

# COFFEE IN THE WORKPLACE



**C**an coffee help a person get through their work day? Here are three things many people encounter in their jobs, and ways coffee can help.

## Jet Lag

Recognize this experience?

You have just arrived after an overnight flight for your two weeks of holiday fun and relaxation, and you feel groggy. Your body clock is telling you that it is midnight back home, and rather than starting to enjoy your precious time away, you feel tired, fuzzy and have a dull headache, and you end up sleeping most of the first day. Eventually you adjust but, by that time, you are probably on your way home again!

Whilst experiencing such jet lag may limit your holiday enjoyment, the effect on your performance in business could have much more serious consequences. Imagine having to attend a major meeting when you have just flown through six time zones – chances are you will be less productive and more prone to making mistakes – hardly the best time to be discussing that important business deal.

Jet lag happens when we disrupt the normal “circadian” rhythms that help us wake up in the morning and go to sleep at night. Studies show that after flying long distances, most of us suffer a wide range of effects.

In the short term, these include symptoms ranging from dehydration and discomfort to legs and feet to long-term symptoms that can continue for days after the flight – fatigue and broken sleep, disorientation, mild irritability, lack of concentration and motivation.

In one study undertaken by NASA scientists working with an airline company, jet lag was shown to reduce significantly our ability to make decisions, downgrading our attention span by 75 percent, communications skills by 30 percent and memory by 20 percent. It is estimated that we need one day to adjust back to normal energy levels for every time zone we cross in our journeys.

**“Caffeine can increase the speed of rapid information processing by 10 percent ...”**

So how can coffee help?

The caffeine in coffee has been proven to increase attention span and vigilance, improve our ability to communicate, and to boost our short-term memory. So drinking a cup of coffee can help counter the more damaging effects caused by jet lag and help us to function normally despite suffering the effects of jet lag.

Along with bright light and exercise, caffeine can also help the hypothalamus gland, the body clock’s main control center in the brain, to shift into a pattern that fits

in with the time zone of our destination. In effect, caffeine can help reset our body clock to a new schedule. And contrary to common myth, coffee is no more a diuretic than water is.

When you get to your new destination and when you return home, drink coffee on a regular basis during the day. It will not only help to keep you awake, it will also be sending signals to your brain to reset your body clock to the local time.

So next time you go on that long-haul flight – remember how that cup of coffee can help make the most of that happy landing on the other end!

## Post-Lunch Dip

It’s a great feeling to sink into a comfortable chair after an enjoyable lunch and give in to that sleepy feeling. But what happens if you have to get on with the job, and that job demands focus and attention, and any small lapse of concentration could have serious consequences? Sound dramatic? Then think of some of the safety-critical jobs that affect us all on a daily basis, e.g., bus and train drivers, air traffic controllers or machine operators. It’s not just your imagination – there is now significant evidence to show the existence of a post-lunch dip in our ability to sustain attention. The effects on human error are widespread, with performance being impaired by as much as 10 percent. The potential consequences in safety-critical jobs could be catastrophic. Some people are able to arrange their after-lunch work schedules to avoid tasks involving sustained attention and switch to those of short duration, e.g., keeping routine letters and paperwork for this time, thereby giving their brains a rest but still getting work

accomplished. For most of us, such a choice is not practical.

So how do we reduce the post-lunch dip?

Modifying our eating habits will help, and eating a smaller meal than usual would certainly lessen the effect, but that is not always possible or even desirable. The alternative is to try to increase one's alertness, and this can be done in a variety of ways:

- By taking exercise – fresh air and natural light helps, so a short walk after lunch could restore your energy.
- By increasing background music – great if working at home, but maybe not always practical in the workplace
- By drinking caffeinated drinks – two cups of coffee will quickly help restore alertness, and for many will totally remove the post-lunch dip.

Coffee can also put you in a better mood after lunch. Studies show that people who have drunk coffee feel more contented and are more interested in their work. The

caffeine in coffee helps to replenish levels of alertness, improving performance and mood – just what we all need to get us through the second half of the working day!

### **Working Well**

Why do some people always appear to be one step ahead? You see them perform at meetings, their reasoning ability, their memory of details, their level of alertness and attention span are finely tuned. Are they really that smart?

Caffeine contributes significantly to such benefits in the workplace. Studies now show that it not only helps you focus and concentrate, but also makes you more alert.

Two large cups of coffee, containing a total of 200mg of caffeine, drunk in the morning can have a lasting effect for the whole day. Caffeine can increase the speed of rapid information processing by 10 percent, and even one cup of coffee after lunch helps to counter that post-lunch dip and sustain your concentration and aid alertness.

If you have repetitive work to do, it is easy to let your attention drift, which may

cause you to make mistakes. Coffee helps to relieve the boredom often associated with such tasks, with the result that your work becomes more pleasant, productive and accurate.

A cup of coffee can also help with the common problem of headaches in the workplace. One study has shown that drinking coffee helped relieve such headaches, allowing workers to feel and work better. Similar results were seen in another study where subjects were suffering the symptoms of mild illnesses like the common cold. Coffee simply removed the impairments normally associated with such conditions.

So, go and watch how your colleagues make decisions. If they seem particularly active, are making good decisions and showing initiative, maybe those cups of coffee are their secret weapon! **N**

*The International Coffee Organization (ICO) is the main intergovernmental organization for coffee, bringing together producing and consuming countries to tackle the challenges facing the world coffee sector through international cooperation. For more information, please visit the website at <http://www.ico.org>.*