

Understanding Workaholism: Causes, Effects and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Workaholism, often referred to as the compulsion to work excessively and uncontrollably, has garnered significant attention in organizational psychology. This paper aims to explore the multifaceted nature of workaholism, examining its causes, consequences, and potential interventions. Through a review of existing literature, this paper elucidates the psychological, social, and organizational factors contributing to workaholism and discusses its impact on individuals and organizations. Finally, strategies for managing and mitigating workaholism are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Workaholism, a term first coined by Oates (1971), describes a behavioral pattern characterized by an obsessive need to work, often at the expense of personal health and social relationships. While dedication to work is generally viewed positively, workaholism is distinct in its compulsive nature and the detrimental effects it can have on an individual's well-being. Recent studies have highlighted the growing prevalence of workaholism in modern workplaces, with estimates suggesting that up to 30% of the workforce may exhibit workaholic tendencies (Ng, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2007). As work demands continue to increase in a highly competitive global economy, understanding the implications of workaholism becomes crucial for organizational and individual well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workaholism, often characterized by an obsessive need to work, can be influenced by various organizational factors, including leadership styles. Leadership is pivotal in shaping and sustaining organizational culture, setting examples that employees might follow, potentially leading to workaholism" (Ghaleb, 2024).

Unlike the healthy dedication and commitment that many professionals exhibit, workaholism is characterized by an intense, compulsive drive to work excessively, often at the expense of other important aspects of life (Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2009). This unhealthy obsession with work can have detrimental effects on an individual's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Therefore, exploring the concept of workaholism, its causes, and its consequences is essential. Additionally, providing strategies for identifying and addressing workaholism can help individuals achieve a healthier work-life balance and avoid the pitfalls of this increasingly prevalent condition.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of workaholism, including its definitions, theoretical frameworks, and prevalence. By understanding the multifaceted nature of workaholism, we can better address its impact on individuals and organizations, and promote healthier work habits.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative research approach through an extensive review of the existing literature on workaholism. The method involved systematically searching for, selecting, and synthesizing academic papers, books, and empirical studies that focus on the causes, consequences, and potential interventions related to workaholism. The selection process included peer-reviewed articles from reputable journals in the fields of organizational psychology, occupational health, and social sciences. These sources were chosen based on their relevance, credibility, and contributions to the understanding of workaholism.

The analysis was both thematic and integrative, aiming to identify patterns and draw connections between different studies. The method focused on understanding the multidimensional nature of workaholism and its impacts on both individual and organizational levels. Finally, the paper synthesized the findings to propose practical strategies for managing and mitigating workaholism.

RESULTS

Understanding Workaholism

Workaholism is defined as "the compulsion or the uncontrollable need to work incessantly" (Oates, 1971, p. 11). It is characterized by an individual's inability to disengage from work, even when it is not strictly necessary or beneficial to their professional or personal life (Schaufeli et al., 2008). Workaholics often derive a sense of self-worth and identity primarily from their work, and they struggle to find fulfillment in other areas of their lives (Spence & Robbins, 1992).

Researchers have identified several key characteristics of workaholism, including:

Excessive work hours: Workaholics typically work significantly more hours than their colleagues, often to the detriment of their personal and social lives (Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2009). This intense commitment to work can lead to chronic stress and burnout, which negatively impacts both physical and mental health. Moreover, workaholics may have difficulty disengaging from work-related tasks outside of work hours, which can exacerbate feelings of fatigue and reduce overall life satisfaction. The instability created by overwork can also strain relationships with family and friends, potentially leading to social isolation.

Difficulty relaxing: Workaholics have a hard time disengaging from work and often feel anxious or guilty when they are not working (Schaufeli et al., 2008). This inability to relax can lead to chronic stress and constant mental and physical tension. Over time, this constant state of arousal can lead to serious health problems, including cardiovascular disease and mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. Additionally, being constantly preoccupied with work can prevent workaholics from enjoying leisure activities and fully participating in personal relationships, which can further worsen feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction.

Neglect of other life domains: Workaholics tend to devote an inordinate amount of time and energy to their work, often at the expense of their relationships, hobbies, and other personal responsibilities (Spence & Robbins, 1992). This neglect can lead to significant imbalances in life, leading to a lack of satisfaction in areas unrelated to work. The absence of a well-rounded lifestyle can hinder personal growth and development, reducing overall life satisfaction. Moreover, tension in personal relationships can cause emotional distress and lead to conflicts or estrangement from loved ones. Ultimately, lack of participation in various activities and responsibilities can harm an individual's well-being and hinder their ability to live a balanced and fulfilling life.

Negative emotions: Workaholics may experience a range of negative emotions, such as stress, anxiety, and guilt, which can further exacerbate their compulsive work habits (Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2009). These persistent negative emotions can create a vicious cycle in which increased stress and anxiety lead to more intense work behaviors as a coping mechanism. Over time, this can seriously impact mental health, potentially resulting in burnout or depressive disorders. The constant presence of such emotions can also harm cognitive functions, reducing productivity and creativity despite excessive working hours. Additionally, these negative emotions can spill over into personal life, affecting interpersonal relationships and overall quality of life.

It is important to note that workaholism is distinct from high work engagement, which is characterized by a healthy, fulfilling dedication to one's work (Schaufeli et al., 2008). While both workaholics and highly engaged workers may put in long hours, the key difference lies in the underlying motivation and the impact on their overall well-being.

Several theoretical models have been proposed to explain workaholism. These include:

Personality-Based Models: Some researchers suggest that workaholism is rooted in personality traits, such as perfectionism and Type A behavior (Clark, Michel, Zhdanova, Pui, & Baltes, 2016). Individuals with these traits are more likely to set unrealistically high standards for themselves and exhibit a chronic sense of urgency and impatience.

For instance, Andreassen et al. (2016) found significant correlations between workaholism and personality traits such as neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness. This model emphasizes the role of individual differences in predisposing certain people to workaholic behaviors.

Cognitive-Behavioral Models: This perspective posits that workaholism arises from cognitive distortions and maladaptive behaviors related to work (McMillan, O'Driscoll, & Burke, 2003). Cognitive-behavioral theories suggest that workaholics have irrational beliefs about work and success, leading to excessive work behaviors.

McMillan et al. (2002) highlighted the role of dysfunctional beliefs, such as equating self-worth with productivity and fear of failure, in driving workaholic tendencies. Interventions targeting these cognitive distortions can be effective in reducing workaholic behaviors.

Sociocultural Models: These models emphasize the role of societal norms and cultural expectations in fostering workaholism (Shimazu, Schaufeli, & Taris, 2010). In cultures that highly value hard work and success, individuals may feel pressured to conform to these standards, leading to workaholic behaviors.

Snir and Harpaz (2009) argued that societal glorification of overwork and the stigma associated with leisure can perpetuate workaholism. Cross-cultural studies have shown variations in workaholism prevalence, suggesting that cultural values significantly influence work behaviors.

Causes of Workaholism

The roots of workaholism are complex and multifaceted, with both individual and societal factors playing a role in its development. In the context of high-pressure environments, both educational and professional settings can have significant adverse effects on individuals' psychological well-being. Similar to the impact of exam-focused and teacher-centered education systems on students, which often lead to elevated stress levels and a narrowed focus that stifles critical thinking and creativity (Ghaleb, 2024), workaholic tendencies in the workplace can result in similar outcomes. Some of the primary causes of workaholism include:

Personality traits: Certain personality traits, such as perfectionism, neuroticism, and a strong need for achievement, have been linked to an increased risk of developing workaholism (Andreassen et al., 2013). Personality traits, such as neuroticism and conscientiousness, and personal values can predispose individuals to workaholism (Andreassen et al., 2016). High achievers and those with a strong internal drive to succeed are particularly vulnerable. Clark et al. (2016) noted that perfectionism is a significant predictor of workaholism. Perfectionists often have high self-imposed standards and fear of making mistakes, leading to excessive work behaviors.

Childhood experiences: Researchers have found that individuals who grew up in environments where parental expectations were high or where there was a lack of emotional support may be more prone to developing workaholism later in life (Serrano-Fernández et al., 2020).

Organizational culture: Workplace cultures that encourage or even reward long work hours, constant availability, and a single-minded focus on work can contribute to the development of workaholism among employees (Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2009). Research indicates that a strong alignment between organizational culture and strategic goals can foster an environment where employees may internalize these objectives to an extent that leads to excessive work involvement, a hallmark of workaholism" (Ghaleb, 2024). Furthermore, companies that invest in continuous cultural development may unintentionally promote a culture of constant improvement and high productivity, potentially pushing employees towards workaholism" (Ghaleb, 2024).

Societal pressures: The emphasis on productivity, success, and material wealth in many modern societies can create a culture that values and even glorifies workaholism, making it harder for individuals to recognize and address the problem (Ng et al., 2007). Societal expectations and cultural norms about work can also contribute to the prevalence of workaholism (Snir & Harpaz, 2009). In societies where long working hours are seen as a mark of dedication and success, individuals may feel compelled to conform to these norms. Shimazu and Schaufeli (2009) highlighted that in Japan, the cultural value of "karoshi" (death from overwork) reflects the extreme expectations placed on workers. Societal attitudes towards work and leisure significantly shape work behaviors and the prevalence of workaholism. More importantly, Cultural norms and societal values significantly influence the prevalence and perception of workaholism, with varying impacts observed across different countries" (Ng, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2007).

Understanding the various factors that contribute to the development of workaholism is essential for identifying effective strategies for prevention and intervention.

Consequences of Workaholism

The consequences of workaholism can be far-reaching and devastating, affecting an individual's physical, mental, and emotional well-being, as well as their relationships and overall quality of life. Some of the key consequences of workaholism include:

Physical health problems: Workaholism has been linked to a range of physical health issues, such as cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, and sleep problems (Schaufeli et al., 2008). Workaholism is associated with a number of physical health problems. Long-term overwork can lead to chronic stress, which negatively affects the cardiovascular system. Research indicates that workaholism is significantly associated with higher levels of stress and burnout, as well as adverse physical health outcomes"(Andreassen, Ursin, & Eriksen, 2007).

Research shows that workaholics are more prone to conditions such as hypertension, heart disease and stroke. Additionally, a sedentary lifestyle often associated with long work hours can contribute to musculoskeletal disorders, including back pain and repetitive strain injuries. Poor sleep quality and sleep deprivation are also common among workaholics, further exacerbating these health problems (Schaufeli et al., 2008).

Cardiovascular Disease: Prolonged stress and lack of physical activity increase the risk of cardiovascular disease (Chandola et al., 2008).

Musculoskeletal Disorders: Prolonged sitting and poor ergonomic practices can lead to chronic pain and musculoskeletal problems (van der Ploeg et al., 2008).

Sleep Problems: High job demands are linked to insomnia and other sleep disorders (Åkerstedt et al., 2002).

These health issues underscore the importance of addressing workaholism as a comprehensive health problem and not just a psychological problem. Employers and healthcare providers should work together to detect

workaholic tendencies early and implement interventions that promote a healthier work-life balance. Encouraging regular physical activity, proper ergonomics, and adequate sleep may reduce some of the negative health effects associated with workaholism. Additionally, creating a supportive work environment that prioritizes employee well-being can help reduce the prevalence of workaholic behaviors and their associated health risks.

Mental health issues: Workaholics are at a higher risk of developing mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, and burnout (Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2009). Workaholism significantly increases the risk of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and burnout. Constant performance pressure and lack of adequate rest and relaxation time lead to emotional exhaustion. Burnout, characterized by severe fatigue, cynicism, and a sense of diminished professional competence, is especially common among workaholics. These mental health issues can further perpetuate the cycle of work addiction, as individuals may use work to escape feelings of anxiety or depression (Shimazu and Schaufeli, 2009).

Depression and Anxiety: Chronic work stress can contribute to clinical levels of depression and anxiety (Melchior et al., 2007).

Burnout: High levels of occupational stress and inadequate recovery time are key factors leading to burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

These mental health issues highlight the critical need for early identification and intervention of workaholic behaviors. Employers should be aware of signs of deterioration in the mental health of their staff and provide resources such as counseling services, mental health days and stress management programs. Promoting a culture that values mental health and work-life balance can help reduce the risks associated with workaholism. It is also important for individuals to recognize their own limits and seek professional help if they experience symptoms of depression, anxiety or burnout. Addressing these issues proactively can prevent workaholic tendencies from escalating and improve overall well-being.

Relationship difficulties: Excessive focus on work often leads to neglect of personal relationships. Workaholics may spend less time with family and friends, which can lead to feelings of neglect and resentment. This neglect can lead to conflict and decreased relationship satisfaction, and sometimes to the breakdown of marriages and family units. An individual who cannot establish healthy relationships may find it difficult to establish healthy relationships in society in a similar way and may withdraw into himself (Ghaleb,2024). Children of workaholics may also suffer from a lack of parental attention and support, which can affect their emotional development (Ng et al., 2007).

Marital Conflict: Increased work hours are associated with higher rates of marital dissatisfaction and conflict (Robinson et al., 2001).

Family Tension: Workaholism can lead to strained family relationships by reducing the time available for family interactions (Westman et al., 2009).

Overcoming relationship challenges is crucial to living a balanced and fulfilling life. Employers and organizations must understand the importance of work-life balance and support policies that allow employees to spend quality time with their families. This may include flexible working hours, remote working options and encouraging the use of vacation time. Additionally, individuals need to be aware of the impact of their work habits on their personal relationships and make conscious efforts to prioritize the time they spend with their loved ones. Getting support from counselors or family therapists can also help improve relationship dynamics and alleviate the negative effects of workaholism. Creating a supportive environment at both work and home can lead to healthier, more satisfying relationships.

Work-life imbalance: Workaholics often have difficulty maintaining a healthy balance between work and personal life. Not being able to disconnect from work results in not having enough time for leisure activities, hobbies and rest. Workaholism has been linked to detrimental effects on personal relationships and family life, often resulting in conflicts and reduced quality of interpersonal interactions" (Burke, 2000). This imbalance can reduce overall well-being and life satisfaction. Moreover, lack of time for self-care and social interactions may further exacerbate the physical and mental health problems associated with workaholism (Spence and Robbins, 1992).

Life Satisfaction: Excessive work involvement is negatively associated with life satisfaction and personal well-being (Clark et al., 2004).

Leisure Activities: Lack of participation in leisure activities can lead to decreased mental and physical health (Pressman et al., 2009).

Achieving a healthy work-life balance is crucial to overall well-being and personal satisfaction. Employers play an important role in developing an organizational culture that values work-life balance and encourages employees to take breaks and prioritize their personal lives. Implementing policies such as flexible working hours, remote work options, and clear boundaries between work and personal time can help employees achieve a better balance. Additionally, individuals should actively participate in activities outside of work that encourage relaxation, socialization, and self-care. Creating strong support networks and prioritizing leisure activities can help reduce the negative effects of workaholism and improve overall quality of life.

Reduced productivity and performance: Ironically, the urge to overwork can lead to decreased productivity and performance. Chronic overwork can cause fatigue, decreased cognitive function, and impaired concentration. This makes it difficult for workaholics to maintain high levels of productivity over the long term. Moreover, the quality of work may decline as individuals become more stressed and unable to focus on tasks effectively (Shimazu and Schaufeli, 2009).

Cognitive Impairment: Prolonged stress and lack of rest can impair cognitive functions such as memory, attention, and decision-making (Sonnentag et al., 2010).

Reduced Productivity: Excessive working hours are associated with decreased productivity and increased errors (Proctor et al., 2000).

As a result, recognizing the deep and far-reaching consequences of workaholism is crucial to motivating individuals to seek help and implement strategies for a healthier work-life balance. By addressing these issues, individuals can improve their physical health, mental health, relationships, and overall quality of life. Recognizing the profound and far-reaching consequences of workaholism is essential for motivating individuals to seek help and implement strategies for a healthier work-life balance.

Strategies for Addressing Workaholism

Addressing workaholism requires a multifaceted approach that involves both individual and organizational-level interventions. Some key strategies for addressing workaholism include:

Self-awareness and self-reflection: Encouraging self-awareness and self-reflection is a crucial first step in combating workaholism. Individuals need to recognize their work habits and understand the negative effects these habits can have on their health and relationships. Self-assessment tools and reflective practices, such as keeping a work journal or participating in mindfulness meditation, can help individuals gain insight into behavioral patterns and triggers. This increased awareness forms the basis for making meaningful changes (Schaufeli et al., 2008).

Self-Assessment Tools: Tools such as the Work Addiction Risk Test (WART) can help individuals identify their workaholic tendencies (Robinson, 1999).

Mindfulness Practices: Mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to reduce stress and increase self-awareness, making them effective in combating workaholism (Hülshager et al., 2013).

These strategies highlight the importance of understanding and addressing personal factors that contribute to workaholism. By promoting self-awareness and utilizing tools and apps designed to detect and reduce workaholic behaviors, individuals can take proactive steps toward healthier work habits and improved well-being.

Establishing boundaries: Learning to set and maintain clear boundaries between work and personal life is crucial for workaholics. This includes limiting working hours, providing regular breaks and leaving work outside of working hours. Techniques such as time management training and the use of digital detox strategies can help individuals develop a more balanced approach to work (Shimazu and Schaufeli, 2009).

Time Management Training: Effective time management can help reduce work-related stress and improve work-life balance (Claessens et al., 2007).

Digital Detox: Reducing screen time and avoiding work emails outside of work hours can significantly improve mental health and personal well-being (Thomée et al., 2011).

These strategies emphasize creating and maintaining boundaries to ensure a healthier work-life balance. Implementing time management training and digital detox techniques can help individuals limit work-related stress and improve their overall mental health and well-being.

Prioritizing self-care: Prioritizing self-care is essential for workaholics to maintain their physical and mental health. Encouraging regular physical activity, relaxation techniques, and social participation can help alleviate the negative effects of overwork. Activities such as yoga, meditation, and participation in social or recreational activities can provide necessary relief from work stress (Spence and Robbins, 1992).

Exercise: Regular physical activity is associated with reduced stress levels and improved mental health (Penedo and Dahn, 2005).

Relaxation Techniques: Practices such as yoga and meditation have been shown to reduce stress and increase emotional well-being (Smith et al., 2007).

These strategies emphasize the importance of self-care in combating workaholism. Engaging in regular physical activity, practicing relaxation techniques, and participating in social or recreational activities can alleviate the negative effects of overwork, leading to better physical and mental health.

Seeking professional support: Professional support from mental health professionals can be invaluable for workaholics. Therapists and counselors can help individuals address underlying issues that lead to compulsive work habits, such as perfectionism, fear of failure, or low self-esteem. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and other therapeutic approaches can provide strategies for managing work-related stress and developing healthier work habits (Ng et al., 2007).

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy: CBT is effective in treating anxiety, depression, and other problems commonly associated with workaholism (Hofmann et al., 2012).

Counseling: Counseling can help individuals discover the root causes of their workaholic behavior and develop coping mechanisms (Richardson and Rothstein, 2008).

These strategies highlight the critical role of professional support to address the root causes of workaholism. Working with mental health professionals and utilizing approaches such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and counseling can offer effective ways to manage work-related stress and develop healthier work habits.

Organizational-level interventions: Employers have an important role in tackling workaholism by promoting a healthy work culture that supports work-life balance. This may include policies that encourage regular breaks, limit overtime, and provide resources for employee well-being, such as wellness programs and mental health support. By preventing the glorification of excessive working hours and recognizing the importance of rest and recovery, organizations can create a more sustainable and productive work environment (Shimazu and Schaufeli, 2009).

Workplace Policies: Policies that support flexible working hours and remote work can help employees balance work and personal responsibilities (Kossek and Thompson, 2016).

Wellness Programs: Comprehensive wellness programs that address physical, mental, and emotional health can improve the overall well-being of employees (Goetzel and Ozminkowski, 2008).

These strategies highlight the importance of organizational-level interventions to deal with workaholism. Employers can create a healthier work culture by implementing policies that encourage work-power balance, such as flexible working hours and remote work options, and can support this by offering comprehensive wellness programs that support the physical, mental and emotional well-being of employees.

A comprehensive, multi-pronged approach to addressing workaholism involves both individual and organizational efforts. By promoting self-awareness, establishing boundaries, prioritizing self-care, seeking professional support, and implementing organizational-level interventions, it is possible to create a healthier and more sustainable work culture that values employee well-being.

DISCUSSION

The findings underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of workaholism, which arises from a combination of individual personality traits, cognitive distortions, and sociocultural influences. The pervasive nature of workaholism in modern workplaces highlights the need for a holistic approach to address this issue. The consequences of workaholism are far-reaching, affecting not only the individual's health and well-being but also their relationships and overall life satisfaction.

From an organizational perspective, workaholism poses a significant challenge as it can lead to decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover rates. Therefore, it is imperative for organizations to recognize the signs of workaholism and take proactive steps to create a supportive work environment. This includes fostering a culture that values work-life balance, providing resources for employee well-being, and discouraging the glorification of overwork.

At the individual level, developing self-awareness and adopting strategies to manage work-related stress are critical. Individuals must be encouraged to seek professional support when needed and to prioritize their physical and mental health over excessive work.

In conclusion, addressing workaholism requires concerted efforts from both individuals and organizations. By implementing the strategies identified in this review, it is possible to mitigate the adverse effects of workaholism and promote a healthier, more balanced approach to work and life.

CONCLUSION

This article has delved into the multifaceted phenomenon of workaholism, exploring its causes, consequences, and potential interventions. Throughout our review, we uncovered numerous findings that shed light on the detrimental effects of workaholism on both individuals and organizations.

From excessive working hours to difficulty resting and neglect of other areas of life, workaholism manifests itself in a variety of ways, ultimately leading to physical, mental and emotional health problems. Moreover, social pressures and cultural norms that contribute to the glorification of overwork further exacerbate this problem, making it imperative for both individuals and organizations to proactively address workaholism.

Recognizing the signs of workaholism and implementing interventions to improve work-life balance and employee well-being are important steps in reducing its impact. This requires a concerted effort at both the individual and organizational levels, with strategies ranging from cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques to creating supportive work environments that prioritize employee health and happiness.

But beyond individual and organizational outcomes, it is important to highlight the broader importance of addressing workaholism. Workaholism not only undermines individual well-being, but also has negative effects on organizational productivity, employee morale, and overall workplace culture. By fostering a work environment that values work-life balance and supports employee health, organizations can increase productivity, reduce turnover rates, and develop a positive organizational culture.

Given the prevalence of workaholism in today's competitive global economy, it is crucial to prioritize individuals' well-being and develop a culture that values work-life balance. Therefore, it is imperative that organizations not only recognize the signs of workaholism but also implement concrete strategies to address it effectively. By doing this, we can create healthier and more sustainable workplaces where employees can thrive both professionally and personally.

Finally, addressing workaholism is not just a matter of individual health and happiness, but is also vital to organizational success and societal well-being. By taking proactive steps to combat workaholism, we can promote healthier, more productive work environments and ultimately improve the quality of life for both individuals and communities.

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