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Policy Brief

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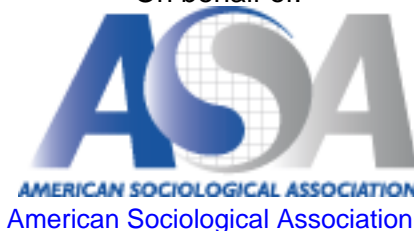
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CHANGING WORK, CHANGING HEALTH: CAN REAL WORK-TIME FLEXIBILITY PROMOTE HEALTH BEHAVIORS AND WELL-BEING?

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SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

JHSB Policy Brief

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RESEARCH PROBLEM & DATA

Workers increasingly report time scarcity as a result of two important trends: All adults in a household now tend to work for pay (meaning no back-up homemaker) and a competitive global economy pushes employers to require fewer workers to do more with less. Nevertheless, rules and expectations about the social organization of work time are outdated, having been designed for a different type of workforce and different types of work in the last century.

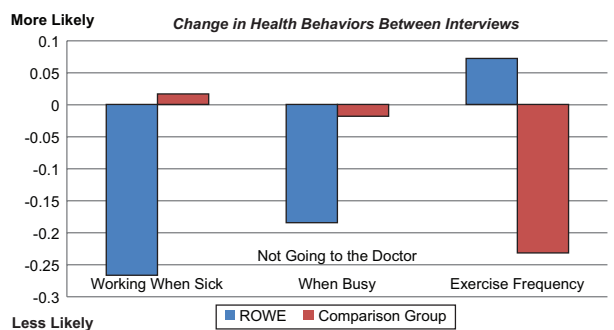
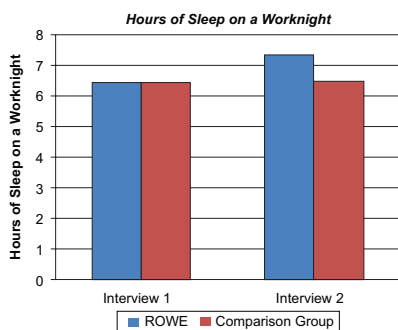
A corporate headquarters was rolling out a workplace innovation called ROWE (Results Only Work Environment), which pushes managers and employees to focus on results, not time spent on the job. ROWE prompts employees and managers to rethink their expectations about when and where work is done. We treated this broad flexibility initiative as a “natural experiment,” surveying 325 employees before and six months after the ROWE initiative, as well as a comparison group of 334 employees who did not participate in the initiative. Using structural equation models, we tested changes in health-promoting behaviors and health outcomes among the employees participating in the ROWE initiative compared to those who did not participate, and investigated possible mechanisms that might explain that relationship.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Taken-for-granted clockworks of work (such as everyone starting and ending at the same times, working Mondays through Fridays, attending regular but low-value meetings with no real objective) matter for employee health and well-being and can be modified. Our study shows that moving from time at work as a signal of productivity and commitment to a focus on results can create a working environment fostering healthy behavior and well-being. This has important policy implications, suggesting that flexibility initiatives creating broad access to time flexibility encourage employees to take good care of themselves. Narrower flexibility policies allow some “accommodations” for family needs but are less likely to promote employee health and well-being or to be available to all employees.

KEY FINDINGS

- Employees participating in the ROWE innovation report getting almost an extra hour (52 minutes) of sleep on nights before work.
- Employees participating in the ROWE innovation manage their health differently: They are less likely to feel obligated to work when sick and more likely to go to a doctor when necessary, even when busy.
- The ROWE innovation increases employees’ sense of schedule control and reduces their work-family conflict which, in turn, improves their sleep quality, energy levels, self-reported health, and personal mastery while decreasing employees’ emotional exhaustion and psychological distress.



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For full text of paper go to: <http://www.asanet.org/journals/jhsb/>

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