
LIFE AS A WORKAHOLIC

By Dennis Heath

Some of my clients, as well as people I have known in my life, suffer from workaholism. In other words, an obsessive attachment to, and identity with, their professional persona and duties to the extent that all other aspects of life are a lower priority.



The symptoms of workaholism among managers include; an inability to manage time to allow for non-work activities, being controlled by communication technology, insensitivity to the needs of others, especially family members and a firm belief that working all hours is the only path to security and promotion. They also tend to mistakenly equate this belief with the path to happiness.

In recent times technology has played a major role in increasing the incidence of workaholism. The Blackberry, also known as the Crackberry, can become particularly addictive. A friend recently related a scene she saw play out at a restaurant one lunchtime. An executive gentleman was seen having lunch with a young girl, who appeared to be his school age daughter. He spent an hour looking at his Blackberry and talking business into it. The daughter looked bored and occasionally looked at her father; no doubt wondering if she might get some attention. *I wonder how many maladjusted teenagers are craving attention from workaholic parents.* I have even observed couples in restaurants on Valentines night glued to their communication device for most of the evening, ignoring their sweetheart. No wonder there aren't enough babies being produced in Singapore!

In extreme cases workaholics make themselves available for work 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. I once phoned a friend on her mobile number at 10am Singapore time, not realising she was overseas. A sleepy voice answered and when I asked her where she was, she said she was in London and asked me if I knew what time it was there. It was 3am and her intonation suggested it was a cruel trick on my part to call her at such an unearthly hour. For my part I wondered why on earth she had her phone switched on while she was supposed to be sleeping.

Holidays can be a strife area for workaholics who spend an inordinate amount of time in touch with HQ, either by email or mobile phone. Confirmed workaholics are often completely insensitive to the effect they have on their family or partner in such situations. *They will justify their behaviour by responding to complaints with platitudes such as, "But I'm doing it for you sweetheart and to earn money for us to have a better life (or, give our children a good education)."* The spouse or partner invariably has a different idea of what constitutes "a better life".

This all begs the question, what is the difference between a focused individual who simply works hard to do well in his or her career versus

those who we recognise as "workaholics". Successful people who avoid workaholism exhibit certain behaviours that are distinct from the workaholic. Many successful, productive people seem to have complete control over their working hours yet still manage to produce outstanding results. They assign equal importance to the management of their personal and work time. So what do they actually do that sets them apart from workaholics? Through observation of my executive clients and former colleagues in my corporate career, I've identified a number of traits common to high achievers who maintain a healthy work/life balance.

When they become involved in a project outside the scope of their role, they limit their involvement to the contribution of ideas and experience but do not get drawn into time consuming implementation minutiae.

They are expert delegators. For each task on their desk they ask themselves, "Am I the only person who can do this task?" If the answer is "No" they delegate responsibly to someone with the knowledge and experience to carry out the task to the required standard.

They reserve time to coach and develop their staff to take on more

responsibility, thereby building a talent succession pipeline and at the same time empowering their staff to achieve more and contribute more to the organisation through their own initiative. The result is that the manager is able to focus more on the job of managing and developing people rather than becoming consumed by operational tasks.

They are assertive when it comes to managing their time. **Many managers are tuned into their electronic devices; Blackberry's, mobile phones, laptops, 24 hours a day.** Thus expectations are set and colleagues around the world assume that they will be available to communicate at any time of day or night. Effective managers take control of their communication devices, switch them off when they are in meetings or in personal time and decide when they will return voicemails and SMS messages, rather than being in a constant reactive state.

They are also assertive with time wasting colleagues. When focused on their key management tasks they know how to deal with time robbing interruptions. If someone interrupts an important task the effective manager respectfully and assertively tells them they cannot talk now but will give them focused time and attention at an agreed later time.

They use the phone more than email. It's very easy to be consumed with emails and spend half the day typing at the PC screen. Picking up the phone to someone in the same time zone is often quicker, more effective and more personal. A verbal message is also less open to misinterpretations that may cause additional work later. They train their secretary to handle all

housekeeping and admin tasks as well as some more complex tasks. Delegating tasks and coaching the secretary relieves the manager of mundane jobs, at the same time motivating her and helping her develop an increasing repertoire of skills.

They schedule their social, family and exercise commitments in the same way they commit to their business activities and treat them with equal importance. They are assertive when non-critical issues threaten to push non-work commitments aside.

Are you a workaholic? To test whether you suffer from workaholism, ask yourself these questions and reflect on your answers;

How many times a week do you cancel or postpone commitments to your family?

How focused are you on your family when you are with them?

If you have children, how much time do you spend just chatting and playing with them?

Do you switch off (not silent but switch 'off') your work communication devices at the weekends and in the evenings?

How often do you find yourself thinking about work issues when your partner, friend or child is telling you something that may be important to them?

Have you set an expectation with your colleagues that you will be available 24 hours, even when on holiday?

Do you stay in the office late even when you have completed your critical tasks of the day?

Do you have trouble sleeping?

Are work issues on your mind most of the time?

Have your family or friends given up expecting you on time?

Do you get impatient with people who have other priorities besides work?

Do you believe that more money will solve the other problems in your life?

Is work the activity you like to do best and talk about most?

Have long working hours hurt your family or other relationships?

Do you take on extra work because you are concerned that it won't otherwise get done?

After carefully considering your answers to the above questions, perhaps even talking about them with your family and friends, you may come to realize that there is a problem. If your answers identify you as a workaholic, perhaps it's time to decide what's really important to you. You might want to ask family members about changes to your work habits that would make them happier. But only ask that question if you are prepared to act on the feedback.

If you decide to take action, help is available. The web site www.workaholics-anonymous.org is a site where fellow workaholics can exchange success stories and strategies for dealing with their problem. Another source of help is to work with an Executive Coach who can help you to get your life back under control and in healthy balance with your work.