

WORKOHOLISM AND OTHER FORMS OF HIGH ENGAGEMENT IN WORK

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ABSTRACT

Analyses of literature dealing with workaholism problems lead to a conclusion that a common understanding of the phenomenon is a result of uncritically repeated stereotypes. The following ‘myths’ are associated with the phenomenon of workaholism:

Workaholism is linked to people at managerial positions

A workaholic is a person of success

There is a ‘healthy’ kind of workoholism

The above mentioned stereotypes make it necessary to talk about workaholism, i.e. about different forms of high engagement/commitment to work, in a systematic way.

In the current article:

- one has differentiated between ‘healthy’ involvement in work and the work addiction or work abuse (overloading with work),
- one has selected and described particular mechanisms leading to appearance and persistence of the addiction

KEY WORDS: workoholism, workoholism problems, work

INTRODUCTION

Social and economic changes taking place in Poland in 90-ies in the 20th century led to an occurrence of a new phenomenon – workaholism. The pressure of a fast pace of life as well as growing demands of working environments connected to an increasing meaning of productivity and to a fear of losing a job are the main factors leading to the development of a work addiction problem. The society looking for its self-approval has becoming more and more committed to work. Analyses of empiric researches’ results allow to draw a conclusion that the number of people being proud of the fact that they are workaholics is growing, and that they see the phenomenon as a kind of ennoblement. But workaholism should be seen as a destruction of a person-oriented work dimension. In relation to it one should call over and reflect on what was once said by the Pope John Paul II who gave a clear priority to the ‘personal’ meaning of work, before seeing it as a ‘subject’. John Paul II wrote: “(...) although it is true, that a man is called for and made for working, above all work is for a man, not a man for work". There should be no hesitation about it that working people, through their commitment to work, have significant impact on the surrounding reality and on their own self-development. Thus it has to be taken into account whether particular work and its results may enrich an individual or lead to his/her destruction (Kalinowski, Czuma, Kuć, Kulik, 2005)

Workaholism – definition and characteristics of the phenomenon

Workoholism, according to B. Robinson, is a kind of addiction that is “a compulsory ‘need for working’ (despite the lack of external pressure), manifested through demands given to oneself, lack of ability of working habits regulation as well as an excessive acquiescence for working while excluding other form of life’s activities” (Robinson, 1998, p. 261).

From the above definition one may see that a nature of the workaholism is formulated by three following independent features:

- a strong internal compulsion for acting/working,
- losing control over own behaviour, gradually changed into a conviction that labour requirements given to oneself are natural and widely accepted within a society,
- so extremely high level of engagement in labour that a person loses his/her will to dedicate own time to anything else but work, and during his/her spare time still concentrates all thoughts on things connected to work (Dudek, 2011, p.17 - 18).

Characteristics of workaholism

Workaholism is a specific form of addiction influencing all important spheres of human life: an emotional one, a spiritual one and a physical one. It develops slowly but covers wide areas of life. The longer in time the addiction continues the more the addicted person has misshapen pictures of oneself and surrounding world, as a consequence of fully operating mechanisms of illusion and denial. Workaholism is among the most insidious and difficult to be recognized addictions. While looking for an answer why the addiction process develops in this way, one needs to focus on the main aspect of the addiction, i.e. the work itself. The social recognition of work as a major value leads to obstacles in observing first symptoms of the addiction, which are usually seen by the society as a well-appreciated engagement of the (addicted) person into his/her work. The person highly engaged in their work is usually supported by his/her family, and that leads to further/more advanced addiction. Even alarming signals are being repulsed through mechanisms of illusion and denial which directly influence the way of thinking and assessing reality (Miescicka, 2002, p. 14). The person extremely engaged in work denies that as a result of the addiction process he/she has lost an ability to control own behaviour, or in general denies that he/she 'is addicted'. To the range of defence mechanisms that increases such way of seeing the problem L. Golinska includes (Golinska 2008, p. 32):

- minimisation («this is just for a few weeks, only till the project has been finished», «well, yes, I was back from work at 22.00 hrs yesterday, but it happens only occasionally»);
- rationalisation («well, it cannot be just stopped like that, because later it will get outdated, it is a crucial element for the dissertation, it would be stupid to abandon it now»);
- distracting mind, wishful planning («just after that everything will get back to normal - just 6 – 7 hrs (of working) and back home»).

The whole system of illusion and denial which is the crucial element of this kind of addiction is not only difficult to be recognised but also very hard to be inactivated. The main factor that makes the addiction grow stronger are financial problems of the 'suffering' person, indicating that something goes wrong. Such problems are a driving force for the development of the addiction (Miescicka, 2002, p. 14-15). As it is underlined by Leth, employees often are convinced that in order to live "at an appropriate level, one has to earn good money. And in order to earn good money (i.e. to have high enough salary) one cannot have his/her own life" (compare: C. Guerreschi, 2006, p. 121).

Getting engaged in hard work may be connected to economic constraints. E. Hornowska and W. Paluchowski determine fear of losing jobs as a consequence of high rate of unemployment as well as experiencing too much competition among workers. Due to the effect of the competition a strong 'self-driving force' occurs. The workers build a belief that 'the rat race', going on without any ethical rules, takes place in their organization, and only through really hard work they may achieve a professional success (Hornowska, Paluchowski, 2007, p 38).

The extreme engagement in work M. Biernacka indicates as a declaration of a 'weak' Ego. The work addicted person 'clings' to his/her post in fear of losing it, especially in the case of own shortcomings: lack of adequate competences/skills, low productivity or inadequate serviceableness for the organization (Biernacka, 2009, p 225).

According to J. Meyer, N. Allen and C. Smith a defining factor for the workaholism is a commitment to the organization. The mentioned authors formulated a 3D model of a professional involvement. They underline three following aspects of the organizational commitment:

- an affective one – which determines an emotional attachment, an identification of an employee with his/her organization; persons affectively connected to work are likely to undertake additional activities that do not fall within a scope of their duties, however they consider such engagement as advantageous for achieving their goals (the person works/is engaged in work because he/she does want to);
- a sustainable one – which refers to the balance of profit and loss account; the person is guided by a desire to avoid negative consequences of leaving the organization; the cost (of the leave) can also be seen as a lack of profits from widely understood 'investments' of the employee in the organization; an impact on this type of engagement may also have different incentives proposed to the employee to remain in the organization; the involvement in work might be also forced by lack of alternatives/perspectives for finding another job (the person is involved in work because he/she has to, i.e. has no other choice);
- a normative one – refers to an employee's conviction that he/she should remain in the organization; the employee feels a strong moral obligation to fulfil given to him/her tasks by a supervisor or the organization; such attitude develops on a basis of earlier socialization experiences and due to the whole socialization process to which a newly employed individual is subject to from the beginning of their employment; the person remains in the organization or in his/her job as feels he/she ought to do so" (Hornowska, Paluchowski, 2007, p. 38-39).

J. Moczydlowska notices that another factor strongly influencing an appearance and development of the work addiction is a pressure which the addicted persons impose on themselves on their own. As it is highlighted by C. Guerreschi, people feel the pressure to work more and longer in order to be able to obtain more and more goods but they are not able to predict negative consequences of such behaviour (Guerreschi, 2006, p. 124). The pressure is not often related to a structure of needs. Workaholics are often focused on satisfying several needs such as: achievements, successes, orderliness, performance, competences, domination or autonomy. The author suggests that persons who cannot satisfy their needs because of a tense family atmosphere at home, are inclined to get addicted to work (Moczydlowska, 2005, p. 83). Because of negative emotions occurring outside the workplace, the workaholic feels a real need (force) for work, in which he/she may experience positive feelings. A strong desire to get highly committed to work favours an effective regulation of emotions. The work, from the addicted person's point of view, appears as a remedy and best solution to solve the existing problems. Although through immersion in work the person will not get rid of stress, but he/she is able to distance in a psychological way and concentrates on something else than problem-focused thoughts. And elimination of such difficult thoughts leads to reduction of negative emotions. The described mechanism of the 'compulsive emotion regulation' is considered to be a typical symptom of the work addiction (Golinska, 2008, p. 32-33).

The next mechanism being an effect of the work addiction is a personal disintegration (Ego disintegration) which might be characterised as a maintaining of a positive self-image. It is worth noticing that an extreme and long-term commitment to work may cause an explicit change in the self-image. Treating work as the only appropriate form of activity results in social distancing, and not recognizing the need to maintain relationships with other people. Workaholics' preferences are aimed at demonstrating the reasonableness of their actions and understanding themselves by creating false but somewhat convincing justifications and reasoning (Golinska, 2008, p 34).

Work addiction vs. work misuse

K. Wojdylo aims at differentiating between the work addiction and the work misuse, and he proposes to call the first form of the distorted behaviour workaholism, and the other one 'work use'. In connection with that differentiation of two pathological phenomena one may ask how to recognise 'healthy' way of 'using' work (taking advantage of it seen as a norm) from the 'work use' which needs to be seen within a clinical context.

K. Wojdylo, taking into account the fact of generally occurring in population symptoms typical for 'using' work, considers two hypotheses for defining that type of disorder:

- a source of work misuse (labour abuse) are 'work use' behaviors occurring commonly in population;
- the clinical form of work misuse should be placed within a particular continuum, covering different types of labour abuse.

The above defined hypotheses lead to a conclusion that the work abuse is not a separate category, and that differences between not addicted and addicted persons (healthy and disordered ones) need to refer to a level of intensification of 'labour' behaviours but not to their type of content. And therefore a determinant for the pathology associated with multiplicity of working activities is an amount of symptoms being a threat to an optimal functioning. While the work addiction symptoms are escalating, a more and more reduced sense of control over own behavior is observed. It needs to be assumed that the following factors may have the main impact on the appearance of the growing disorder: the number of working hours, frequent thinking about work and above all over-optimal intensity of symptoms that results not only in the loss of control but also in an inability to 'switch-off' (Wojdylo, 2010, p. 24). The work addicted persons differ from the 'healthy' ones in an ability to keep appropriate proportions between the family life and professional career. The workaholics withdraw from their commitments made to close relatives in the light of increasing 'work demands'. The excessive dedication to work and continuous proving of own value lead to frequent conflicts and a shrinking circle of friends (Paluchowski, Hornowska, 2003, p. 307).

Healthy and pathological forms of high engagement in work

In order to identify differences between healthy and pathological forms of the high commitment to work, K. Wojdylo conducts analysis and interpretation of two basic concepts - workloads and work overloads. On a basis of a personal perception of a working life reality one may experience it as a phenomenon of being loaded or even over-loaded with work. The workload is a result of number of working hours and additional activities connected with labour implementations. This phenomenon is only potentially pathogenic but in certain conditions leads to starting pathological changes in an affected person. In the case of the work over-load the phenomenon goes beyond the critical point defined as the pathology (Wojdylo, 2010, p. 25). W. Banka distinguishes two forms of the work over-load: a quantitative one - objectively determined by "too much work" conditions, and a qualitative one - subjectively

determined by "too hard work" conditions (Wojdylo, 2010, p. 25). It should be emphasized that the objective overload negatively affects physical health, whereas the subjective one results in a negative impact on mental health.

According to Ch. Maslach the work overload is a result of 'professional burnout' syndrome, which might be characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of own achievements. It is to be underlined that the burnout should not be confused with workaholism. Two features that connect both phenomena are the following ones: being dissatisfied with own situation in the labour environment and experiencing a strong stress and feeling of being overloaded. While looking for differences between the two phenomena N. Oginska-Bulik notices that the burnout should be assigned to a professional activity dedicated to co-working with other people, while workaholism refers to all activities aimed at achieving a set goal, seen subjectively as 'work'. In addition, the author draws attention to the fact that in both cases, i.e. while taking into account people suffering from the burnout syndrome and people prone to workaholism, some mental exhaustion symptoms occur. As for the first phenomenon, the emotional exhaustion occurs along with a reduction of professional involvement, while in case of the second one the psychophysical exhaustion is accompanied by a constant and increasing commitment to work (Oginska-Bulik, 2010, p 27).

As based on a common knowledge workaholics are people who are over-loading themselves with work. This is a false understanding of the phenomenon. As noticed by K. Wojdylo the workload should be connected to people strongly committed to their work, intensively engaged in what they are doing but acting without any pressure. They can be usually called enthusiasts of work. As long as they can experience a feeling of purposefulness and usefulness of they work, they can function even while being accompanied by stress and a strenuous effort. However if working is based on an internal constraint, the workers may experience the work over-load (Wojdylo, 2010, p. 26). The work compulsion is linked to the way working activities are performed, i.e. to the lack of ability of taking control over own work, and experiencing an obsessive need of high involvement in the conducted work. The compulsion might be discovered in the context of not being able to leave the work / withdraw from the working activities. According to J. Stepien "the compulsion to work occurs at a mental level; it has an internal cognitive character and exists despite its negative effects to mental health and social functioning, leading to the lack of job and life satisfaction" (Stepien, 2005, p 203).

Acceptance of the above described criteria of workload and work overloading is the basis for differentiating pathological forms of high commitment to work from its 'healthy' forms (Wojdylo, 2010, p. 26).

N. Oginska-Bulik, referring to L. Golinska's findings, points out the 'healthy form' of workaholism as a continuous opportunity for acquiring new experiences, developing creativity and increasing the level of self-esteem. Machlowitz (after N. Oginska-Bulik, 2010, p. 28) belongs to a group of authors who also believe in existence of a 'positive' kind of workaholism. According to her workaholism might be seen as pleasure and creativity as well as the source of satisfaction and sense of accomplishment through the engagement into work.

To healthy forms of high commitment to work one includes: work enthusiasm (passion for work), situation-based workaholism, and the behaviour type A.

To the group of work enthusiasts one may include people who consider their work as the source of experiences typical for the 'flow' state. Bakker (after N. Oginska-Bulik, 2010, p. 28) underlines both: similarities and differences between terms 'workaholic' and engagement seen as an essence of the flow. A highly involved in work person has an internal motivation to work, and can experience the pleasure of taking activity. On the other hand a workaholic is

under the internal constraint, he has no control over his/her activity and is not pleased with the carried out work.

The situation-based workaholics are highly committed to their work; they do not show obsessive compulsive tendencies but only a temporary state of 'being busy' depending on critical events/situations occurring in their lives as stressors. Among main critical life events with the highest subjective level of adoption difficulty K. Wojdylo points out such ones as: the death of a spouse, and a divorce or separation.

Behaviour type A includes a range of features characteristic for the work addiction such as: fast pace of work, 'rush', a solid sense of the time flow, aiming at achieving results and (social) recognition, imposing high standards of performance, a tendency to make exhaustive efforts as well as to manipulate and take control over others, an aggressive attitude, and also striving for efficiency and effectiveness. K. Wojdylo suggests that despite the similarities observed in both: workaholics and people with behavior type A, the two forms of the high commitment to work correlate with each other slightly. The type A behavior is only dependent on changes provoked by an increase of the adrenaline level in the high commitment to work conditions. Whereas the workaholism apply to persons with the strong internal compulsion, and with the characteristic obsessive - compulsive style of work. The described observations highlight the distinctiveness of the two phenomena (Wojdylo, 2010, p. 31).

Sources of origin of workaholism

Reasons of the work addiction should be looked for in specific experiences of an early childhood. Compulsive disorders associated with professional activity might result from dysfunctional families (Rostowska, Peplinska, 2010, p. 256). The specificity of such family is linked to a thesis that there are inappropriate behaviours patterns and wrong interactions models occurring within it / among its members, and that might lead to serious mental health problems (Killinger, 2007, p. 23). Parents are said to give to their children too high requirements regarding: achievements, efficiency, perfection of performance/excellence, reliability, sense of duty, responsibility, punctuality or order. The development of the addiction to work might be based on lack of a positive attitude of parents to emotionality, which is manifested through rejecting or hiding feelings. The emotional 'sterility' in the childhood, linked to being unsatisfied with the low level of parents' involvement in the child's life, may lead (in adult life) to aiming at receiving high recognition of others and proving own value by taking on intensive working activities in excessive efforts conditions (Rostowska, Peplinska, 2010, p. 256).

According to B. Killinger in the dysfunctional family operates a 'catalogue' of burdensome rules that children have to obey. Among controversial rules mentioned by the author one may find the following ones:

1. *One does not need to talk about problems.* Focusing on avoiding any conversation of existing within a family problems makes it impossible for children to get to know other points of view and as a consequence it leads to creation of an illusion that relations among all members of family are always friendly. Bringing up the child in such environment and proving to him/her that nothing wrong has ever happened develop some defence mechanisms that are to 'help' in later life to ignore or avoid anything that is unpleasant.
2. *One does not need to show feelings.* Parents with tendencies to the addiction to work might be characterized by emotional 'blunting' and following a rule of feelings masking. In the case of any form of showing emotions from the side of closest persons in the family, the member addicted to work reacts with anger. In families suffering

from the work addiction there is a severe shortage of desired (social) roles' patterns. Parents who do not teach their children how to understand the roles in society make difficult for them to establish a proper contact with the environment (external world) / other people.

3. *There is lack of direct communication among the family members. Usually one of the members takes a role of a go-between (i.e. within-the-family messenger).* This leads to creation of a communication triangle for interpersonal contacts. An indirect communication pattern operates in a way that one person in the family communicates with only one of its members, talking about some other family member(s) with whom he/she is in conflict. Such communication style is a very dysfunctional one, because it does not help solving existing problems, but rather creates some new ones. There is lack of any strong bond among spouses; they are inclined to control and test each other's 'power'. While one of the parents is absorbed by his/her work, the other one takes the central position in the family. Such situation is likely to create the communication triangle. This is not a 'healthy' type of communication; it causes destruction. Children learn bad habits that are later difficult to be eradicated. Setting one against the other leads to a closure of a family system, because there is an excessive secrecy and lack of mutual trust within it.
4. *Children should be strong, good for others and excellent.* In the dysfunctional families a parent expresses 'love' towards his/her children giving some pre-conditions: «I will love you, if you are good for others, perfect, strong and responsible». Whereas unconditioned love says: «Be who you are; I will support you as a unique person. I will let you know when I do not agree with what you do and do not want to support your behaviour. I will give you then some tips to think about, and will share my knowledge with you. You can accept it or reject it – but I will still love you». For people whose main goal is to achieve the excellence nothing is good enough to satisfy them. They want their children to achieve success. The most important for them are competition and winning. Mistakes are not welcome. Failures lead to a decrease of self-esteem and a loss of love.

Growing up in the dysfunctional environment, with the specified above rules, does not go in line with a coherent development of personality. Children are taught that the value of a human being depends on the way of behaviour or ability to achieve goals. They know that in order to be accepted by their parents it is not enough to be just who you are but it is necessary to make more and more efforts (Killinger, 2007, p. 28). One may conclude, on a basis of scientific research carried out by E. Robinson, that in adult lives the children of workaholics follow their parents' tracks. They are likely to be work addicted in the same way as their parents, and they also take on themselves a lot of duties because they do not tolerate a state of being inactive / doing nothing (Kozak, 2009, p. 127).

While analysing reasons for which people get work addicted, Maslach points out an internalization of values that are appreciated in particular culture. In the case of workaholism the values are connected to social pressure to compete in order to obtain better and better results.

Precise hypotheses related to determination of the origin of workaholism have been formulated in three following paradigms: the theory of addiction, the learning theory and the theory of characteristics (Retowski, 2003, p. 319)

According to medical models the work addiction is a result of some substances produced by a human being's body. A working person is subject to some kind of discomfort due to spending several hours at a work place, however thanks to the body's neuro-stimulators

he/she is able to cope with tiredness/fatigue, and often feels pleasant stimulation and satisfaction. Such phenomena occurring on a regular basis lead to the addiction. The addicted persons have low chances to get rid of the addiction. A workaholic-like model of behaviour has a very low level of flexibility and is characterized by a strong resistance against any changes.

In accordance with rules of a psychological model a man can function when he/she is extremely engaged in their jobs/careers. The job/labour becomes for the person a good way to a professional success or to gaining a high professional prestige. In such model some susceptibility to changes is possible. There is a possibility that workaholism might be exchanged with some preferred behaviour in a situation when there is a chance/perspective for obtaining some highly appreciated values (other than work itself).

With regard to persons extremely committed to their work a special role is played by the theory of conditional stimulation, according to each a man learns particular behaviours by means of observing their consequences. Taking on some extra work should result in earning some extra money and receiving a better admiration from others, and that increases the likelihood of behaving in a similar way in the future. From the perspective of the learning theory such situation will launch a mechanism of workaholic assimilation model of behaviour in the workplace. S. Retowski notices that behaviours of a workaholic character are learned through a consistent reinforcement.

On the basis of the conditional stimulation theory one may assume that an employee may 'fall in' workaholism when he/she is extremely involved in work bringing him/her desired results. It is more likely that the workaholism development will be at a higher level in the case of workers with high income and top professional status and also in the situation when the person does not draw satisfaction from any non-professional activities/spheres of life.

In the context of the theory of characteristics the workaholism is a feature of a man's personality which could fully develop in a mature age. That means that workaholism might be observed regardless a particular workplace. In an adolescence age we are likely to be highly engaged in work under the influence of environment/other people. Gradually this is transformed into a constant element of personality. In maturity the workaholism is well established and resistant to all kinds of influence. According to the theory of characteristics the workaholism is an individual feature occurring in different types of societies; it exists regardless how a particular addicted person is judged/assessed by other people (Retowski 2003, p. 334).

Research carried out in the field of personality factors and predispositions to workaholism allow to draw a conclusion that among reasons leading to the addiction development one may find the following ones:

- a stimulation of consumption needs;
- a constant need to 'prove yourself';
- a desire to satisfy own self-esteem;
- excessive ambitions;
- a perfectionism tendency,
- a sensitivity to other people's opinions (Kalinowski, Czuma, Kuc, Kulik, 2005, p. 97).

Negative results of workaholism

B. Dudek, referring to several empirical findings, highlights some negative results of the workaholism which might be manifested in different spheres of life:

- within an area of performing professional duties

Workaholics are under a severe stress at the work place largely due to the fact that they work longer and longer hours; they create problems for themselves, put on themselves more and

more workload and under such constant pressure they are likely to be subject to the 'professional burnout';

- in a family functioning

Persons focused just on 'acting' are likely to destroy a proper balance between work and home/family life, which leads to weakening of marriage bonds and coherence. The workaholics have a negative influence on their own children; it is often showed through increased levels of depression and anxiety;

- in creation of dysfunctional interpersonal relations in the work place and within family environment

Among the workaholics there is a dominant need for controlling their co-workers; they are likely to treat others in a disrespectful way; they don't build proper interpersonal relations due to concentrating too much on work;

- as far as a general physical and mental health is concerned

A tendency of some employees to deny their fatigue and ignore clear symptoms of worsening of their overall condition might result in a negative impact on their well-being and health.

CONCLUSION

In the current article one has highlighted that there are two forms of workload/'use' of work': workaholism, being a kind of the work addiction, and the work overload (abuse) being a form of disorder. In a contrast to the above mentioned 'clinical' forms of work, one showed also a 'healthy use' of labour, which could be interpreted as a passion, without any harmful consequences.

Workaholics are people who has an internal pressure to carry out their work; they want to realize or achieve in their work place important for them values. They do not look for establishing long-lasting relationships in the working environment; work itself has a bigger importance for them than relations/social aspects of work.

In order to better described mechanism of the work addiction functioning one characterized the process of its development. Three typical mechanisms of the addiction, being in mutual inter-actions, were presented in the article.

Sources of workaholism should be looked for in a dysfunctional functioning of a (primary) family. Researchers generally agree that workaholics are person who were brought up in families governed by negative, in their consequences, rules.

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