

The Challenges of Workplace – Do More with Less?

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Abstract - As global competition increases, people have been asked to learn to do more with less. Among the many undesirable effects from this type of action is that it leaves all the existing work (if not more) to be done by fewer employees. Everyone is asked to dig in and do whatever possible. Some employees struggle to meet work demands while maintaining a strong family life and involvement in outside activities. Others seem to thrive on the challenge. In fact, a few might seem to prefer working long hours. These individuals might be addicted to their work, be workaholics, and this work pattern can have negative consequences for business operations. The individual who works in excess is at risk for both physical and mental health difficulties. Can it really be more profitable to have an employee with physical ailments and subject to temper outbursts and mood swings? Increasingly, companies require collaborative work in order to be responsive to customer needs and to deal with rapid changes in markets and operating conditions. Addiction introduces dysfunctional patterns into every interpersonal dynamic involving the addict. What little gain there might be in the long hours worked by that individual could be more than offset by a ripple of distorted work team relationships.

Keywords - Doing more with less, family and social life, negative consequences of workaholic employees, mental health and dysfunctional dynamics of workaholics, distortion of teamwork and negative consequences.

I. INTRODUCTION

The term “workaholic” is often used in a lighthearted way. Some people seem to take pride in identifying themselves as persons consumed by their work. The term has a serious connotation, however, and can be described as work addiction. In recent years, technological advances have increased our ability to work anywhere, anytime. The resulting pressure for 24/7 connectivity may push more and more people into putting work ahead of all other activities. Although this may at first seem to benefit the companies, for which they work, offsetting issues, negatively impact business operations. Work addiction/workaholism is a manifestation of excessive work that carries with it a number of consequences to both the individual and that person’s network of relationships both personal and professional. Again, both personal and professional relationships are considered, but the emphasis here is on the business consequences and, therefore, professional interaction. Social changes that seem to encourage excessive work, including technological advances, are considered for the ways in which they encourage either the conscious belief that more work is

always better or the seemingly unconscious behaviors that allow work to increasingly intrude into other life activities.

As clarified in Burke’s (2000) summary, neither researchers nor popular press authors agree on the exact definition of workaholism or how to best measure whether and to what extent it exists in the workplace. Some authors disagree with the characterization of workaholism as work addiction, preferring instead to call everyone working long hours a workaholic and distinguishing that some of those individuals are very happy and productive in that situation. There is, however, some consensus that excess work—whether called work addiction or something else—can be a problem, and this extends to a number of developed countries. A quick Internet search reveals that Germans write about *arbeitsucht*, which translates to work mania or work craze. In Japan, widows have successfully sued companies for their spouses’ *karoshi* or death by overwork. Articles and books have appeared in areas as divergent as the Czech Republic and Brazil in the last decade. All of this indicates that there is something here of substance and worthy of further investigation.



Figure 1: Illustrative picture of the effects of excessive work

Excessive work is contrary to the potential for personal benefit in discussions of work/life balance. On the one hand, there seems to be greater recognition that policies supporting work/life balance are a good idea. On the other hand, actual practices might fall short due to the engrained habits that have evolved as the prevalent work culture. These opposing forces shift in balance from time to time. Some predicted there would be more attention given to life outside the workplace. With so much pressure to work

long hours, is it realistic to say that some people would continue to do so even if those pressures were removed? The work addiction view answers that question as “yes” and suggests that the existing work addicts or workaholics in the organization are helping to perpetuate the belief that more work is always better.

Such challenges of the modern work place cannot be belittled. It is a fact that modern work places take a toll of the personal time and stamina of the worker.

II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Questions about the work place environment can be very sensitive. But it remains as the most challenging area for the employers. Work environment and the quality of work as well as the quantum of work and the duration of work are all important. One cannot be overemphasized at the cost of the other. Modern work places have sometimes become ‘sleeping places’ because the tired and weary worker falls asleep on the job (See Figure 2) We used to hear the old fashioned complaint that one is overworked and underpaid. Thanks to various wage agreements and Governmental laws, the wage has become stable but the element of overwork has increased disproportionately.

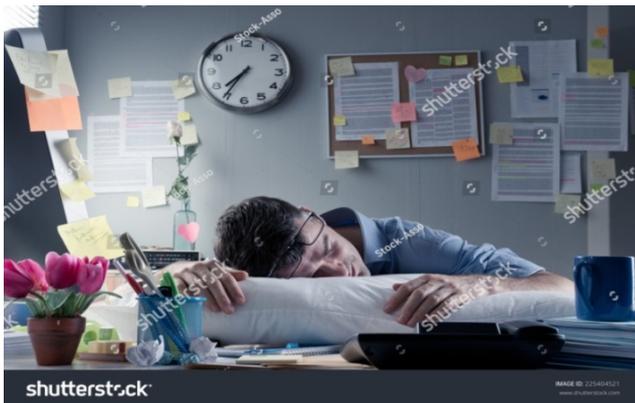


Figure 2: Workplace can become a veritable sleeping place!

(When employees are overworked)

The present research paper tries to identify the current business environment and factors contributing to the skepticism of overwork and excessive workloads. The present research paper would try to find answers to the following specific research questions

1. A reality check on the current work environment
2. Identification of factors responsible for the current situation.
3. Of the various challenges, reasons why the work environment is important.
4. How the Businesses are coping with the current situation
5. Futuristic scenario and solutions

Since the study is more about the environmental factors and the current business situation as it is obtained, a comprehensive analysis of the current data available through published literature would serve better. Hence available information and data from published literature as well as web pages and the internet resources were fully utilized. It is amazing to see the amount of study, interest and literature available on the subject. All it needed was a careful compilation and tabulation of the data to arrive at Conclusions as indicated in the Findings.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

We can probably all agree that dedicated, diligent employees are essential for any workplace, but some people argue for more and more work to be expected from a shrinking work force — they want you to become a workaholic, singularly obsessed with achieving the company's mission. This is no small difference, and you probably feel the repercussions in your everyday life. You may be an industrious soul, devising creative solutions for whatever problems come your way, and are happy to devote your talent and time to your employer. But you might also resent the fact that your days are long — so long that you rarely get to wind down with a bike ride, see close friends, or even spend time with your kids.

Initial enthusiasm to meet the competition squarely and get the better of them makes you work on Saturdays and Sundays. You do not mind the sacrifices you have to make, but you think it is worth. But it is disheartening to find out that your competition is not beating you or getting the better of you, because they are working more hours than you, but they are working smartly with better products and customer service. At first, the thread launched a conversation among male entrepreneurs mostly on the merits of nonstop work, and soon more skeptical people, including women, started to weigh in. Some clearly felt invested in the status quo, while others were alarmed by it. The workaholism at the center of this debate demands that you take an endless string of sacrifices in stride — as if a full-tilt obsession with work, to the exclusion of all else, is the only path to success. It ignores the reality that a person can be passionate, persistent, and hard-working and also find fulfillment in other aspects of life. Indeed, that satisfaction probably enhances their vision in ways that are difficult to quantify. The overbearing philosophy of workaholism, which is rooted in macho stereotypes about what overwork, would look like, also conveniently leaves out some difficult facts.

A company is referred to as “family friendly” when policies and practices include benefits like extended parental leave, flextime, and corporate child-care programs, along with a general culture that values family life and believes in supporting more balanced lives (Andreassi & Thompson, 2004). Having policies is one

important step; following through with actual practice is another. Companies that do maintain family-friendly practices and an organizational culture that supports balance between work and family life may do so for different reasons. It may be that the founder or leader of the company supports these values and ensures that consistent messages are carried throughout the employee ranks. A company may also strive to be the preferred place of employment for the best employees. Unfortunately, many companies have policies in place that employees do not utilize, because the organizational culture dictates that face time and overtime are the true values (Andreassi & Thompson, 2004).

Technology has allowed for new products that have sometimes been called “labor-saving devices.” Past generations wondered what women would have left to do in their homes when washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and later, microwave ovens relieved the burden of previously time-consuming household tasks. In factories, there was fear that robotics would displace so many workers as to cause economic disaster. More recently, our ability to do more things and do things faster has accelerated. Document handling has changed with the introduction of fax machines and high-speed copiers. Computers and the Internet have put tremendous amounts of information at everyone’s fingertips. Cell phones have allowed easy contact while away from work. Handheld devices now provide features of both phone and computer and are so compact in size that one can slip them into a pocket or wear them clipped to a belt.



Figure 3: Pictures speak louder than words.

All of this allows new freedom for people to move about and does make it easier to leave the workplace and still cover necessary messages, research, and scheduling. However, does the ability to stay in touch 24/7 equate to a requirement that one do so? Technology itself can be addictive. Many people have experienced losing track of time playing a computerized video game. Many have

stayed up later at night than intended, engrossed in surfing the Web. As isolated events, these things may not be a problem. When it becomes habitual, and everything else is arranged around the use of the technology, the person might be identified as a “techno-addict” or one subject to “techno-philia” (Kakabadse, Kouzmin, & Kakabadse, 2000). With some people vulnerable to becoming addicted to work and others vulnerable to technology addiction, the intersection of the two would seem to be a dangerous combination. Work addicts can use the technology to more conveniently indulge; tech addicts can use work as an excuse to justify their need to stay connected at all times and in all places. These are mutually reinforcing patterns. The resulting behavior does not always seem so logical to those who do not share in the addiction.

Unfortunately, technology has progressed faster than social norms about what is appropriate. Consider these examples:

1. A guest is in the home of a friend to watch the football playoff game on a Sunday afternoon. Every 20 minutes or so he pulls out a handheld device and checks his e-mail. It’s Sunday! How many people are likely to be sending him messages that are so critical they cannot wait until Monday morning or at least until later that evening when he’s no longer at a social gathering? A few people may have critical jobs that require this type of monitoring, but not many. Why is this behavior not considered out of place or an insult to his friend as host of the gathering?
2. A man drives up to the front of a church on Sunday morning, letting his wife and children go inside while he parks the car. When he enters the church, he stays in a back pew rather than joining them farther up. At the end of the service, they find he has been back there working on his laptop computer. How much benefit came from that time on the computer to balance against the turmoil between him and his wife after it is discovered why he did not sit with the family?
3. A woman supervisor at a bank always wears a wireless earpiece to maintain connection to her cell phone, even during meetings and lunches with friends. She keeps the phone on silent mode and typically waits to check later to see who has called, but she simply is not comfortable removing the device from her ear. Why is it so uncomfortable to feel physically separated from that piece of technology?
4. A woman is asked by her husband to “just this once” not take her handheld device along on vacation. She convinces him that it will bring her comfort to have it in along in case of an

emergency, but she will not use it otherwise. Then, she gets up very early every morning and sneaks it into the hotel bathroom with her to check e-mail while he is still sleeping. What are the chances she received something in that e-mail that really justified lying to her spouse and sneaking around to use the technology that she had promised to set aside?

When 30% of the people in a restaurant are using some type of electronic device, they probably are not all addicted to either technology or the work they may be using it for. Are the others just being rude? Opinions on that might differ. Society has not yet defined the etiquette for appropriate use in public places. When some of those people continue to talk on the phone or check their e-mail while driving their car after they leave the restaurant, there is a deeper question of safety for their passengers, other drivers, and the public at large. In both situations, are people giving due consideration to their own true priorities? Once norms evolve on use of technology, it will become easier to spot those who are compelled toward excess. However, dealing with the problem of excess requires that someone identify that difference with thought as to why it should be addressed and how that might be done. This is equally true whether the excess is a drive to use technology or to work constantly, and it is especially true regarding the combination of the two.

Addictive behaviors can be learned at a young age and tracked from one generation to the next because childhood survival behavior often evolves into adult dependencies (Robinson, 1989). When this is the case, a person's workaholic tendencies exist before entering the workplace; the current job is simply today's time and place for the behavior that would occur whenever and wherever that person might be working. Is it the employer's responsibility to change that? There is no doubt that individuals are fundamentally responsible for their own behavior. The employer's responsibility might seem more clear-cut if the job requires this type of excessive behavior and, therefore, seems to pressure people toward work addiction over time. Then we might instinctively turn to the employers as having some responsibility for correcting a situation that they have created. Is there a practical difference between the two possibilities?

When focusing on business consequences, the origin of the problem becomes less important. The previous discussion has emphasized that workaholics are not a company's best asset. By surface appearances, work addiction might be mistaken for dedication, perseverance, and a willingness to always go the extra mile to accomplish goals and make sure standards are upheld. However, the dedication is directed toward making sure that there is always more work than can be completed; apparent perseverance is

simply indulging the addiction while garnering societal support; accomplishment of goals and high standards may be real but might also have been accomplished more efficiently and with less turmoil for other involved employees. The company is, of course, concerned with outcomes, but this is no longer enough. The competitive environment today requires that those outcomes be achieved as efficiently as possible. Time at work is not the same as productivity, but even productivity is not enough when there is a possibility that the same level of output could be achieved more effectively than with current processes.

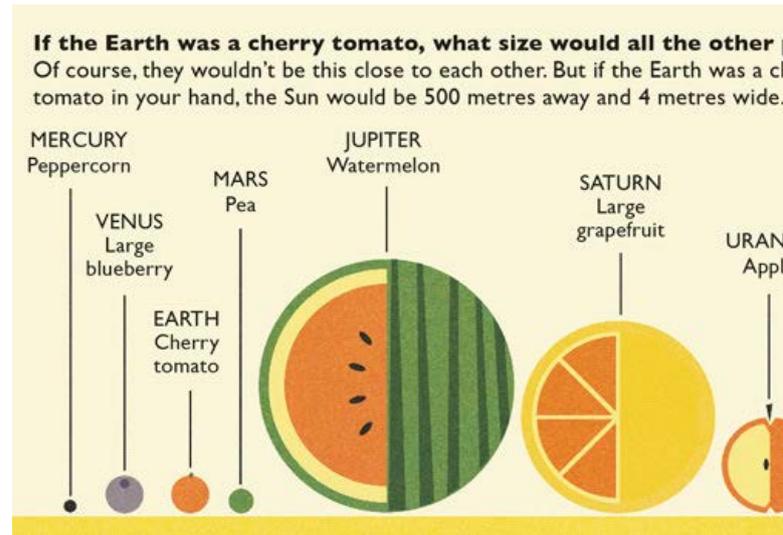


Figure 4: The dilemma of 'Communicating'

The problem with using just text to describe the size of planets is the poor job it does of illustrating scale—knowing Jupiter's surface area is 6.1419×10^{10} km² doesn't mean much, because it's too large to perceive. With a visual, we gain a concrete sense of how big the Earth is compared to the other planets.

A manager functions as agent for the company in dealing directly with both the targeted outcomes and related employee issues. The easy road is to assume that the employees who are constantly at work are the most valuable. A more difficult task is to monitor both the end result and the process used to arrive there. It is easy to credit an employee with being available and in contact any time of day or night; more difficult to evaluate how many of those odd-hour contacts truly carry any urgency, or how many urgent situations could have been avoided. Management training should include information to assist in making this transition. Better understanding of work addiction will help, but concrete suggestions are also needed.

Consolidating from several prior authors, the Burke (2000) article covers a number of possible actions for changing the culture of the organizations away from work excess and encouraging individual behaviors to support that

change. Main points follow, with some interpretative comments added:

- Identify and track the costs of imbalance to provide motivation for change and continually remind everyone why it is important to continue pursuing that change. Stress levels and unproductive conflict might be a start; employees would be a good source of input on situations and measures to monitor.
- Create policies that support balance so that people have relief from their work involvements, whether that may be time with family, community activities, or other leisure pursuits. These policies should be grounded by leadership support, including the expectation that people actually use the policies.
- Contain meetings within the regular workday times. Setting key meetings outside that time forces people to arrive early or stay late. Keeping them within the standard workday is a clear communication that employees are expected to have other commitments beyond that time and the company will not routinely interfere with those commitments.
- Require employees to take their vacation days and do not allow them to work on holidays. Any options for carry-over or pay in lieu of vacation time should be carefully controlled, used only in situations where it will benefit the employee in a short-term situation but not repeatedly applied.
- Encourage people to go home rather than work late. Encouraging this may be as simple as making it visible that the boss goes home and tells people to do the same. A special circumstance might require extra effort for a limited time. Indications that someone is consistently staying on the job would be reason for discussion about work distribution and new goal setting. If a complete workgroup or department is staying late, individuals may feel that they have to match that behavior. Groups can gradually slide into this longer workday norm unless they receive ongoing, consistent communication that it is not viewed favorably.
- Talk to employees about how their time on the job might be more productive—whether they are having general time-management problems, having difficulty prioritizing activities, or struggling to secure uninterrupted time for better concentration.

These suggestions are based on the stated assumptions that employees will be more effective in their work, overall, when their lives include time and attention to sources of satisfaction outside the workplace. People who are working long hours due to external pressure are likely to gravitate toward changes such as these as soon as they are convinced it is a message truly supported by their employer. Those who resist such changes—who continue to spend excessive time on the job—are the people working that way from an inner drive to maintain work activity with or without external demands. Those people will strongly resist efforts to have more work/life balance. For example, they will not use their vacation time, will not stay home even when they are ill, and they will ignore or even sabotage policies that would allow other benefits like flextime or telecommuting. In other words, they seem determined to stay at work as much as possible.



Figure 5: What workaholism does to you

Workaholism has the effect of side lining Talent and promoting the mediocre. A work culture that values how many hours you put in above all else also sets up the perverse expectation that men, by nature, won't care as much about spending quality time with their children, that it's expendable if the money or opportunity is right. And, hey, it might be for some men *and* women, but this is exactly how we end up with a less-than-diverse workforce. This isn't just a personal matter: Research has found that a more diverse staff is more likely to produce better financial returns. This old-fashioned approach to productivity and creativity rests on a laundry list of assumptions about who you're hiring and who's holding down the home front. And even if someone's wife or partner has her own job, the societal expectation is that she'll drop off and pick up the kids, take them to their doctor's appointments, and volunteer for field trips.

Workaholism perpetuates a macho vision of what the most valuable efforts should look like: grueling, never-ending,

The February 2007 issue of Harvard Business Review contains its list of Breakthrough Ideas for the upcoming year. Number seven on the list, and in the category of "people management," is the item Living with Continuous Partial Attention, a condition in which one is "constantly scanning for opportunities and staying on top of contacts, events, and activities in an effort to miss nothing" (Stone, 2007, p. 28). The concluding breakthrough idea in this article was that companies will be able to differentiate themselves both with customers and employees by offering "discriminating choices and quality of life" (Stone, 2007, p. 29). Companies astute enough to recognize the validity of this shift and take action toward moderation will be able to gain competitive advantage by avoiding, or at least diminishing, the negative business consequences of excessive work.

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