



Meeting Management

By Jeanne Martinson

Their Biological Clock Is Ticking

You do your best to accommodate your attendees' various needs, from different learning styles to generational and demographic preferences. But how about their circadian rhythms? Here's why it makes sense to make that part of your program planning.

Schedules for conventions and conferences are jam-packed with activities. All of a meeting's stakeholders are vying for a piece of your attendees' time. Between the educational sessions, networking events, and walking the exhibit floor (not to mention travel to and from the meeting), attendees come home mentally and physically exhausted. What if an understanding of circadian rhythms could help you organize a schedule that was less of a drain and more of a stimulating experience for attendees?

Did Benjamin Franklin have it right when he said, "Early to bed and early to rise will make a man healthy, wealthy, and wise"? And why did the

Many people think that time preference is something a person can change at will. But trying to become an early bird when you are a night owl is like writing with your right hand when you are left-handed. Certainly, you can force yourself to do it, but you will be less productive and it will feel uncomfortable and unnatural. This is because we have an internal master clock that controls sleep and wakefulness, body temperature, and metabolic rate. When our normal daily body temperature is at its lowest, we are the most inclined toward sleep. When our normal daily body temperature is at its highest, we are the most alert. Exactly when

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person who came up with "The early bird catches the worm" have something against night owls? The truth is, our society places more value on being early to bed and early to rise than late to bed and late to rise.

Carolyn Schur, sleep and fatigue specialist and author of *Birds of a Different Feather — Early Birds and Night Owls Talk About Their Characteristic Behaviors*, believes that up to 25 percent of the population may be night owls, with a smaller percentage early birds, and the remaining 60 percent what she calls "intermediates." (Intermediates favor a bedtime between 11 p.m. and midnight and awake between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m.)

these changes take place determines whether we will be an early bird (who loves to leap out of bed at 6 a.m. with vim and vigor) or a night owl (who loves to stay in bed until noon and then work into the wee hours).

It's not fun being a night owl in an early-bird world. Night owls are often reprimanded for arriving late to work in the morning (even if they stay later at the end of the workday). They may feel pressured to be cheerful first thing when they still feel tired and half asleep. This value-laden perspective of time creates low self-esteem and inhibits night owls' career success.

I recently asked Schur how "chronotype" —

Take Away

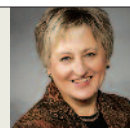
We have not historically thought about chronotype — whether a person is an early bird or a night owl — as a diversity issue or a biological fact. It's considered merely a matter of personal choice.

But chronotype is not something you or your attendees can control. It's determined by an internal master clock.

Meeting planners can accommodate their attendees' different circadian rhythms by making a few simple scheduling decisions, thereby creating a better experience for the entire group.

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ON THE WEB: Learn more about chronotype issues at www.nightowlnet.com.



A Sleep Expert's Top Tips for Meeting Success

1. Schedule the most critical components of the meeting between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.
 2. Keep lunch light and based on protein, fruits, and vegetables.
 3. Plan tours and activities after 2 p.m. or in the evening.
 4. Schedule networking events in the morning or evening. This allows attendees to decide if they wish to attend, without feeling that they are missing key content if they do not.
 5. Repeat sessions so that attendees can choose the time that allows for greatest alertness.
 6. Particularly when you are organizing a national meeting
- on the East Coast, plan the first full day to start with breakfast between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. and the opening keynote at 9:30 a.m. or 10 a.m. This is when most attendees will be comfortable and get the most out of their experience. Alternatively, consider the impact of that late Saturday-night banquet and dance on early birds when holding a national meeting on the West Coast.
7. Closing keynotes between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. will greatly tax early birds' attentiveness and patience, particularly if the speaker addresses difficult issues.

— Carolyn Schur

individual schedule preferences — should be considered when planning a meeting program.

How does chronotype affect the value we get out of a conference or meeting?

Schur: Just because an event or keynote is scheduled for a certain time does not mean that all the participants will be ready and alert. We are all familiar with rooms filled with sleepy people in the afternoon, but night owls and early birds have specific challenges at other times of the day. As a result, many conference attendees do not get full value because the schedule of events does not meet their needs.

So when we begin the conference day influences who shows up when and how alert they are?

Schur: We live in a culture that places a high value on early-morning rising, so conference events are regularly planned to start at 7 or 7:30 a.m. Night owls, who are especially [challenged] by early-morning events, will often decide which ones are most important and make every effort to be there. For the remainder of the conference, they may forgo the early-morning events so they can be more rested for the events later in the day and evening.

Does the geographic location of the meeting affect chronotype behavior?

Schur: The closer your conference is to the East Coast of North America, the more likely it is that a great many of the attendees

have arrived from time zones farther west. This means that their schedules are being advanced to an earlier time than they are accustomed to. For example, a 7:30 a.m. event in New York will require that many of the attendees be in attendance at what is actually 4:30 and 5:30 a.m. on their usual schedule — difficult even for the more early-morning types. ■