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BUSINESS

No More Napping on the Railroad, Says New CSX Boss

Hunter Harrison breaks with longstanding practice of paying workers for 45-minute naps; safety vs efficiency



A southbound CSX freight train travels down Main Street in La Grange, KY. The change instituted by CEO Hunter Harrison eliminated more than two decades of allowable naps under certain circumstances on CSX trains. PHOTO: LUKE SHARRETT/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By Paul Ziobro

July 14, 2017 5:30 a.m. ET

CSX Corp.'s [CSX -0.49%](#) ▼ new boss has nixed naptime.

Hunter Harrison joined the railway as chief executive in March, promising to quickly jolt the company's culture and bring on tighter schedules, faster trains and less downtime.

One casualty of the new plan: napping breaks, which train conductors and engineers were allowed for up to 45 minutes under a strict protocol when trains were stopped. Now, any on-the-job shut-eye is forbidden.

"We had a rule that said you could take a nap while you worked," Mr. Harrison said in a recent interview. "We don't have that now."

The change, instituted by the 72-year-old railroad veteran in a half-page bulletin in April, eliminated more than two decades of allowable naps on CSX trains. It also put CSX at odds with its U.S. rivals. BNSF Railway Co., Kansas City Southern Corp., Norfolk Southern Corp. and Union Pacific Corp., allow napping under certain conditions, as do hundreds of other smaller railways.

The two other railways that Mr. Harrison ran—Canadian National and Canadian Pacific—don't allow napping.

"We think it's pertinent and appropriate in certain circumstances to enable an employee to nap," said Union Pacific CEO Lance Fritz. The railway has allowed naps since 1999 and

has even built “nap rooms” at various sites to facilitate rest.

The various changes that Mr. Harrison is implementing are meant to give employees less variability in their schedules, allowing them to plan their sleep better, CSX spokesman Rob Doolittle said. CSX believes employees are safer “when they are fully engaged in the activity around them at all times when they are on duty,” he said, adding that worker safety hasn’t slipped since the rule changed in April.

THE RULES FOR NAPS

According to the General Code of Operating Rules, napping is permitted by U.S. freight trains:

- If a crew is stopped waiting for departure, for another train to pass or for track work
- One crew member must remain awake at all times
- The nap period must not exceed 45 minutes
- When conditions allow the train to move, the napping employee must be immediately awoken
- The employee in charge of the locomotive controls must ensure the train’s brakes are applied and its generator is off
- The employee who is awake must remain on the locomotive

Frequent delays hauling freight provide plenty of opportunities for napping. On long routes, a train may be shunted to a “siding” to allow another to pass from the opposite direction. With dozens of miles between sidings and long trains chugging along at about 25 miles an hour, such delays can easily last more than an hour. Track repairs, derailments and congestion can also lead to long waits.

Fatigue is an issue too in what is a 24/7 operation in which engineers can be called into work in the middle of the night. Federal laws regulate railroad shifts, including a maximum of 12 hours worked in a 24-hour period and 10 hours off before resuming work. Still, the National Transportation Safety Board says nearly 20% of investigations of railway accidents between 2001 and 2012 identified fatigue as a cause or contributing factor.

A Union Pacific spokeswoman cited a National Aeronautics and Space Administration study of airline pilots that showed a planned, 40-minute nap taken in-flight made them 34% more aware and 100% more alert.



CSX CEO Hunter Harrison, shown in November 2015. PHOTO: CHRIS GOODNEY/BLOOMBERG

Fatigue is a common issue in other industries —such as aviation and medicine—that are staffed round the clock, and often workers are encouraged to nap to keep alert. United Parcel Service

Inc., for one, has 125 sleep rooms at its main hub in Louisville, Ky., where pilots can recharge between flights.

“If there was an opportunity to take a nap, 90% of the time someone in the cab was going to want to do it,” said John Paul Wright, a retired CSX locomotive engineer who currently organizes for Railroad Workers United, a coalition of unions. He recalls spending three hours waiting outside terminals in Nashville, Tenn., without moving. “It

doesn't matter if it's 12-noon or 12-midnight, someone is going to kick their feet up and nap for a minute."

John Risch, national legislative director for the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers, a union that represents CSX conductors, said that napping is a key way to deal with fatigue. "Eliminating napping is a real disappointment and the wrong way to go," he said.

While union contracts govern pay, benefits and other quality-of-life issues, rules on operational procedures—which have a long history in the railroad industry—remain within the purview of railway management.

Waiting is anathema to Mr. Harrison, who is busy at CSX implementing an approach he calls precision railroading. The goal is running trains on a tighter schedule and keeping them moving along. Less than four months into his tenure, CSX's trains are moving 10% faster and spending 7% less time in terminals.

Some staff view the nap prohibition as another way for CSX management to put the screws on workers, who are monitored constantly on inward-facing cameras in cabs. "If you're sitting in a siding somewhere and you fall asleep out in the middle of nowhere, what's the issue with that?" a current CSX employee said.

CSX says it uses a progressive scale to address noncompliant behavior, "ranging from informal coaching to termination."

Section 111 of CSX's rule book detailed the now-obsolete napping protocol, which prohibited sleep if the train was moving or any crew was on the ground. Only one crew member could nap at any time, while another had to remain at the controls. The maximum nap time was 45 minutes.

Norfolk Southern, which like CSX operates in the eastern U.S., continues make allowance for naps in its operating rules. "The policy has a positive effect on safety and no effect on productivity," Susan Terpay, a spokeswoman, said.

Canadian Pacific said it prohibits naps because operating crews always have safety-related duties to perform, and expects employees to rest during their time off. "CP believes fatigue management is a shared responsibility between the railroad and the employee," said Martin Cej, a spokesman for the railway.

Railroaders are left with few things to do when trains are delayed. Distractions like smartphones, magazines, books or games aren't allowed. One thing they can do to pass the time, said Mr. Wright, the retired engineer: "Read the operating rules."

—David George-Cosh contributed to this article.

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