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Fact Sheet: D.I.D.O and Fatigue

As the Australian mining and resource industry has experienced rapid growth in recent decades, the nation is beginning to see a trend towards a growing number of workers who operate in a Drive-In, Drive-Out (D.I.D.O) and Fly-In, Fly-Out (F.I.F.O) capacity.

As the term suggests, D.I.D.O workers commute to their remote work sites by driving. Typically, they will stay onsite for a period of time before returning home. However, some D.I.D.O workers – typically contractor support personnel – will drive long distances to undertake work during the day and then drive home at the end of the day or into the evening. For D.I.D.O workers who remain on-site, schedules typically involve shift work. Rosters can vary, depending on the worker's arrangement with their employer. They will either be evenly rostered, such as 2 weeks on and 2 weeks off, or unevenly rostered, such as 3 weeks on and 1 week off. Workers may be assigned day shift, night shift or a rotation between day and night shift. Extended working hours of 10 or 12 hours per shift are not uncommon.

Did You Know?

Working 12-hour night shifts on an extended roster can have the same effect on performance as a BAC of 0.05%.⁶



While D.I.D.O work comes with its perks, such as high pay, free accommodation and food, and an opportunity to work in a dynamic industry, it also presents some challenges.

These include^{1,2,3}:



Time spent commuting from home to the worksite



Long, intense and frequent shifts



Altered sleep patterns



Absence from family for extended periods of time



Detachment from typical support structures

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Risks associated with D.I.D.O work^{2, 3, 4, 5}

Are you struggling with the following issues? You may not be alone. The demands of working under such intensive work conditions can contribute to a range of physical, psychological and social problems in D.I.D.O workers.

Anxiety and depression

"The energy drinks help me get through each shift and the alcohol helps me get to sleep. I don't think I'd survive without them."

Substance use is quite common practice for some D.I.D.O workers. However, stimulants in particular can have a negative impact on your ability to sleep adequately. This can create a cycle of poor sleep for some workers who develop an over-reliance on stimulants and depressants. See 'Strategies for preventing fatigue' for tips on managing the fatigue without the use of substances.



Strain on family relationships, resulting in family breakdown, violence, grief and loss

"I never see my kids and my spouse isn't coping well. But I'm doing this to secure our future, right?"

D.I.D.O work can be a great way to earn money to secure your finances. However, if your family is suffering in the process, then it may be worth rethinking your situation. Again, it may be worth contacting your workplace Employee Assistance Program. They can offer counselling and objective advice for dealing with family issues in a confidential manner. You can then weigh up your options and have a serious discussion with your spouse on your next week off. It may be that you decide to change to a 7/7 roster from a 14/7 roster, leaving more time for family.

Chronic sleep deprivation from long shifts with limited recovery time

"I'm exhausted all the time and on an extended roster there's no time to recover. But everyone's in the same boat and I just need to push through."

Every D.I.D.O worker has a different sleeping pattern, work schedule, and ability to cope. If you are always exhausted, then you need to consider how this may affect the quality of your work and how safe it is to do your work whilst fatigued. What would you say to the worker next to you if you noticed he was nodding off at the wheel of heavy machinery? It is better to be safe than sorry in these situations. There are always options to change your work schedule and improve your sleep hygiene if you are suffering from exhaustion. See 'Strategies for preventing fatigue' for more advice.

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Fatigue-related injuries and accidents both at work and during commute

"But I just want to get home to my family. I'm not too tired to drive, am I?"

D.I.D.O workers are at a substantially increased risk of a crash. Some D.I.D.O workers report that the long distances they are forced to drive at the end of an extended night shift can cause them to fall asleep at the wheel. Staying an extra night to rest up before travelling home will give your family peace of mind that you are going to come home safe.

"I drive 500kms for meetings more than once a week. My boss pressures me to drive back the same day so I don't feel like I should ask for accommodation on-site."

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Act (1984), your employer is legally obligated to ensure they have a fatigue management plan which allows drivers to be consulted on their own schedules. These schedules should be arranged to allow drivers to have good quality sleep and to recover from the effects or onset of fatigue before driving again. If you are feeling too fatigued to drive after a long trip followed by work, then your employer should be made aware of this and make other arrangements to ensure you are well-rested prior to departure.

Similar to the occupational health and safety laws, under the Heavy Vehicle National Law (HVNL) heavy vehicle drivers must be allowed to stop if they are at risk of exceeding the limits and make alternative arrangements. Everyone in the supply chain shares responsibility for ensuring breaches of the HVNL do not occur, including the employer, contractor, operator, scheduler, etc. Visit the National Heavy Vehicle Regulator website for more information (<https://www.nhvr.gov.au>). Heavy vehicle drivers and supply chain employees can confidentially report potential safety breaches via 1800 931 785.

High blood pressure, increased vulnerability to illness, weight gain and a reduction in physical activity, often from being too exhausted to exercise after a day's work

"I'm struggling to keep up with the fast pace at work. My doctor says I need to lose weight, but how can I exercise when work wipes me out so much?"

Exercise can be a struggle for the most of us, and D.I.D.O workers in particular report being too exhausted to exercise after a long day's work. After a 12-hour shift, the only thought on your mind may be food and sleep. However, there are other ways to fit in exercise to your schedule besides pushing your body beyond breaking point after an extended shift. Research suggests that Exercise can be a struggle for the most of us, and D.I.D.O workers in particular report being too exhausted to exercise after a long day's work. After a 12-hour shift, the only thought on your mind may be food and sleep. However, there are other ways to fit in exercise to your schedule besides pushing your body beyond breaking point after an extended shift.

Ceasing employment due to fatigue, and distance from their family and friends

"I'm not coping with the D.I.D.O lifestyle. But I need to keep pushing through for the sake of my family."

Research has shown that D.I.D.O workers with extended rosters and longer shifts are more likely to suffer from burn out and subsequently ceasing employment. If you're not coping with the intensive D.I.D.O lifestyle, it is better to work on managing your workload than it is to push through and suffer from burnt out. Pushing through the fatigue will be detrimental to your health in the long-term. Remember that your health is the most important thing – without your health, you have limited capacity for work. Your family will benefit more in the long term if you re-negotiate your work arrangements to be on a shorter roster. See 'Strategies for preventing fatigue' for more information on coping with the D.I.D.O lifestyle.

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Barriers to seeking help^{2,3}

Many D.I.D.O workers are often reluctant to seek help due to a workplace culture of not discussing problems, the belief that it would be 'unmanly' to ask for help and a general dislike for formal counselling services. A lack of insight into their own mental health and wellbeing is another reason why workers may not report having problems. These barriers to seeking help can mean that problems such as stress, fatigue, and depression may go unreported for years. These employees can not only become a risk to themselves, but also other people around them, particularly if they are dealing with heavy machinery or dangerous materials. It is therefore important that employees are able to get the help they need before they become a safety risk.

Are you a High-Risk D.I.D.O worker?

- Do you work extended rosters and shifts?
- Are you always exhausted at work?
- Do you have trouble sleeping?
- Do you avoid telling others when you're struggling?

If yes, you need a strategy to reduce your risk.

Strategies for preventing fatigue⁵

There are a number of both effective and ineffective coping strategies that D.I.D.O workers report for managing their fatigue. One common strategy amongst D.I.D.O workers is the use of substances to stay awake during long 12-hour shifts, such as energy drinks, caffeine, and methamphetamine. Substances such as alcohol and sleeping pills are then used to aid with falling asleep. While the use of substances may be common practice for some D.I.D.O workers, stimulant drugs in particular can have a negative impact on workers' ability to sleep adequately by keeping them awake post-shift.

This can create a cycle of poor sleep and chronic fatigue for some workers who develop an over-reliance on stimulants and sleeping pills. However, there are more effective coping strategies which D.I.D.O workers can use to reduce fatigue and promote good health without developing a reliance on stimulants and sleep aids. Coping strategies which D.I.D.O workers can implement on their own include:

- Avoid driving to and from the worksite close to a long shift. Make sure that you are well rested before driving to avoid injury and potentially falling asleep at the wheel. Consider carpooling if this is an option.
- Make sure you are getting adequate sleep (7+ hours) after each shift. If your accommodation is noisy, use ear plugs to block out sound. If you work night shift and have to sleep during the day, use black out curtains to prevent the light from disturbing your sleep.
- Consider negotiating shorter rosters with your employer, such as 7/7. Longer rosters, such as 14/7 can cause exhaustion.
- Avoid day-time naps if possible, as this can affect night-time sleep (or visa versa if you work night shifts). Instead, take regular breaks away from your work station to avoid boredom fatigue, repetitive strain and stress.
- Avoid accumulating sleep debt by consistently going to be late. If sleep debt occurs, make sure to compensate by going to bed earlier over the next week until you feel well rested. This includes resting when you have time off work.
- Reserve your bedroom for sleep and sleep only. Turn off electronic devices, including the TV. These techniques will improve your sleeping environment and make your body feel restful.
- Practice healthy eating, stay hydrated, exercise regularly, try to avoid caffeine after noon and limit alcohol intake. Ensuring that your body is healthy will protect it against developing chronic health problems.

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- Make use of your Employee Assistance Program, who can provide confidential counselling and offer advice on fatigue management. You can also confide in trusted friends or colleagues if you prefer this over formal supports.
- If you are still suffering from fatigue after putting these strategies into practice, talk to your doctor about it. Conditions which contribute to fatigue such as sleep apnoea or depression are relatively common in this industry and should be ruled out.
- It is also important for management to support their workers by implementing their own health and wellbeing management plans. Employees are more likely to be engaged and committed to their workplace if their employers also show commitment. Strategies which management can implement include:
- Consider implementing a policy which factors in travel time to and from work to ensure workers aren't driving fatigued before or after a long shift. Encourage carpooling so that workers can divide the driving time and reduce fatigue.
- Ensure shifts do not extend beyond 12-hours. Shifts should also be regular and predictable with adequate post-work recovery periods to protect against development of chronic fatigue.
- Provide relatively private accommodation (with black out curtains) away from noise to prevent sleep deprivation.
- Offer training in fatigue management so that employees have the knowledge and empowerment to reduce their risk of developing chronic fatigue.
- Monitor the type of tasks workers are involved in, to prevent monotony and subsequent boredom fatigue.
- Encourage use of Employee Assistance Programs and peer support programs.
- Employ on-site safety officers to identify and manage fatigue in workers.
- Use fatigue monitoring technology, particularly for workers operating heavy machinery.
- Encourage a reporting culture, where workers don't feel afraid to let management know when they are experiencing problems.



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References

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