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WHEN WORK BECOMES AN ADDICTION:

**AN EXPLORATION OF INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL
ANTECEDENTS OF WORKAHOLISM AND THE IMPACT ON EMPLOYEE
OUTCOMES**

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we propose and empirically test a model in which we explore the role of individual and organizational antecedents on reported levels of workaholism and we investigate the relationship between workaholism and some important employee outcome variables. Using data from a sample of 2759 full-time employed Belgian workers, our findings indicate that strongly engaged and ambitious employees (in terms of career progress) show higher levels of workaholism. Organizational work-life balance support shows to inhibit workaholism. Furthermore, we found workaholism to be important in explaining work-life conflict and employees' commitment to flexibility and performance. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: Workaholism, structural equation modelling, antecedents and outcomes

INTRODUCTION

People spend currently more time than ever engaged in work. Recent figures from the fourth European Conditions Survey in the European Union, covering nearly 30.000 employed workers (Eurofound, 2006), suggests that more than 20% of all European workers report long working hours (i.e. more than 42 hours per week). Changes in the socio-economic environment, including a demographically changing workforce, organizational downsizing and just-in-time-delivery put extra pressure on the current employees. Advanced technology enabled employees to work regardless of time and place to the detriment of clear role expectations (Sullivan, 1999), causing the boundaries between work and personal life to be blurred. Furthermore the changing nature of careers (Rousseau & Arthur, 1996), characterized by mobility, job insecurity and a greater emphasis on career self-management encourages people nowadays to work excessively hard in order to visualize their contributions and make their way to the top in a flattened organization. Given these trends, studying the notion of “workaholism” and its consequences is important and meaningful, especially as the occurrence of workaholism increases worldwide (Schor, 1991; Sparks, Faragher, & Cooper, 2001).

Despite the fact that workaholism has received a lot of attention over the past years in the popular press (Fassel, 1990; Killinger, 1991; Robinson, 1998) our scientific understanding of the concept is still limited. Previous research on workaholism has long been hindered by the absence of clear concepts, good operational definitions and validated measures (Burke, 2001a; McMillan, Brady, O’Driscoll, Marsh, 2002; Scott, Moore & Miceli, 1997). Fortunately, over recent years, definitions have been clarified and multiple studies have demonstrated the psychometric properties of the most important measures, i.e. the work addiction risk test (WART) (Flowers and Robinson, 2002) and the Spence and Robbins’ workaholism Battery (WorkBAT) (Burke, 2001b; McMillan *et al.*, 2002; Spence and Robbins, 1992), thereby clearing the path for more empirical research on workaholism.

The present study builds on previous work as well as extends this work to new areas. Research findings suggest that individual difference characteristics and organizational factors serve as antecedents, however most studies focus only on the individual characteristics. These include personal demographic characteristics (Burke,

2000; Harpaz & Snir, 2003), family of origin dynamics (Robinson, 1998), personal values (Burke, 2001a; Harpaz & Snir, 2003) and aspects of personality (Schwartz, 1982). Organizational factors that have proven relationships with workaholism include values supporting work-personal life balance (Burke, 2001a) or imbalance (Schaefer & Fassel, 1988; Killinger, 1991). In our study we will examine both individual and organizational predictors of levels of workaholism at the same time. On the individual level we look at importance of career advancement and work engagement as two potential predictors of workaholism. As work centrality has been proven to be a significant predictor of workaholism (Harpaz & Snir, 2003), importance of career advancement or the ambition of individuals to climb the organizational ladder might also be an important characteristic of workaholics. Work engagement has been proven to be a closely related yet distinct concept of workaholism. The organizational predictor assessed the perceptions of organizational support of work-life balance.

With regard to the consequences of workaholism, most research has focused on its negative side (e.g. Killinger, 1991; Schwartz, 1992). According to Burke (2004) ‘these writers...depict workaholics as unhappy, obsessive, tragic figures who were not performing their jobs well and were creating difficulties for their coworkers’ (p. 263). Others suggest that it might have beneficial outcomes for both individuals and organizations (Burke, 2001a, Machlowitz, 1980). However, we believe that both outcomes can coincide; hence we investigate the relationship with work-life conflict as a negative individual outcome and commitment to perform and be flexible as positive organizational outcomes.

Previous research has been dominantly North American (McMillan, O’Driscoll, Marsh & Brady, 2001). Therefore, our understanding of workaholism runs the risk of becoming culturally biased. By conducting our study in the Belgian workforce we address this shortcoming.

WORKAHOLISM: CONCEPTUALIZATION

Various conceptualizations and definitions of workaholism have been proposed. In their synthesis of earlier theory and research, Scott, Moore & Miceli (1997) mention three core features of workaholism based on an inductive approach of previous theories and empirical studies. According to these authors, workaholics (1) spend a great deal of time in work activities when given the discretion to do so, which results in their giving up important social, family, or recreational activities because of work, (2) persistently and frequently think about work when they are not at work, and (3) work beyond what is reasonably expected (Scott et al., 1997: 292). For the purpose of this paper, we make use of the definition as proposed by Ng *et al.* (2007) who used a theory driven and deductive approach. They define workaholism as “*those who enjoy the act of working, who are obsessed with working, and who devote long hours and personal time to work*” (Ng *et al.*, 2007: 114). This definition is, as far as we know, the most recent definition on workaholism and encompasses the three core-dimensions proposed by Scott, Moore and Miceli (1997).

PREVIOUS FINDINGS AND HYPOTHESIS

In important area of interest for workaholism reflects those intellectual processes that propel workaholics to work excessively (Ng, et al, 2007). One of these cognitive processes are the values and drivers that workaholics hold. Values that are likely to be held by workaholics are achievement values. According to Schwartz (1992) the value of achievement encompasses one’s desire to be successful, capable and ambitious and therefore predispose individuals to be obsessed with job and career attainments (Ng et al, 2007). Similarly, Type A personality, an achievement related personality trait that is closely related to workaholism (Schwartz, 1982), is characterized by ambition, next to impatience and hostility (Savickas, 1990). Hence we assume that those persons with a high work ambition and therefore an urge for career advancement will be at risk of becoming workaholic.

Hypothesis 1: Importance of career advancement is positively related to workaholism

Workaholics are those who dedicate a lot of time to their work. Ng, *et al.* (1997) suggest that workaholism implies a passion for working. This important role of positive affect in defining workaholism has also been acknowledged by past research. For example, Bonebright, Clay & Ankenmann (2000) attribute workaholism to the ‘immense enjoyment’ derived from working, Spence and Robbins (1992) define ‘enjoyment of work’ as one of the core dimensions of workaholism and Cantarow (1979) suggest that it is passionate involvement and gratification that workaholics seek from working. However, based on the suggestion that some types of workaholics do not enjoy the work they do (Spence & Robbins, 1992), Ng *et al.*, assumes that it is often the act of working in itself that workaholics enjoy. Based on this reasoning, we hypothesize that work engagement (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001) defined as a “*persistent, positive affective state of fulfillment*” (p. 417) will be an antecedent of workaholism.

Hypothesis 2: Engagement will be positively related to workaholism

Workaholism is an actual excessive involvement in work (Ng *et al.*, 2007). This behavior might be encouraged or frowned by the organizational culture, or the shared beliefs and values among organizational members (Schein, 1990). It has been suggested that a workaholic environment may exacerbate workaholic behavior patterns (Scott *et al.*, 1997). Some industries encourage and reinforce working excessively, while others don’t (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Wright & Smye, 1996; Harpaz & Snir, 2003). Previous research has shown that values supporting work-life imbalance are an indicator for higher levels of workaholism (Burke, 2001a). Hence we assume that the perceived organizational support for work-life balance will inhibit levels of workaholism.

Hypothesis 3: Organizational work-life support will be negatively related to workaholism

Taris, Schaufeli & Verhoeven (2005) argue that as workaholics spend excessively much time on their work at the cost of other activities, they should differ from others regarding the quantity and quality of relationships they maintain with intimate others as well as the degree to which they feel that the work and nonwork domain interfere with each other. Past research has also shown that marital estrangement is higher among workaholics than non-workaholics (Robinson, Flowers,

& Carroll, 2001). Therefore, we hypothesize that workaholics will report higher levels of work-family conflict.

Hypothesis 4: Workaholism will be positively related to work-family conflict

Finally, workaholics tend to sacrifice almost all of their time to work activities and spend more time to work than others do (McMillan *et al.*, 2002). Machlowitz (1980) found that workaholics create more work for themselves by making simple projects more complicated than necessary, and enjoy working on problems. Therefore, Taris *et al.* (2005) suggest that workaholics work longer and harder than others not because their jobs require them to do so, but because they tend to create high job demands for themselves. Hence we hypothesize that workaholics will report higher levels of commitment to flexibility and to performance.

Hypothesis 5: Workaholism will be positively related to commitment to flexibility

Hypothesis 6: Workaholism will be positively related to commitment to performance

In Figure 1, we present the variables included in our model and the hypothesized relationships between them.

Insert Figure 1 about here

METHOD

Sample and procedure

We distributed the questionnaire via a Belgian career newspaper among its readers and some media attention was given to it. Respondents had the choice of completing the questionnaire by the paper-and-pencil method or by an on-line web link. To increase response rate an incentive was raffled and strict confidentiality was guaranteed. In total we collected data from 2,759 employees working on fulltime basis (38 hours per week) who live and work in Belgium.

46% of the participants were women. The mean age of participants was 33 years. Within the sample, 6.3% held an executive position, 20.9% were employed in a higher management position, 15.7% in a lower management position and 32.1% as professional employees. A large majority (75.8%) was married or cohabiting and 49.9% had one or more children.

Measures

Workaholism was measured using the 9-item Compulsion Tendencies scale of Robinson's Work Addiction Risk Test (WART; Robinson, 1999). Taris *et al.* (2005) showed that this subscale has substantial correlations, ranging from .89 to .93 with the complete 25-item WART scale and is therefore in itself a sufficient measure of workaholism. Each item is answered on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Sample items include: "I seem to be in a hurry and racing against the clock" and "I put myself under pressure with self-imposed deadlines when I work". On the basis of the data collected in the present study, reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was .83

Importance of career advancement was measured by a five item scale, adapted from De Vos, Buyens & Dewettinck (2006). All items were related to cross-hierarchical ambitions and were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all*(1) to *certainly*(5). Sample items include "I want to get promoted to a higher hierarchical level within the organization" and "I want to climb the ladder to a more general managerial function". Reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was .83 .

Work Engagement was measured by an adapted version of the Schaufeli (2002) Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) scale and consisted of six items answered on a 5-point scale ranging from *never(1)* to *always(5)*. Sample items include “When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work” and “I am enthusiastic about my job”. Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) was .90 .

Organizational support of work-life balance was measured by four self - developed items related to an organizational culture supporting work-life balance. Items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from *not agree(1)* to *totally agree(5)*. Sample item is ‘I have a flexible work scheme based on my needs’. Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) was .80

Work-family conflict was measured using a 5-item Likert scale, developed and validated by Netemeyer, Boles & McMurrian (1996). Sample items include “The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life” and “Due to work-related duties, I have to make changes to my plans for family activities”. Possible answers ranged from *never experienced it(1)* to *experiencing it all the time(5)*. Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) for this scale was .92

Commitment to flexibility was measured by a four-item scale developed by De Vos, Buyens & Schalk (2003) to assess the perceived inducements regarding flexibility of employees towards their employer. Sample item include ‘I take work home with me’. Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) was .74

Commitment to performance was measured by a four-item scale developed by De Vos, Buyens & Schalk (2003) to assess the perceived inducements regarding performance of employees towards their employer. Sample item include ‘I do whatever it takes to obtain my results’. Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) was .79

Table 1 provides the basic statistics and inter-correlations of all constructs that were used in the analysis

Insert Table 1 about here

Analysis

The hypotheses were simultaneously tested in a structural model, using maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS (Arbuckle & Wothke 1999). This approach has several advantages. First, it provides a systematic basis for evaluating the ‘fit’ of the hypothesized model to data based on a χ^2 -statistic, incremental fit indices (e.g. nonnormed-fit-index, comparative fit index) and other indicators of absolute fit including Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (MacCallum & Austin, 2000). Second, it provides control over measurement error that can constitute over 50 percent of the observed variance and often introduces substantial bias in estimated effects and hypothesis testing (Ping 2001). Third, it provides systematic approaches for testing the psychometric properties of constructs (e.g. convergent and discriminant validity).

RESULTS

The hypotheses were tested in a simultaneous path analytical model. The results are summarized in Table 2. In terms of overall fit, the table reveals the following fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 4189,557$ $df = 605$ ($p < 0.001$), $NFI = 0.91$, $NNFI = 0.92$, $CFI = 0.92$, $SRMR = .05$, $RMSEA = .046$ (90% CI = .045 to .048). On statistical grounds, the hypothesized model appears to adequately account for the systematic variation and covariation in the data. Furthermore, the relative fit indicators exceed .90 and the absolute fit indicators suggest that the residuals are small ($<.05$) and tightly distributed (cf. 90% confidence interval of $RMSEA = .041$ to .046). Consistent with this, the parsimony fit indicator, $NNFI$, exceeds .92, indicating that the model has adequate over-identifying restrictions for parsimony, and provides a reasonable fit to the data.

Insert Table 2 about here

The regression weights show us that both importance of career advancement ($B = .26$, $p < .001$) and work engagement ($B = .21$, $p < .001$) are positively related to workaholism. Thus, our analysis provides support for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. The degree to which employees are eager for career advancement and engaged in their work has a significant positive impact on the extent to which employees experience

workaholism. Hypothesis 3 was also supported. Our results indicate that the extent to which the organization is perceived as supporting work-life balance inhibits, although in a modest way, significantly the reported level of workaholism ($B = -.15, p < .001$).

For the consequences, our results reveal a strong positive relationship between workaholism and work-life conflict ($B = 1.02, p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of workaholism are associated with high levels of work-family conflict, hereby confirming our fourth Hypothesis. We also found a strong positive relationship with commitment to flexibility ($B = .64, p < .001$) and a rather low but significant positive relationship with commitment to performance ($B = .09, p < .01$). So, in support of hypothesis 5 we found that higher levels of workaholism are associated with a higher commitment of the individual towards flexibility and, in line with hypothesis 6, that higher levels of workaholism are linked to a higher commitment to performance.

An unexpected outcome is that surprisingly importance of advancement ($B = -.071, p < .001$) and work engagement ($B = -.22, p < .001$) are directly and negatively related to work-family conflict (although low for importance of advancement), while positively related to workaholism. All remaining direct effects were significant and in the right direction.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to enlarge, within a Belgian sample, our scientific understanding of workaholism by exploring the role of multiple sources (i.e. individual and situational) in affecting workaholism and by looking both at positive and negative consequences in the work and personal sphere. We based ourselves on the definition of Ng *et al.* (2007) stating that workaholics are “*those who enjoy the act of working, who are obsessed with working, and who devote long hours and personal time to work*” (p. 114).

We found evidence both for the effect of individual difference characteristics and for the impact of organizational culture in explaining workaholism, which is in line with the suggestion that workaholism is derived from multiple sources. On the individual level we found a positive relationship with work engagement and importance of career advancement. With regard to work engagement, one can assume that in order to become a workaholic a certain level of work involvement and joy in work is necessary to be able to put so much effort and energy in the work activities.

This finding is also in line with Orford's (1985) conceptualization of addiction as excessive appetite, the satisfaction of which brings pleasure and gratification. Another explanation might be that as most people are motivated to maintain a positive self-view (Dipboye, 1977), workaholics might avoid thinking of themselves as workaholics in a negative sense, thus resulting in more positive answers on the work engagement scale.

Concerning importance of career advancement, our results show clearly that people who attach much importance to upward mobility are at risk of becoming workaholic. In order to achieve promotion, people might become overly focused on their own work and career attainments and therefore are willing to sacrifice almost all of their time and energy to work. This is also in line with Ng *et al.*'s (2007) proposition that achievement-related traits and achievement related values are positively related to workaholism and with Robinson's (1999) finding that Type A personality, of which achievement striving constitutes one of the core dimensions, is positively related to workaholism.

It has been suggested that workaholic environments may exacerbate workaholic behaviour patterns (Scott *et al.*, 1997; Harpaz & Snir, 2003). In support of this, we found that organizational support in managing the work-life balance lowers the reported level of workaholism (Hypothesis 4). People working in organizations that encourage excessive working, while jeopardizing a healthy work-life balance, may be at risk of becoming workaholic. Conversely, organizations that stimulate work-life balance will cripple workaholism. This finding supports the idea that studies on workaholism need to include organizational characteristics, next to individual factors as possible antecedents.

As for the consequences, the current study confirms Bonebright *et al.*'s (2000) findings that workaholism is associated with higher levels of work life conflicts. As work hours increase, employees struggle to balance personal and family needs with work demands. Because time is a fixed resource, excessive work hours detract from time available to share with friends and family.

With regard to work-life conflict, we found that importance of career advancement and work engagement are negative related to work-life conflict, while these same variables are positively related to workaholism. This might lead us to conclude that although work engagement and workaholism have a common ground

they are two distinctive concepts. Work engagement might evoke work-life conflict, to the extent that it induces workaholic behavior.

In addition, we also found evidence for a positive relationship between workaholism and commitment to flexibility and performance. As they are driven to work excessively hard, it is of no surprise that they have no problems to summon the courage to go the extra mile and might be an explanation for the higher commitment to flexibility. Furthermore, as workaholics may even create more work for themselves by making simple projects more complicated than necessary, or by causing crises for the fun of working on the problems resulting from these (Machlowitz, 1980), it is of no surprise that they commit themselves towards the organization to out-perform. This is also in line with Taris *et al.* (2005) suggestion that workaholics work harder not because the job requires them to do so, but because they tend to create high job demands for themselves. However, it remains unclear whether workaholics out-perform their non-workaholic colleagues. Their job performance may be better than that of non-workaholics due to the fact that they devote more hours to work, but they also may have poorer mental and physical health and social relationships, which can reduce work effectiveness over the long term. Future studies need to further investigate the relationship between workaholism and performance.

Study limitations

Limitations of this study warrant attention. First, although we build on theoretical insights that suggest causal relationships, our design does not allow to empirically test such relationships because of its cross-sectional nature. Therefore, future studies could use longitudinal designs to provide a more rigorous test of the proposed causal relationships. Secondly, common-method variance may have biased the validity of the structural relationships. Future research should focus on more multi-source based data. Finally, although our sample covers a large, heterogeneous group of workers within the world of professional jobs, it certainly is not representative for the working population at large. Further research on self-employed or blue-collars is needed in order to investigate the generalizability of our findings.

Managerial implications

This study also has a noteworthy implication for practitioners. Based on our findings we might conclude that workaholic behavior has some (at least short term) beneficial consequences for the organization, while jeopardizing the well being of the employee. As strain and stress might lead to absenteeism and poor performance, the well being of individuals can not be overlooked. Our study shows that an organizational culture that encourages work-life balance can inhibit workaholism. So managers should balance between the organizational advantages and the disadvantages for the individual by guarding individuals working behavior and the interference with their non-work time.

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TABLE 1:**Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations between Variables^a**

Variable	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Career advancement	3.91	.73	.83						
2. Work engagement	2.80	.70	.307	.90					
3. Work-life support	3.29	.80	.088	.279	.80				
4. Workaholism	3.17	.91	.358	.291	-.030	.83			
5. Work-life conflict	2.58	.59	.142	-.020	-.223	.540	.92		
6. Flexibility	2.86	.87	.315	.359	.146	.467	.282	.74	
7. Performance	4.35	1.01	.294	.381	.250	.208	.002	.324	.79

^a *N* = 2759^b Entries on the diagonal are Cronbach's alphas^c Correlations > .03, *p* < .05; correlations > .05, *p* < .01; correlations > .06 < .001

TABLE 2:

Estimated parameters and fit statistics for the structural model

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable							
	Workaholism		Workfamily conflict		Commitment to flexibility		Commitment to performance	
	B (S.E.)	t-value	B (S.E.)	t-value	B (S.E.)	t-value	B (S.E.)	t-value
Workaholism	----		1.02 (.05)	20.4***	.64 (.04)	16.0***	.09 (.03)	3.0**
Importance of career advance.	.26 (.02)	13.0***	-.071 (.021)	-3.38***	.10 (.02)	5.0***	.13 (.02)	6.5***
Work engagement	.21 (.02)	10.5***	-.22 (.023)	-9.56***	.14 (.02)	7.0***	.26 (.02)	13.0***
Org support of work life balance	-.15 (.02)	-7.5***	-.20 (.02)	-10.0***	.11 (.02)	5.5***	.15 (.02)	7.5***
	<i>R</i> ² = .27		<i>R</i> ² = .49		<i>R</i> ² = .49		<i>R</i> ² = .26	

*** = $p \leq .001$ (absolute critical t-value = 3.10)

** = $p \leq .01$ (absolute critical t-value = 2.33)

$\chi^2=4189,557$ $df = 605$ ($p < 0.001$), NFI = 0.91, NNFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = .046 (90% CI = .045 to .048)

FIGURE 1:

Conceptual model and hypothesized relationships

