Workaholism

Bonnie A. Osif

“We decide which are the most important things to do first. Sometimes that may mean doing nothing. We strive to stay flexible to events, reorganizing our priorities as needed. We view interruptions and accidents as opportunities for growth.”

“We do not add a new activity without eliminating from our schedule one that demands equivalent time and energy.”

Definitions of workaholism are important and can vary greatly from researcher to researcher, so take note of the specific definitions in each article. In their much-cited article, Spence and Robbins define a workaholic as “a person who exhibits three properties: In comparison to others, the workaholic is highly work involved, feels compelled or driven to work because of inner pressures, and is low in enjoyment of work.” Work enthusiasts, on the other hand, score high on work involvement and work enjoyment, and low on feeling driven to work. Enthusiastic workaholics score high on all three components. Some of the other definitions include Barbara Killinger’s: “workaholism is a soul-destroying addiction that changes peoples personalities and the values they live by. It distorts the reality of each family member, threatens family security and often leads to family break-up . . . A workaholic is a work-obsessed individual who had gradually become emotionally crippled and addicted to power and control.” Mudrack and Naughton say “Workaholics work more and invest more energy in work than is absolutely required.” In a good review of the topic, Lynley McMillan, Michael O’Driscoll, and Ronald Burke write “workaholism involves difficulty disengaging from work, a strong drive to work, intense enjoyment of work, and a differing use of leisure time than others.”

While there have been many definitions, Oates is credited with the first, both by his own writings and by the Oxford English Dictionary. He states, “Workaholism is a word which I have invented . . . It means addiction to work, the compulsion or the uncontrollable need to work incessantly.” While this short book is somewhat dated and, as it is written by a professor of religious psychology, has a religious theme, it is as he states a “serious jest” and gives insight into the views of a person who has seriously looked at and lived with the issues of workaholism. While not necessary reading, it is interesting to see the beginning of a field, and both the serious and humorous insight makes the book worth a look.

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Time and Work Addiction

This chapter discusses workaholism and work addiction as "an obsessive-compulsive disorder that manifests itself through self-imposed demands, an inability to regulate work habits, and an overindulgence in work to the exclusion of most other life activities." He presents a very personal point of view to the subject. Chapters begin with a case study and provide practical help. There are self-tests in the book that can be eye opening. Chapters address the needs of partners and children as they deal with being close to a workaholic. There is an excellent bibliography and a chapter devoted to additional resources, including Workaholics Anonymous, a twelve-step group that helps people win their battle over workaholism. This book is very different from the scholarly articles reviewed below. There is some humor in the book that deals with a decidedly serious topic. The intent is vastly different too, but Chained to the Desk may have the type of information that is needed in the practical manager’s repertoire. Understandable and fast reading, this is a must for review and possible later reference. While scholarly studies are fascinating and shed light on workplace situations and issues, this might be the one that can directly help the manager handle certain situations.

Ronald J. Burke’s name will be mentioned several times in any review of research articles, as will many of his chapter authors. Research Companion to Working Time and Work Addiction provides an historical summary of time issues and the work environment. It provides an excellent summary of dozens of researchers in workaholism and related fields. The chapters make clear the complexity of the subject and the contradictions, ambiguities, and academic disagreements in the field, or, as Mudrack says, the “‘tangled web’ of workaholism.” Reading this book will provide a very good review of many of the major researchers in workaholism and their primary themes. It is highly recommended that time be spent to read this complex, challenging, but worthwhile book. But if time is an issue, begin with the chapters “Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde? On the Differences between Work Engagement and Workaholism” and “Career Success and Personal Failure: A Developing Need to Find Balance.”

“We schedule time for play, refusing to let ourselves work non-stop. We do not make our play into a work project.”

It would be useful to read Spence and Robbins’ paper on the development of their measurement scheme, definition, and research results because they are cited in so many later works. While it may seem as if workaholism has been a major topic of discussion and study for decades, it really is a more recent phenomenon. Although many subsequent articles summarize this paper, it is a good idea to take a look at this foundation research that influences later articles.

Snir, Harpaz, and Burke’s guest editorial provides a short but clear introduction to the subject of workaholism. In three pages of text they introduce the topic and a series of articles that comprise the rest of the issue of Career Development International. They review the thirty-plus-year history of this field of study, cite major researchers, and make it clear that this is a young discipline in flux. There is much disagreement about terms and emphasis. Some researchers see workaholism as a negative; others as a positive. Some of those articles will be reviewed in this column.

McMillan and coauthors did a study to validate Spence and Robbin’s WorkBAT tool by testing it on more than three hundred employees. They found that the tool was not validated by the results of their research, especially the aspect of work involvement, and recommend further study and the possible use of other tools. In part because of this uncertainty, Porter notes that the technology field is a fertile area for the study of workaholism. She presents a very short literature review of the discipline, then summarizes the rapid changes, long hours, and constant activity of the high-tech world. She had a very small group of fourteen, seemingly almost like case studies so she could not make too many general statements. But she did not find that all rated high on all areas of work addition. She notes, “Perhaps there is yet a chance for healthy workplaces amid all the pressure for more speed productivity, and time on the job. Organizations should strive to do a better job of highlighting those people who succeed without relying on workaholic traits.” Porter also says “workaholic behavior may seem well suited to a high-tech environment, but it apparently is not a requirement for success.” Her descriptions sound much like conditions in the library, where librarians and staff must learn, adapt, and utilize the constantly changing technologies and interfaces in much the same way as Porter’s study group.

Another article by Porter concerns excessive work hours. She states that new technologies make it easier to be in touch with work no matter the location, including places and times that “previously provided a barrier between work and nonwork activity.” At some point the workaholic must realize that it is not just the organization putting the pressures on the workers but also the manipulation of the workers themselves. Some researchers see this as an addiction with damage done to self. She writes “an unfortunate side effect is the organization’s tendency to take high work involvement at face value. The workaholic is generally rewarded for being on the job more hours than employees who find more efficient ways to accomplish a similar task.”

Porter reviews the two major points of view on workaholism. One sees it as time spent on work, and this behavior can be good or bad. In other words, many hours can be spent
on the work, but the result can be either compulsive and perfectionist (negative), or achievement oriented (positive). The other point of view sees workaholism and work addiction as the same thing, both addictive behaviors. Control, perfectionism, rigidity, and identity issues are all part of this. If these characteristics are lacking, the person is not a workaholic. Motive can be a real issue. An unfulfilled workaholic tends to be uncooperative, uncommunicative, overly sensitive, resentful, and a perfectionist who is judgmental of other's work, while joy in work, commitment, and achievement orientation are motives that indicate a nonworkaholic. The study looked at the difference in perception of joy of the workers at a technology firm. When demographics were studied, it indicated that there was no real significance in any of the race, gender, or age categories. What did show statistical significance were the perceptions of the workers. Perfectionists saw things as more of a competition or a “battle among employees who share resources, information, space, or even customers.” Collaboration and teamwork were not popular with this group, giving “some indication that the contrast between perfectionism and joy in work does correspond to creating or, at least, perpetuating different types of working climate among coworkers.” Further,

There is always concern that people working a lot of hours are under stressful conditions and that those conditions may lead to health problems or strain on interpersonal relations. This study was an attempt to show that there may be important differences based on the individual’s motive for working so hard. This difference is particularly important in terms of impact on the general working climate as the focal person interacts with others. The environment is likely to become a breeding ground for stress if the motive stems from the type of perfectionism thought to be a strong characteristic of workaholism.

One more Porter article that should be read concerns how excessive work hours can affect an organization. She summarizes the literature well, detailing the wide range in terminology and perspectives, and then compares behaviors of the workaholic to those of the alcoholic. Identity issues, thinking patterns, denial, and progression of the affliction are all reviewed with startling similarities. A comparison table lays out commonalities between the two. Another table looks at workaholic behaviors (hours worked, performance standards, job involvement, control, personal identification) and at traditional and alternative ways of interpreting these behaviors. She concludes,

Excessive work is not synonymous with commitment to the organization. The individual’s commitment may be to the behavior itself, possibly involving an underlying pursuit of self-esteem or personal control. An organization that accepts workaholic behaviors from employees may erroneously believe there are short-term benefits from the amount of time worked and personal sacrifice for the good of the company.

However, there may be another side to this that is not normally considered that has significant detrimental effects and these effects should be considered. I recommend that interested persons definitely read this one.

“We work at a comfortable pace and rest before we get tired. We do not yield to pressure or attempt to pressure others.”

The International Journal of Stress Management devoted an issue, edited by Ronald J. Burke, to the subject of workaholism in organizations. Begin with McMillan et al., “Understanding Workaholism.” It provides two categories of workaholism: dynamic, which identifies effects of the behavior or characteristic (for example, the magnitude and value judgments of the behavior), and operational, which specifies how to determine variables (for example, the exact components of the behavior), a more empirical way of looking at workaholism. They discuss the three major empirical tools to measure workaholism—Work Addiction Risk Test, Schedule for Nonadaptive and Adaptive Personal Workaholism Scale and Workaholism Battery (WorkBAT)—and provide a short overview of stress and health issues. After this review of the basics of the field, they look at the addiction, learning, and trait theories, then compare the three with a chart detailing each theory's predictions about workaholism. While they state in their conclusion that they “aimed to spark debate,” for the nonresearcher this provides a very interesting summary of the topic and ideas to consider.

Mudrack and Naughton detail the development of two new scales to assess workaholism. One scale looks at nonrequired work activities and the second looks at interpersonal aspects of workaholics. Another article in the issue worth reading, but not crucial, is Burke’s “Predictors of Workaholism Components and Behaviors.” It looks at three predictors of workaholism (individual demographic predictors, work situation characteristics, the antecedents of personal beliefs and fears, and perceptions of organizational support for life–work balance). His results are consistent with other studies in that the first two have “modest and inconsistent relationship with various workaholism measures” while the third has some significant relationship with some of the workaholic behaviors (feeling driven to work, joy in work). Porter produces yet another article, this time on stress and concludes that one potential direction to explore in terms of eliminating destructive stress in the workplace might be to identify those individual with strong perfectionist tendencies and deal with that pattern as a negative influence. . . . In conclusion,
organization leaders should care why people work so many hours. If it is extreme perfectionism with little or no joy in work, there will likely be negative interpersonal relations that can spread and interfere with general efficiency.38

Burke used Spence and Robbin’s scale to study the three components of workaholism and their relationships to each other in a study with MBA graduates from one Canadian university.29 The results were interesting.

It is not surprising that joy in work was found to be positively related to levels of work and career satisfaction and higher levels of psychological health. Positive feelings in one sphere of activity are likely to be associated with positive feelings in other spheres. . . . Feeling driven to work may be associated with negative feelings, similar to negative affectivity, which increase levels of dissatisfaction. Individuals feeling driven to work, a situation combining elements of obsession and addiction, may deny themselves opportunities to experience satisfaction. . . . Thus while both work enjoyment and feelings of being driven to work heighten workaholic behaviors, the former fosters satisfaction and well-being while the latter diminishes both.30

He concludes that this is a challenge for organizations, but it is easy to see how this is an important one.

“We balance our work involvement with efforts to develop personal relationships, spiritual growth, creativity, and playful attitudes.”

A syndrome is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a concurrence of several symptoms in a disease; a set of such concurrent symptoms.”31 As Aziz and Zickar note, “If workaholism is truly a syndrome, each of the three components (that is, high work involvement, high work drive, and low work enjoyment) defined by Spence and Robbins would be necessary (though not sufficient) conditions for someone to be classified as a workaholic.”32 They devised an interesting study that goes beyond looking directly at workaholism to look at issues such as self-employment, family centrality, and religion (with an Israeli sample population).40

For a different and practical look at the subject, pay close attention to Douglas and Morris’s “Workaholic, or Just Hard Worker?”41 Their summary of previous research and the basic terminology and perspectives of workaholism is one of the best. They then go on to ask the research questions: are all people that work hard workaholics, and

high enjoyment workaholics had fewer psychosomatic symptoms and more favorable physical well-being than many other workers. In fact, his data indicated that (enthusiastic) workaholics’ and non-workaholics’ physical health scores were so similar that they all fell within one standard deviation of the mean.35

The authors note that it might be that “low enjoyment in work is the critical factor that leads to poor health outcomes, as many studies reporting poor health outcomes for workaholics conceptualized workaholism as comprising low enjoyment.”36 Noting that their results may not be generalizable to other countries, they also state that the workaholics should not be “typecast as unhappy slaves.”37

Workaholism is also addressed in a 2006 issue of Career Development International. Snir and Harpaz review the topic cross-nationally with research samples from Belgium, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States.38 While not critical to the library workforce, their findings are interesting because we often read of work-week comparisons among countries, and the article provides a snapshot of differences and similarities in the studied countries.

Harpaz and Snir’s “Workaholism: Its Definition and Nature” is valuable for its demographic study of workaholism predictor variables.39 Especially useful is the chart of the viewpoints of the major workaholism researchers. Their “Attitudinal and Demographic Antecedents of Workaholism” expands on their demographic research to look at issues such as self-employment, family centrality, and religion (with an Israeli sample population).40

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what causes people to work hard? They defined four work motivations: driven-ness (work orientation), materialism (economic orientation), nonwork orientation (leisure orientation), and preference for work-associated perquisites (perquisite orientation). A chart diagrams the differences in the four attitudinal groups clearly. They note that it is only those who work long hours for the work itself (the driven) who are the ones that are “properly called workaholics.” Others might well be called work enthusiasts “who are similar to work addicts in that they are highly driven to work but oppositely gain high levels of work enjoyment.”

For another perspective on the topic with very real application, consider Russo and Waters’s “Workaholic Worker Type Difference in Work-Family Conflict.” The study looked at Spence and Robin’s work drive, enjoyment, and involvement triad; the McMillan drive and enjoyment dyad; and the role of supervisor support and flexible work practices as they pertain to the work family conflict (WFC) issue. While noting the now familiar limitations of the study, the authors do conclude with “the potential for management to introduce family friendly polices to curb WFC may well be dependent on a better understanding the interaction between such policies and individual difference variables, such as worker type.” This supplies an interesting insight into an important aspect of the working environment.

“We accept the outcomes of our endeavors, whatever the results, whatever the timing. We know that impatience, rushing, and insisting on perfect results only slow down our recovery. We are gentle with our efforts, knowing that our new way of living requires much practice.”

Summarizing this subject, with its many facets and opinions, and in as much flux as the concept of workaholism itself, seems almost impossible. Yet, with so many stresses on people from work, technology, the economy, social issues, and more, it seems it is a very important one. The best summation might be from Dov Zohar in the epilogue to the Career Development International issue on workaholism. After a review, he writes,

Altogether, the papers in this issue suggest that the study of workaholism has a long way to go before it reaches the mature state of Consolidation and Accommodation. As noted above, by such a time a dominant definition would have emerged accompanied by standardized methodology and measurement scales. All of which suggests that students of workaholism need to identify ways leading to convergence and shared understandings as a condition for continued progress.

The field is in flux, and there are several fertile avenues of study; but most would agree that workaholism has serious and far-reaching effects. We can joke about depictions in the media, but workaholism is real, and it has real implications for the worker, coworkers, supervisors, family, and society. The readings in this column provide an introduction; monitoring future research should be both fascinating and useful.


References

6. Ibid., vii.
9. Ibid., 125.
15. Ibid., 458.
17. Ibid., 149.
18. Ibid., 149.
19. Ibid., 162.
20. Ibid., 163.
21. Gayle Porter, “Organizational Impact of Workaholism: Suggestions from Researching the Negative Outcomes of Exces-

continued on page 164
LAMA Diversity Officers’ Discussion Group

Twenty-four people gathered for the meeting of the LAMA Diversity Officers’ Discussion Group in Philadelphia. As always, we welcomed all those interested in diversity issues, whether or not they are in positions that include diversity-related responsibilities. In addition to sharing information about the roles and responsibilities of library diversity officers and diversity committees, we talked about our experiences with diversity residency programs and other diversity-related initiatives, including displays celebrating the cultural heritage of a variety of groups, liaison relationships with cultural centers, and mentoring programs for new library employees. Several people from university libraries provided insights into relationships with campus diversity committees. In some libraries, performance appraisals and job announcements now include a demonstrated commitment to diversity, and the diversity officer or a member of the diversity committee sits on every search committee.

Recruiting and retaining a diverse employee group remains a challenge for many libraries. Some have responded by creating programs that focus on high school or undergraduate students, giving them experience working in libraries with the goal of helping them visualize themselves in careers in library and information science. Our meeting concluded with an update on the recently formed Residency Working Group.—Nancy Hewison

PRMS Training and Education Committee Announcement

The Training and Education Committee of PRMS is planning a Hot Topics program for Annual Conference in Anaheim. The speakers are Marisa Duarte from the Fresno County Public Library and Tammy Allgood from Arizona State University. They will be talking about marketing strategies through gaming and Second Life.—Felice E. Maciejewski