

# Work

## Late risers lobbying for workplace recognition

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By her own account, Carolyn Schur made a lousy employee. Working in a government office, she'd show up late for morning meetings, spend much of the day telling off co-workers and be incapacitated by frequent headaches.

Her bosses didn't have much sympathy. She was singled out as unruly for routinely flouting the office's 9 a.m. start time. One supervisor warned that if she continued to arrive late, she would be disciplined, Ms. Schur says.

“I ignored it for a while. And then I just said, no, I don't have to take this any more. There's a reason for why this is happening.”

The reason? “I'm a night owl,” says Ms. Schur, who's spent the 30 years since her first forays into the workaday world as a human-resources consultant.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Carolyn Schur, a human-resources consultant, tried to work 9 to 5 but couldn't adjust to the early hours. 'I'm a night owl.' (*Geoff Howe for The Globe and Mail*)



“When I tried to change, I got sick.”

Night owls have long suffered under the tyranny of the early bird.

At work, early risers are quick-climbing keeners. At home, they can sneak out the door while the house is still quiet. At breakfast, they pay half price.

Any list of the world's most powerful people attests to the merits of rising before the rooster. By 4:30 a.m., U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is already pondering foreign-policy conundrums. Half an hour later, real-estate mogul Donald Trump is well coiffed and considering his next deal. At 5:30, Research In Motion bigwig Jim Balsillie can be found working on his backhanders at an ice rink.

Not for much longer. A growing parliament of night owls is finally starting to hoot in protest. Citing genetic differences that force them to wake up late, these dawdlers are organizing worldwide to overthrow a workplace bias they say favours early birds.

“Why should we have the work hours of farmers and peasants forced upon us in this day and age?” says Danish engineer Camilla Kring, an emerging international force in the fight to recognize night owls in the workplace. “We all have different day and night cycles and it's time workplaces created new structures that support our different rhythms.”

After struggling her whole working life to adapt to the dawn alarm that went with Denmark's 8-to-4 workday, Dr. Kring, whose PhD was on work-life balance, began researching what was so different between her and morning people. She soon latched on to a University of Surrey study showing that early risers are more likely to have the long form of a gene called Period 3, while late risers are more likely to have a short form.

Dr. Kring has labelled the larks A-people and the owls B-people.

“B-people are not lazy,” she says. “It's genetic.”

This year, Ms. Kring launched B-Society, a group devoted to lobbying companies to stagger start times and better accommodate those whose circadian rhythms are a little delayed. In just six months, the group attracted 5,500 members and sprouted offshoots throughout Europe. The group's website is adding a job board on which B-friendly openings throughout the world will be posted.

“B-people are just as productive as anyone else,” she says, “but they are productive at different times of day.”

By some sort of cubicle telepathy, the idea that some workers should be allowed to start work late has spread to North American shores as well.

In a chapter of her new book *War and Peace in the Workplace*, Regina-based HR consultant Jeanne Martinson argues that circadian rhythms should join race and gender as diversity issues that supervisors cater to in the workplace.

“A lot of motivational speakers tout this stuff about the early bird getting the worm,” says Ms. Martinson, who wrote the chapter after consulting Ms. Schur's 1995 book *Birds of a Different Feather*, which highlighted circadian differences among workers. “They make it seem like being a night owl is a choice. It's actually biological. It's like being blue-eyed or brown-eyed. It's not about choice at all.”

Ms. Martinson holds workshops and one-on-one sessions with business leaders in which she prods them to reassess their dim views on morning stragglers.

“When someone comes into a meeting at 8 in the morning and looks like they've just pulled an all-nighter,” she tells bosses, “you tend to make judgments. You attach certain reckless behaviour to them. You see yourself as righteous and them as lazy. It's something you have to rethink.”

She has worked with the likes of Canada Post, Weyerhaeuser, London Life and KPMG, and her message is making the rounds. In the United States, NetFlix and Best Buy have introduced results-based workplaces in which workers can toil whatever hours they choose as long as they complete a monthly work allotment.

New studies may soon push more companies to do the same.

Researchers have found that about one in four people carry the short version of the Period 3 gene, a physiological difference that delays their natural wake-up time by a couple of hours. By contrast, little more than one in 10 carry the early-bird form of the gene (the rest of the population falls somewhere in the middle).

“These are the people who've been the same way since childhood,” says Harvey Moldofsky, director of the Centre for Sleep and Chronobiology at the University of Toronto. “They are the kids whose parents couldn't get them up in the morning, who needed three alarm clocks, who always screwed up first class.”

But, Dr. Moldofsky says, it's important not to attribute too much of the night owl's sleep schedule to genes. Sleep doctors usually trace complaints of morning drowsiness to something physical, such as sleep apnea, or something behavioural, such as alcohol, drugs or a TV addiction.

And then there's the problem of BlackBerrys, e-mail and other electronic shackles that keep us labouring around the clock.

“Many workers are expected to be available 24 hours a day with no respect for biological rhythms,” Dr. Moldofsky says.

For that reason, late-arriving staff may encounter some difficulty in their push for workplace recognition. The 9-to-5 workplace is quickly being replaced by the 9-to-9 workplace.

“I can only say good luck to those who think they can protest to their boss,” says Dr. Moldofsky, who says he's neither a lark nor an owl. “We're working in a society where the lights never go off.”