causes fatigue?

Causes of fatigue can be summarised into 2 different categories.

Work-related causes:

- Work time arrangements
- High physical workloads
- Temperature extremes
- Excessive noise
- Work stress
- Poor ergonomic design of workstations and equipment

Non-work-related causes:

Undiagnosed medical conditions – many diseases and disorders can trigger fatigue, for example:

- Sleep disorders, such as sleep apnoea or restless leg syndrome
- Chronic fatigue syndrome
- Tuberculosis
- Chronic pain
- Heart problems
- HIV

In addition, the following elements can contribute to fatigue: living conditions (housing and nutrition); alcohol and substance abuse; lack of exercise; and certain medications. It is important to note that it is the employee's responsibility to inform the employer of any health condition they suffer from or medication they are on.

To mention a few effects that are associated with fatigue: desire to sleep; lack of concentration; impaired memory; poor judgement' difficulty in problem solving; reduced hand-eye coordination; reduced visual perception; reduced vigilance; slower reaction times; neglect of non-essential activities; reduced capacity for effective interpersonal communication etc.

What is the goal of a Fatigue Management Plan

In general, the goal of a Fatigue Management Plan is to maintain and, where possible, enhance safety, performance and productivity in operational settings, and manage the risk of fatigue in the workplace.

The development of a Fatigue Management Plan will assist organisations to develop strategies to effectively control the risks of fatigue. It sets out a risk management approach based on consultation with the workforce. This approach requires the organisation's management to–

- identify fatigue-related hazards and factors that contribute to fatigue;
- assess the risks of fatigue;
- implement risk control measures;
- monitor and review the effectiveness of the controls;
- ensure that all individuals are alert and fit for work;
- compile and document a Fatigue Management Plan.

How to develop a Fatigue Management Plan

The recommended process for developing and maintaining a successful Fatigue Management Plan consists of the following interrelated elements.

○ Securing and maintaining senior management commitment

The Fatigue Management Programme has named the designations that are responsible for different actions. The organisation's management is responsible for ensuring that the Fatigue Management Plan is implemented.

○ Establishing a Fatigue Management Committee

Given the complexities involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and review of a Fatigue Management Plan and the various disciplines and departments involved, close co-operation and effective management are essential. The organisation should establish a Fatigue Management Committee to discuss and address the circumstances leading to fatigue and the control measures necessary. This function can form part of the Health & Safety Committee operation.

o **Developing a policy and Fatigue Management Plan**

The aim of the policy and plan is to educate, inform and ensure a safe working environment.

o **Communicating policy and Fatigue Management Plan**

Managers, together with the Fatigue Management Committee, will ensure that the policy and fatigue management plan has been effectively communicated, implemented, managed and reviewed.

o **Training**

Training gives the workforce the skills and knowledge needed to work with risk controls for fatigue and informs them of the fatigue-related hazards and risks in the workplace. Fatigue Management Plan training must be scheduled to ensure that the employees have the skills and knowledge they need to assist the organisation's management in implementing the plan successfully.

o **Managing fatigue**

The organisation will ensure that all employees have access to confidential and professional assistance to address and resolve work and personal issues that might cause fatigue. Where a manager or supervisor believes that an individual may be fatigued at the start of a shift, they will assess the situation and address it accordingly.

o **Monitoring, reviewing, and modifying**

All aspects of a Fatigue Management Plan will be reviewed at regular intervals to ensure the continuing suitability, adequacy and effectiveness of the controls to eliminate risk.

Conclusion

As employees form the backbone of a company, fatigue should be recognised as a legitimate and significant workplace hazard to be addressed by means of appropriate measures. The origins of fatigue are rather complex, and an integrated approach is essential to manage fatigue. Strategies to manage fatigue at work should be based on a sound knowledge of the physiological factors behind fatigue and what is causing fatigue, as well as practical countermeasures to reduce fatigue.

*SERR Synergy assists businesses with Occupational Health and Safety compliance through the development of the necessary policies, documentation, training and support relating to information e.g. **Guidelines when working from home**.* Our team of OHS Professionals can relieve the stress and concerns that might affect your business's capability to stay operational.

About the Authors: Leon Visser started his career in the Security and Safety Industry in 1998, where he also served in the SAPS. He currently holds a diploma in Risk Management from the University of South Africa and has completed various certificates in emergency preparedness. During 2019, he joined the OHS team at SERR Synergy for a change of pace, moving from security to health and safety, and is currently studying towards an International Certificate in Occupational Health and Safety at NEBOSH. As a professional Health and Safety Practitioner he is registered with SAIOSH.

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