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FIRM MANAGEMENT

All In a Night's Sleep: How Accountants Cope with Sleep and Busy Season

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Taija Sparkman • Apr. 16, 2014

Accounting offices across the country have started transitioning to offices that allow staff to work anywhere, anytime. This has led to many professionals "burning the midnight oil" to get more done at a time when everything else slows down.

There are tons of apps and devices that make it even easier to connect outside the office. But at a time when technology is making it easier to get more done, studies are suggesting the opposite may actually be happening. Recent studies by Michigan State University workers found that nighttime use of smartphones decrease productivity the next day, while another study published in the Journal of Neuroscience found that lack of sleep led to irreversible brain damage in mice.

With all this research showing the negative consequences of staying up past your bedtime, it seems the obvious answer would be get more sleep and produce better work the next day. However, it's not always as easy as that, especially for accountants as Tax Day approaches. With the added task of preparing and completing tax returns on top of other daily tasks, many accounting professionals find themselves working longer days and/or bringing work home.

Busy season takes a lot out of accountants, so it comes as no surprise that many accountants also see changes in their sleeping habits during this time. The longer hours put a strain on their time, but very rarely do other parts of their lives slow down. If they aren't careful, their work/life balance can become unbalanced in the blink of an eye. Therefore, accounting professionals must find a way to cope with the steady lack of sleep.

Most accountants will tell you they typically get less sleep during busy season, although a few say they get about the same during this time as they do throughout the year. A heavier workload usually means less time for everything else, so sleep and life outside of the office becomes a juggling act.

So exactly how do accounting professionals balance work, sleep and everything else? They employ various tactics from daytime naps to controlling the number of clients they bring on, from implementing work and sleep curfews to utilizing apps.

Byron Patrick, CPA.CITP, CGMA, MCSE uses the Sleep Time app to monitor his sleep pattern and keep track of how much, or little, sleep he's getting. He also tries to work out in the morning when he can.

“Lack of sleep doesn't really affect my work or personal life too much during the busy season, but I'm a night person and tend to drag in the morning anyway. I do notice, though, when I workout in the morning it definitely helps my energy level throughout the day,” said Patrick, CEO, Simplified Innovations Inc.

For Christie Blaylock, MAcc, an ARSA Solutions Senior Consultant and Certified QuickBooks ProAdvisor at Anglin CPA, it's her workload that has to fit into her busy life – as opposed to fitting life into a busy season. Blaylock, who recently welcomed her son into the world, keeps a tight work schedule of 40-45 hours a week during the busy season to balance her workload and lack of sleep.

“I do get a lot less sleep this busy season, but that's due to the baby. Since I usually don't get enough sleep during the week, I take long naps on Sundays. And drink lots of caffeine! I also work only 40- or just over 40-hour weeks to keep my workload manageable,” said Blaylock.

While Blaylock is juggling busy season and a newborn child, she's not alone in implementing naps into her schedule. In fact, the accounting firm Berman Goldman & Ribakow in Ellicott City, Maryland, created a napping room in their office.

Partners at the firm encourage staff to take 20- or 30-minute power naps to refresh their energy levels.

Still, some accountants notice changes in their sleep pattern, while others find that their sleep remains unaffected while they have less time for other things they enjoy.

“I get about the same amount of sleep during busy season, so it’s not really about getting enough sleep,” said Mia A. Thomas, CPA, CGMA. “It’s that I have less personal time in the evenings with myself and my family during busy season.”

For Thomas and other accounting professionals, working non-traditional or later hours allows them the flexibility they need to attend family activities. Another benefit of working late at night is that things tend to be quieter – family is sleeping, there’s not much going on, etc. There are also fewer distractions from the office and email at night. These benefits counter the findings of MSU’s study, as professionals feel it allows them to be more productive at a time that is known for its hectic hours.

“My perspective has always been, ‘This is temporary.’ I know plenty of nurses and doctors that work bizarre hours all the time. And they make life or death decisions, which I’m not faced with too often. So the way I see it, as my 14 year old would say, ‘NBD,’” said Patrick, who doesn’t mind the late nights.

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