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April 8, 2011

Family flexibility, easier commutes among the perks of the night shift

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By **Karyn Johnson**
Special to NWjobs

Around the time most workers are heading to bed, Patricia Maddox starts her 10:30 p.m.-7 a.m. shift as a registered nurse at Western State Hospital in Tacoma.

Maddox, 58, has been working the night shift ever since a restructuring at the hospital following the 2001 Nisqually earthquake. The nurses had to bid for shifts, and Maddox ended up on nights.

It wasn't her first choice, but Maddox says, "I truly am a night person ... have been since I was a little girl."

Having night-owl tendencies is useful for working nights, but a little caffeine can also help.

At 9 p.m., Matt Black reports to work as a network operations center operator at Getty Images in Seattle. Black, who describes himself as nocturnal, is able to get through each night with some help from energy drinks.

"The caffeine consumption in our department tends to be fairly impressive," says Black, 33, especially since his employer provides free coffee and soda.

Some local workers request the night shift when they apply for jobs, according to Princess Silva, a staffing specialist at Labor Works in Tukwila. Recently, the industrial staffing company sent workers to Qwest Field to clean up after games — typically an 11 p.m.-7 a.m. shift — and to work overnights at a local coffee company.

The Washington State Employment Security Department does not keep statistics on night-shift workers. The most recent national figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that nearly 15 percent of full-time workers were employed on alternative shifts in 2004. Of these workers, 3.2 percent permanently work the night shift, with hours between 9 p.m. and 8 a.m.

Two major reasons cited for choosing the night shift were family/child-care needs and personal preference. Late-night workers also enjoy less-congested commutes, shopping at off-peak times, the ability to see a doctor without taking time off work and, sometimes, a higher pay rate than their daytime counterparts.



Matt Black's job in the network operations center at Getty Images in Seattle starts at 9 p.m. Each day, Black goes to sleep about the time most people are thinking about lunch. (Mike Aguilar)

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Child care was an important consideration for Maddox. When she had the chance to go to an earlier shift, she refused. Working nights allows her to be available for her children, and she has grown attached to her staff, she says.

Couples who work different shifts to accommodate child care or for other reasons may need to make a special effort to ensure that they see enough of each other and are communicating well.

Black had worked the night shift before, so he didn't feel that the hours were a major drawback when he applied for his current job. His wife, however, isn't happy with his schedule. "Fortunately, she works from home," he says. "She's always here when I leave for the night and when I get home for the day."

When working a topsy-turvy schedule, it's vital to get the proper amount of sleep during the day. According to a 2005 National Sleep Foundation poll, shift workers tend to battle insomnia and excessive sleepiness more than daytime workers do.

Black usually goes to bed by 11 a.m. and gets up no later than 8 p.m. It's critical, he says, for night-shift workers to not cheat themselves out of sleep and to stick to a sleep schedule.

"It becomes remarkably easy to get so messed up after a few days that I'm tired all the time" if he deviates from his routine, Black says.

Maddox, who gets eight or nine hours of sleep each day, also stresses its importance.

To be successful on the night shift, she says, you must "protect your sleep."

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