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Excessive Work & Business Values

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1

Research Paper - Commerce

ABSTRACT

As global competition increases, people have been asked to learn to do more with less. Companies claim that employee layoffs are necessary to save the business and retain jobs for at least some people. 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. Where will it stop? Who decides how much is too much? 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. It is this very last group of employees that the company would be wise to think about more carefully. These individuals might be addicted to their work, be workaholics, and this work pattern can have negative consequences for business operations.

Keywords: Workaholics, Business Strategies, Labour Laws, Inefficiency, Behaviour.



Introduction:

The term "workaholic" is often used in a light-hearted way. Some people seem to take pride in identifying themselves as a person consumed by their work. The topic has a serious side, 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.

Here the words workaholism and work addiction are used synonymously, although with recognition given to the work of researchers and authors who make various distinctions. 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 behaviours that allow work to increasingly intrude into other life activities.

Research Stances on Workaholism:

In a summary of research on workaholism, Burke (2000) offers a number of points for consideration:

- " A variety of definitions and measurements are used to specify workaholism, but some consensus surfaces on the idea of working long hours beyond what is required by external demands, financial need, or a particular work situation.
 - " Estimates on the prevalence of workaholics range from 5% at the low end up to at least 23% of workers in various samples.
 - " Researchers agree that the workaholic individual is more likely to suffer both psychological and physical problems
- As a result of excess work. Typical problems referenced are anger, depression,



or general anxiety, as well as physical health complaints.

Together these points highlight the importance of the issue to managers-the problem does exist, it involves a substantial number of people, and it leads to outcomes with negative impact on the work setting.

Family therapists and counsellors have long considered work to be a potentially addictive behaviour in the same way that gambling can become addictive. Robinson (1989) offers a Work Addiction Risk Test (WART) from which scores indicate whether a person is NOT work addicted, MILDLY work addicted, or HIGHLY work addicted. Items include "I get impatient when I have to wait for someone else or when something takes too long, such as long, slow-moving lines"; "I overly commit myself by biting off more than I can chew"; "I spend a lot of time mentally planning and thinking about future events while tuning out the here and now"; and 22 other items of that type. As a psychotherapist, Robinson is concerned about the individual who works in excess. He describes physical symptoms ranging from headaches and indigestion to chest pains, ulcers, and allergies. Behavioural symptoms include temper outbursts and mood swings, along with insomnia, difficulty concentrating, hyperactivity, and others.

In summary, the individual who works in excess is at risk for both physical and mental health difficulties. In the past, there has been a tendency to assume that the company employing a work addict is benefiting from all the extra hours on the job and doing so at the expense of the individual. 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.

Character/Self-Esteem:

Typically identity issues include problems of self-esteem or distorted self-concept. Whereas alcoholics may drink to feel better about themselves, workaholics are also reaching outward to obtain reinforcement of their worth. On the job, this means that



they will seek situations in which they will be seen as the hero, the most (or only) responsible person who will put in the time to get the job done.

Firm Thinking:

The addicted person indulges in rigid thinking. An alcoholic often places unreasonable demands on self and others and turns to a drink as a means of coping with the resulting frustrations. A workaholic is often a perfectionist, setting standards that cannot be met. Further, this individual will likely have a high need for control. In the workplace, this means controlling other people, work processes, and critical information. As frustrations mount, the workaholic creates a situation in which the only solution seems to be personal investment (as the only one, apparently, who cares enough) in more and more individual work. Work addicts are drawn to crises, and astute managers might note on closer inspection that some of these crises could have been avoided. Workaholics not only will allow these situations to develop but may also contribute to the conditions that create them. Resolving the crisis then becomes a mechanism to achieve the self-reinforcement just referenced being the hero, doing something no one else was willing or able to do.

Advanced Condition:

Addiction accelerates over time. An alcoholic will need increasing amounts of alcohol to achieve the desired state of mind. The next morning will bring a hangover and possibly regret or embarrassment over some behaviour while under the influence which triggers further need to find a way to again feel okay, and which now takes more drinking than previously. This cycle is paralleled by the workaholic who works to achieve recognition and a temporary feeling of having proven worth in the organization. The recognition for example praise, a raise or promotion, a bigger office brings the desired result for a short time but then loses prominence. Now there is need to accomplish something even greater to finally prove worth, and the workaholic is driven to do so.

Extraction:

A person breaking an addiction will suffer both physically and psychologically, and this holds true for a person trying to break free of work addition. Because it does not involve an ingested substance, the physical symptoms are secondary rather than direct



physiological adjustments. The person addicted to work becomes accustomed to a certain level of activation the stress of a heavy workload plus dealing with any personal relationships that may be suffering due to long hours on the job. The work has become a sole (or strongly primary) source of satisfaction, so it is also the sole focus of energy and attention. If suddenly removed from work involvement, that attention, energy, and stress response has no focus. Feelings of anxiety result. There is added stress from fear that things are no longer under control, or perhaps a worse fear that things will be okay without the workaholic's involvement. If a constant stream of work is required to maintain any sense of worth in the workplace, the potential that the work might be handled adequately without the workaholic would be devastating to his or her self-worth. This is the root of the high need for control on the job. If the opportunity to control the situation and continue the work is taken away, this stress and anxiety manifest into an extreme need to return to the prior state.

Extending the discussion of these points brings into view the dilemma a manager faces in determining who the better worker is. An employee who is always seen onsite-what is called "face time" appears to be more dedicated to the job. In some cases, this might be a true assessment but, when dealing with workaholism, it is not an accurate evaluation. Another employee who consistently leaves work on time to have evenings and weekends with family might be viewed as less interested in the business. This second person, however, might be continually striving for greater efficiencies to protect that time off and actually be contributing more to organizational effectiveness. The question to ask is "Who is getting the job done most efficiently?"

Particularly in white-collar work environments, it is difficult to determine what to measure as "the job." There are standard business metrics such as sales, production, and customer feedback. But those are summary level and do not tell the full story. Faced with ambiguity about the value of individual contributors, too many managers opt to use their general impression of who looks more involved and is always available for more involvement. This can result in rewards going to workaholic employees rather than those who work more efficiently, which can be demoralizing to those employees who see the full situation among their colleagues. Robinson (1989) explains that the work addict is



focused on "quantity control but not quality control" (pp. 33, 47) and will lie if necessary to maintain control, even when telling the truth would be easier. Co-workers can see the entire dynamic and become disheartened when their efforts are considered inferior to those of a person who creates workplace difficulties through workaholic behaviour.

Excess Work in Today's Business Environment:

Americans have increased the number of hours they work in the past 20 to 30 years, precisely the time frame one might hope would have offered increased leisure. Americans have been noted to work more hours each year than Japanese, British, or German workers and on average do not use the paid time off they have available to them. 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. The above historic highlights for the United States explain a cultural tendency to value hard work. This should not be taken to mean that it is non-existent or less of a problem in other countries. A quick Internet search reveals that Germans write about arbeitssucht, which translates to work mania or work craze. In Japan, widows have success-fully sued companies for their spouses' karoshi or death by overwork. Articles and books have appeared in areas as separated 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.

Excessive work is contrary to the potential for personal benefit in discussions of work/life balance. A company is referred to as "family friendly" when policies and practices include benefits like extended parental leave, flex time, 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).

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. Following the destruction of New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, there was a great deal of reflection about what is truly important in life. Some predicted there would be more attention given to life outside the workplace. That emphasis seems to have been short lived. In subsequent years of economic difficulty, global competition, and job losses due to redundancies after mergers, fears about career stability and job retention have overshadowed the magnitude of loss experienced on 9-11.

Help from Advancing Technology:

Technology has allowed for new products that have sometimes been called "labour-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.

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 behaviour does not always seem so logical to those who do not share in the addiction.

What Should Be Done; Who Is Responsible?

Addictive behaviours can be learned at a young age and tracked from one generation to the next because childhood survival behaviour 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 behaviour 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 behaviour. The employer's responsibility might seem more clear-cut if the job requires this type of excessive behaviour 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.

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.

Conclusion:

The overall scenario might seem unpromising. The generation to generation replication of addictive behaviour means it is not a problem likely to go away on its own. Technology is potentially compounding the number of workers involved in excessive work. Increasing demands of the workplace both for more hours involved in work and for use of technology to stay connected may be encouraging the formation of workaholic behaviour patterns. One might think it futile to tackle the concern of excessive work and honestly question whether there are not more pressing issues deserving of managers' attention.

Offsetting this pessimistic view are more promising signs. 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". In contrast to multitasking, which often combines tasks that require only limited attention, continuous partial attention is more taxing, and focus seems to deteriorate in the face of this constant barrage of incoming information. 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".

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