

Early bird gets the praise

YOU'RE EITHER A NIGHT OWL OR A LARK, AND THE 9-TO-5 WORLD TENDS TO REWARD THOSE PEOPLE WHO ARE AT THEIR BEST FIRST THING IN THE MORNING

SUSAN SCHWARTZ THE GAZETTE

John Ryan rises at 5 a.m. – and shines. It's in the early morning that he can focus best, says the director of pedagogical services for the English Montreal School Board. A document that takes 30 minutes to write if he starts at 6 a.m., say, will take him three times as long if he sits down to the task at 7 p.m., says Ryan, an avid golfer who thinks 5:30 a.m. is an excellent tee-off time.

Paul Sarenas is physically present in his office at Concordia University, where he is a systems analyst in financial services, most mornings by about 9, even if he sometimes makes it there by the skin of his teeth. Ask him a work-related question much before 11 or so, though, and you might detect a slight delay before he answers. "It's your question registering," he says.

Not everyone works best from 9 to 5. Yet the system remains entrenched. And it favours the early risers, leaving those of us who stagger into work sleepy-eyed and slow-reflexed to be perceived as lazy slugs – even though a study reported in the British Medical Journal found no substantiation for the Ben Franklin maxim that early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise. "There is no reason for early risers to affect moral superiority," the study concluded.

Steven Appelbaum believes the 9-to-5 world does not take into account the fact that each of us is unique. "A person who is brilliant at 4 p.m. can be brain-dead at 9 a.m. You can't mess with that," says the man who holds Concordia's research chair in organizational development and traded a career in industry years ago for a PhD, a career in academia – and the luxury of choosing his working hours.

Appelbaum loves the night, enjoys late-night television and finds that "until about 10 a.m., I am tuned out. When I have to give a lecture at 8, I'm awful ... I structure my outside consulting and my speaking for later, when I am better."

Larks and owls, the scientists call morning and night people. "And the differences are real," says Shimon Amir of Concordia's Centre for Studies in Behavioral Neurobiology.

Each of us has an internal biological clock that tells us when to sleep, eat and drink, he explains. Each is synchronized roughly to a 24-hour cycle, but each is slightly different in terms of the duration of its cycle. And whether one is a morning or an evening person, Amir says, is due "to differences probably determined by a mix of biology, how our clock genes are organized or function, and by lifestyle."

Sometimes people find phone messages from Debbie Friedman, administrator of the trauma program at the Montreal Children's Hospital and an inveterate – and energized – early riser, as early as 5:15. "What time do you get up?" they ask.

Yet Friedman is not judgmental about those of us who need more time than others in the morning before we are capable of coherent thought. "I do not think of people who are not morning people as slackers," she says. "I like to think that, as individuals, we each have our own style and rhythm of doing things."

Some say they like the freshness and promise of the early morning – or that they like to ease into the day. Irvin Dudeck, director of budget planning and control at Concordia, is awakened by his body clock at 5:30 – even on holiday.

Daniel Aitken finds getting to work early makes the day less stressful. He gets up at 5, feeds Flinky the chihuahua, showers, dresses and gulps half a cup of coffee before heading west, in light traffic, from downtown to Pointe Claire, where he is a director of the strategic business development unit at Future Electronics.

He's at his desk by 6:45 or 7 – and in those first two hours, when the phones are silent and he's generally the only one in, he's able to accomplish the equivalent of four or five hours work. "And at 8:30 I'm ready to start my day – with little left on my desk."

Others love the quiet of the evening, the stillness of the night. Like Francine Fiore, a writer who worked for *l'Actualité Médicale* for 20 years before going freelance. "Sometimes I was in the office at 5 or 6 p.m. and worked until midnight and sometimes until 3 in the morning. But, of course, after the deadline, if there was nothing urgent, I could take the morning off ... I don't think that people thought I was lazy. It was the opposite. Everybody, except my boss, told me that I was working too much."

Throughout CÉGEP and university, Tony Falcone signed up for evening courses and had no problem working on assignments through the night, when the house was still, and going to sleep at dawn. When he wasn't busy with schoolwork, he was working evening or overnight shifts at a Park Ave. video store, a job he continued to do for a year after graduating from Concordia with a finance degree.

In April, Falcone started a job with a bank. After years of going to bed as late as 7 a.m., having to be at work for 8 a.m. was a huge transition. "It was really tough for me," said Falcone, now 24. "My brain wouldn't wake up till 11 ... I lasted 2 1 / 2 months."

Sometimes listening to your body clock means opting to not work 9-to-5.

Radio talk-show host Peter Anthony Holder, who hosts an evening talk show on CJAD, has started work in the wee hours, when he produced a morning show, and he has worked overnight. The only shift he didn't enjoy was 9-to-5. When he worked traditional hours at a production house, "the regular hours of commuting with the rest of the world didn't really appeal to me."

As we shift to a more knowledgebased economy from an industrial one, there is room for more workers who, by definition, need not adhere to a 9-to-5 shift. They "can work more when they are at their peak of productivity," said Victor Haines, an associate professor of human resource management in the school of industrial relations at the Université de Montréal.

For certified management consultant Michèle Desjardins, "my most productive time is after 4:30 or 5 p.m. I worked for many years in the constraints of a 9-to-5 job, but the creative work, the outside-the-box work, that I did better after everyone had left the office.

"With my consulting practice, my office is in the house. Very often I start at 4:30 or 5 o'clock, take a break for dinner, then continue to midnight."

As she handles more routine tasks – conference calls, correspondence – during regular business hours, her ideas simmer and percolate. Then later in the day, in the quiet of her window-lined study, she writes the recommendations that go to the client.

Desjardins, a senior associate with Connecticut management consultants Lansberg Gersick and Associates, has clients in different time zones, "and I find technology has opened the borders of the traditional definition of an office space. "For me, e-mail and the Internet have made a huge difference."

Not that there isn't a downside. Mark Mortensen is an assistant professor in McGill University's management faculty whose research is on teams working together – but at a distance, sometimes in different time zones. People who don't work in the same space risk missing cues about each other and, by extension, their work, he said – as well as the benefits of informal contact in a workplace.

There's something else to consider: Just because someone is at work doesn't necessarily mean he's being productive. When she worked 9-to-5, Desjardins often did her creative work after hours. "But as long as I had a physical presence between 9 and 5, then it was valued."

Haines at the Université de Montréal calls it presenteeism.

"We can confuse the time people spend at work with their productivity," said Gilles Simard, a professor in the business school at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He described the mentality as one that values people's contributions "according to the amount of snow that piles up on their car on a winter day ...

"There are organizations that consider leaving at 5 to be leaving early – never mind when you came in," Simard said.

"It's not so much a question of productivity as it is of what we value as a society."
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VINCENZO D'ALTO THE GAZETTE Daniel Aitken is up by 5 a.m. without an alarm, with time for a coffee on his deck before he gets to work by 6:45 or 7 a.m.



PHOTOS: TYREL FEATHERSTONE THE GAZETTE Michèle Desjardins finds it easier to concentrate when it's dark, so she works in the evening. Tony Falcone (right) was happy to work the all-night shift for years during university. Now he works in a video shop whenever he's needed.



VINCENZO D'ALTO THE GAZETTE Paul Sarenas goes through the stickies from his co-workers.