

PRODUCTIVITY ROAD TEST

Owl or lark?

Mornings aren't a hoot for all of us, but there is hope. By **Sue White**.

If most of us were asked, "When do you like to work?" the automatic answer would probably be, "Never". Let's be honest: weekday movies, lunches with friends or even washing the dog often hold far more appeal than tucking in to work-related tasks.

But unless you're a film or restaurant critic (could I be in the wrong niche?) or, of course, a professional dog washer, most of the above don't pay the bills. Therefore, it's good to know that work can be far more productive and, yes, enjoyable if you work when your body is ready for it. Enter owls and larks.

Larks are morning folks. That colleague greeting you with a chirpy "Hello!" at 8am? Lark. The person struggling to give you more than a slow nod before 10am? Owl.

Maybe. Defining this category is more complicated: they could be hungover, unfriendly or they might just dislike you.

Figuring out whether you're an owl or a lark is important because it helps you manage your work day productively. If you're a lark, get started earlier, when you're in peak productivity mode. Owls should spend the extra time under the bed covers; for them, easing into things slowly makes for a more efficient day.

It's fairly easy to diagnose whether you're a morning person or not (jump online and Google "Owl and lark test"), but a few challenges arise when working with the findings. First, many researchers, including Dr Simon Archer from the



Illustration: Kerrie Leishman

University of Surrey, now say about 50 per cent of our owl/lark status (or more technically, diurnal status) is genetic.

While you can't change your genes (yet), you can tweak the other part of the equation - your environment. But this brings up problem two: our work world is typically geared towards the early birds. Owls should speak with their boss and see if there's any flexibility in start and finish times. Owls tend to fall asleep later, so getting up for an 8am (or even 9am) start is physically gruelling. Offer it up as an experiment (or even for one day

each week) to see if there are productivity improvements.

If your working hours are set in stone, take back some control by determining what tasks your brain can cope with at different times of the day.

Owls may find strategic work difficult first thing - it's far better to tackle that in the afternoon. Larks? Don't attempt complex tasks later in the day when your early morning spark is fading; save that for first thing in the morning and keep afternoons free for more process-oriented tasks.

Remember, you can be strong or

weak in either category: "light" owls may find falling asleep earlier is possible if they go to bed before they are tired, while "heavy" larks may be able to encourage themselves to sleep in an hour or two longer by investing in blackout curtains.

But whatever your status, there's one key learning to take from every owl and lark researcher: don't work shiftwork - you'll be toast.

Sue White is a freelance writer interested in productivity, working sustainably and trying to support her light lark status. Follow @suewhitewriter.