

The Best *Vs.* The Worst

by Mackenzie Wilson

The World's Best Safety Experts tackle the worst and most persistent safety problems.

Fatigue Risk Management

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Fatigue is a part of our lives, affecting our reflexes, ability to anticipate danger and decision making. What should safety leaders do about it, especially in the workplace? SafeStart author Larry Wilson invited experts from world-class companies to join him for another round of SafeConnection Panel discussions to see how they are tackling this perennial challenge.

To begin, he took the temperature with the group: is fatigue primarily a personal responsibility or a company one? Can it be tested reliably? And how much control should a business exert in this area?

Make no mistake, an organisation that fails to respond to fatigue risk management is in line for dangerous consequences:

- Michael Cooke (Vice President – Social and Environmental Responsibility, Jabil Group) explains that he first realised the detrimental effects of fatigue while working at a chemicals company, with trucks travelling with big, dangerous cargos. "Some nasty accidents were happening", he says, "and we lost a bid because we decided to tighten our demands on fatigue management practices, like drivers can only drive so long at once, need to stop and sleep at night, etc. One of our competitors decided that they could do without all of that, got the bid, but unfortunately had a very tragic accident": a customer was even willing to pay more for their services after that. **"It sadly took a fatality for the customer to realise it wasn't just about costs"**, concluded Michael.

In their customary fashion, industry leaders shared hard-won knowledge from the front line on how fatigue can throw up unexpected issues:

- "When we moved to a 12-hour shift", says Alex Carnevale (President, Dynacast International), "some people were really excited because they would get a

seven-day period off. But anecdotally, I felt we weren't as sharp, so I started putting some data to it and looked at a few metrics". The result was that the incident count was raised at particular points: the end of the shift, the beginning of the shift and the last one or two days of the four-day cycle. This discovery pointed towards fatigue as the decisive factor. "It was not a popular decision" he says, "but eventually I made the decision to go back to the eight-hour shifts".

- Arun Subramanian (Senior Associate Vice President & Head HSE, Coromandel International Limited) also noted patterns of this sort, with night-shift disruption of workers' circadian rhythms an ongoing dilemma: "One thing that is very common in the manufacturing industry is shift worker fatigue", he observes. There is also a problem on the project side where you have 24/7 work in the mix, but there "you have a floating population, and can manage it a little better".

Workers in occupations requiring long shifts must develop the right mindset going in:

- Hector Salazar (Director H&S, Dragados Canada Ltd) notes that "in the oil and gas industry and construction, 12-hours a day, six days a week is what normally happens". He has found that workers coming to remote locations to work in this way are aware of and mentally prepared for these long shifts.

If rotations are part of the productivity approach, give your employees notice in advance so that they can adapt both psychologically (mindset) and biologically (circadian rhythms) to the change:

- The workforce at Dr. Praveena Dorathi's company (JLL, where she serves as Environment Health & Safety Head, Work Dynamics, West Asia) is decentralised over different client sites, with some but not all operating 24/7.



- Dr. Praveena agrees: "Apart from ensuring shift work doesn't become repetitive, we also **shuffle workers and tasks** because complacency sets in when a job is continually being repeated".

Employers can look to personnel differentiation to overcome the fatigue risk management challenge:

- That means addressing fatigue differently depending on the type of worker explains Edward Stephens (Global HSE/SA Audit, Assurance & Senior Lead Investigator, ABB Robotics and Discrete Automation): "In the workforce you have office personnel, workers on the shop floor, and service personnel", he says. "The way you think about fatigue, productivity, quality, safety, has to **address those categories differently.**"

- For office personnel, the biggest challenge is that they are often sitting all day without getting the chance to get up and move their bodies. "By doing that", Ed observes, "we are not giving our bodies the resources it needs to process and manage stress correctly".

- Conversely, on a shop floor where people are always moving around and burning calories, the biggest challenge for them is sleep and making sure they are actually decompressing and resting when they go home. (He also adds that the service group is a mix of the previous two: a better combination.)

Repetitive stress fatigue is a category that must not be neglected, but the psychological dimension must be watched carefully as it can easily throw up counterproductive outcomes.

- "One focus [at Coromandel] is on the office workers continually sitting at a desk", says Arun, drawing attention to an environment that can be overlooked but remains important "especially if you don't have an ergonomic work table".

- Anthony Panepinto, PhD (Senior Director Health, Safety, and Environment Affairs, Proctor & Gamble) notes that P&G also shared that ergonomic focus during the 80s. "The same goes for the maintenance team who have to work on the shop floor: **certain roles are difficult by nature**, working continuously in the same position".

- He notes that at a previous workplace they tried to standardise as many of these activities as possible, working with, among others, a physiotherapist, office administration and safety people. But, "no matter what standardisation you have", he says, "you will always find **people working haphazardly**... you have a trolley provided for them, and they don't use it, and you don't find supervisors enforcing it".

Especially to pre-empt fatigue on big-project sites, it pays to build some slack into your system, whether that be more workforce depth or particular resources to support employee comfort:

- "The key", says Hector, "is to have **extra manpower**": have at least five percent more people than

"We have shift operations, on a rotational basis" she says, stressing the importance of letting workers know ahead of time so that they can make the adjustment. "One person won't be working night shifts all year, not even throughout the month".



Experience insight from SafeStart's Larry Wilson: "You have all moved away from people working permanent shifts", a good thing from a mental health and fairness point of view. "Fatigue management is mostly a personal thing. Only you really know how tired you are, and only you know why. So sometimes it's 'better' to hide your fatigue if you haven't managed your sleep, which makes it difficult for a supervisor to notice." Leaders need to be aware of such potentially consequential thought patterns for optimal risk management.

Beyond rotating shift work in a way that respects the limitations of the human mind and body, what practical steps can a company take?

- "In the construction industry", explains Hector, "it's very important that when you have workers working 12-hours a day, you...break down their activities so they **feel like they are accomplishing something**". Why is that important? A worker will be better able to relax and have the peace of mind to enjoy the time off and come back refreshed.

- Arun's company system allows field operators to be rotated as panel operators, pre-empting the danger of repetitive tasks. Knowledge-sharing sessions are run for the night-shift workers to maintain alertness, but, as he says, "they don't compensate for a loss of sleep".



Through the panels the notion emerged that fatigue has become more multi-dimensional – and that includes mental health considerations.

- Michael says that “fatigue has been talked about a lot but it’s just that the context of fatigue is a bit wider now because it **includes mental fatigue**”.

- Anthony shares that, especially throughout Covid, leadership learned the importance of **looking candidly at internal stressors**. “We asked, what does it mean to give an employee their perfect day, where they’re on their game, they’re focused, they’re not complacent?”

- “We as leaders can have conversations to find out what’s motivating them every day” he continues. “Everyone has a mental health state that varies every day... we need to raise the awareness that it’s okay to come and talk about that and instruct leaders on **how to have those conversations in a humble and empathic way**”.

Realistically, only the individual knows exactly how tired he or she really is; when tiredness starts becoming a problem, we need to recognise the situation and do something about it before there is a minor or even serious mistake. We can’t always get more sleep, but we can do some brisk exercise or stretch, have a coffee or tea or take a quick break and close your eyes for 10-15 minutes – just not while you’re driving!

Fatigue remains inescapable. But there are lots of things that can be done to help combat it at the workplace, with leadership always bound to play an important role.

you need, so that when workers are taking rests or cannot work, there are others to pick up the slack.



Case Study: SafeStart's Larry Wilson recalls a workplace he had a big job at that really didn't have any high-risk operations, but the workers pulled carts all day. Their number-one recordable injury was shoulder injuries, and it seemed as though the supervisors didn't even notice anymore. "But all the employees know that they should push the cart. And obviously they know when their shoulder starts to hurt. So, it's not easy. And it's not fair to throw it all on the supervisors".

- Providing **breaks, food, hot beverages or isotonic drinks** is something workers really appreciate, he tells the panel.

- All the panellists agreed that having a **place for workers to take a rest** or nap while on break is a good idea. Alex remembered that one of the best things Etex did while he was working there was making investments into locker rooms and break facilities.



Take Aways

- ✓ Organisations must take fatigue seriously
- ✓ Shift work requires management care – and mental/physical preparation
- ✓ Use productivity techniques such as shuffling tasks and breaking down activities
 - ✓ Build in slack to give workforce relief where needed
 - ✓ Empathetic listening keeps the awareness level high

- Based on SafeConnection panels on North America, Europe, The Middle East, India and Asia.
- All opinions expressed in here are purely those of the panelists. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions or views of SafeStart and the panelists' companies.
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