



Clocking on

Matching your working hours to your chronotype could be the best way to keep time on your side

At 10.30pm, I'm often to be found snuggled in bed, my face lit by the glow of my laptop screen, a cup of herbal tea sending up curls of steam beside me. It's a terrible habit in so many respects. However, it's also the time of day when my mind feels clearest.

Don't get me wrong: it's also when I'm tired and should be asleep like everyone else in the household. But with the majority of the day's tasks done and no distractions, stillness surrounds me and the ideas flow. My partner is the opposite. He will often creep downstairs in the early hours before dawn to quietly read before everyone else stirs.

I am definitely what is referred to as a night owl, and my partner is a lark. In scientific terms, we have very different chronotypes – our preference for when we sleep and when we are alert. This is influenced by genetics, lifestyle, age and even environmental factors such as exposure to light. It's also the way that we experience our circadian rhythm – or the 24-hour daily cycle that the body goes through. Understanding your chronotype means that you can adapt your lifestyle to when those peaks and troughs take place.

What is now sparking debate is how the standard nine-to-five working model prevents you from doing this. For example, you may be sluggish until 10am, but your team has a regular 8.30am breakfast meeting. While you're there in body, your mind might still be snoozing. Standard working hours don't account for different chronotypes, which means that many people aren't making the most of their day.

Working out of sync

A rising number of people are calling for a rethink of how we work, including London-based author and journalist Ellen C Scott, who coined the term 'chronoworking' in her book, *Working on Purpose*. She shares that her interest was sparked by her own experience: 'After years of waking up super early,

I finally realised that's not when I do my best work. In my previous job, I worked a 6am to 3pm shift. I thought I was fine... then when I swapped jobs and got a new 9.30am to 5.30pm schedule, I realised I had been operating for the previous seven years completely sleep-deprived. It was like being drunk,' she recounts.

When Ellen set out to make more time for creative projects alongside her job, she initially tried to squeeze in a few hours of writing before logging onto her magazine role. It didn't work.

As chartered psychologist and sleep expert Dr Lindsay Browning, from Berkshire, UK, explains, Ellen was working against her chronotype. 'When mealtimes, exercise timing, sleep and work schedules are out of sync with your biological clock, you're more likely to feel tired, underperform and struggle with your wellbeing,' she says. This is when the coffee machine calls, you get distracted and you feel like you're just not achieving when you need to. For me, this is also when I push harder, get frustrated and then spiral into self-chastisement – none of which actually helps me get anything done.

So Ellen took a step back. She says: 'I did a "time audit" for a feature with time-management coach Sarah Stewart, which really made me look at the way I spent my hours, and required some proper analysis of how I felt at different points in the day.' What she discovered was a clear pattern. 'I am so much better at creative ideas in the late afternoon, but can be really efficient on the mindless admin front pre-lunch,' she says. Chats at work revealed that many of her colleagues experience exactly the same roller coaster, but at different times of the day.

A call for flexibility

While researching her book, Ellen came to the conclusion that chronoworking could be as powerful a factor as job characteristics, organisational practices and interpersonal relationships in determining whether you thrive at work.



'It made me start to question why we were sticking so rigidly to one uniform working pattern when it's possible that adapting it could make us more creative, productive and happier,' she says.

She argues that businesses that shift to take chronoworking into account will reap huge benefits, and those who don't will lose talent. She says: 'If workplaces are unwilling to flex even a little, today's workers have no problem simply downing tools and refusing to put in any more time or energy than they can get away with. Plus, I think that once some workplaces are brave enough to just try giving people the option to chronowork, or to work more asynchronously – or trusting workers, full stop – they'll report back massive benefits.'

For the job roles that this is simply not possible for, Ellen suggests you can still honour your chronotype simply by focusing on specific types of tasks at optimum times. For example, the post-lunch slump that so many people experience is a perfect time to clear emails, but might not be the best time to write a complex report. She adds: 'You might not be able to decide your working hours, but you will likely have some level of autonomy over what kind of work you're doing throughout each day, or at the very least how much effort you put in. In some jobs, things are so rigid that your only way to chronowork is by giving yourself permission to half-arse work in the morning.'

This is also a valuable insight that can help you maximise your non-working hours – and teachers, nurses and so many others can still 'tweak' their day. Lindsay suggests picking when you exercise to fit your energy cycle. She adds a caveat, though: when it comes to sleep, practicality is important.

'Owls can easily start going to bed later and later, but still have to get up at the same time for work, which means they end up getting less sleep overall,' she says. 'Larks, on the other hand, may start going to bed very early and then find themselves waking at 5am and feeling frustrated that they cannot get back to sleep.' She suggests 'making small, realistic adjustments when needed' and just keeping a tab on your owl or lark tendencies.

Ellen adds that even small changes can have a notable impact. 'Chronoworking might be acknowledging that you aren't your best, most creative self before 11am, so you stop beating yourself up for struggling to wake up at 5am and instead consciously plot in creative time in the evenings,' she says. It also doesn't have to mean 'tailoring your workday to give your best bits to your full-time job'. Instead, it's a chance to look at how your energy levels and engagement shift during the day – in and of itself a fascinating exercise – and then make whatever changes are possible to use your time to best fit your natural rhythm. For me, this means guarding some quiet hours in the evening when I feel the most productive, but recognising that burning the midnight oil doesn't work with family life. After all, even owls need to sleep.

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Find Ellen at ellenscott.co.uk and on your socials @ellenscott
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ILLUSTRATIONS: CYAN LIN

TIME TO WORK

How to change the way you work to suit your chronotype

Start with an energy audit. Ellen suggests tracking your energy levels throughout the day. 'You could keep a journal over the course of a week to see where your natural highs and lows are.' She adds: 'Look at not just when you're more willing to work, but also what type of work best fits with certain times of day.'

Establish a working template. 'If you see clear patterns and can imagine a change in hours that would work best for you, present that to your manager,' says Ellen. Keep in mind practical elements, such as timings that overlap with colleagues, or even who manages access to your place of work.

Match tasks to times. If your manager says that it's not possible to work more flexibly, you can still use what you have learned to tailor your tasks during the day. List some common tasks and then think about their demand on you, and when you are best suited to tackle them.

Look at hobbies too. Use your audit to enhance your non-working time. If there is a time of day when you are home and feel energised, find an activity that fits this. Try and make adjustments, however small, to honour your natural rhythm.

