Research Paper Social Sciences

Workaholism – A Modern Day Nuisance

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Scope and Definition
The term "workaholism" has become deeply entrenched in common parlance since Oates (1971) introduced it. It appears roughly 50,000 times in a search of the Internet, and the term "workaholic" appears an additional 670,000 times.1 Merriam-Webster defines a workaholic as "a compulsive worker." Workaholism is an addiction. It's the illusion, and associated destructive behaviors caused from that illusion, that a person can effectively address challenges in life and work exclusively by working harder at work.

Discomforts in life and work cause the person to seek relief from those discomforts. The primary form of relief that the person (the "workaholic") has access to, and believes in the most, is to feel good by accomplishing something as part of his job at work. So the workaholic attends to getting something done at work. However, as the workaholic attends increasingly to getting things done at work, their personal life begins to suffer from lack of attention. As their personal life suffers, it causes more discomfort for the workaholic, so the workaholic works even harder at getting more things done at work, causing their personal lives to suffer even more -- and the vicious cycle, or compulsive work syndrome, goes on and on. (McNamara, 2004)

The emphasis appears to be on addiction and on the negative implications for the person's life away from the workplace. Workaholism, or work addiction, has not yet been accepted into the official psychological or psychiatric nomenclature, and there is no consensus characterization of its underlying nature. Killinger (1991, p. 7) asserts that the "peak performances [of work addicted people] are a form of ecstasy, and the accompanying surge of adrenaline acts like a drug." Fassel (1990, p. 3) speculates that workaholism may be a unique addiction in that "it has both a substance component (addiction to adrenaline) and a process component (addiction to the actual process of working)."

While measuring the amount of smoking or drinking is easy, measuring the extent of addictive or even harmful smoking, drinking and overeating is more problematic. Even the neurological effects of alcohol consumption, an addictive substance that really has just one active ingredient, are far from fully understood. Similarly, while it is fairly straightforward to measure hours worked, determining what fraction of those hours represents excessive, compulsive, or addictive work is not easy. Going to a more basic level and trying to determine the biological effects, if any, of addictive work has not even been attempted.

Physiological Setbacks
A variety of health problems, ranging from exhaustion to high blood pressure, have been attributed to workaholism (Spence and Robins, 1992). Recent statistics of National Population Health Survey linked longer work hours (but not workaholism per se) with increased chances of weight gain, smoking or alcohol consumption. High stress can lead to high blood pressure, which is a risk factor for heart disease. In addition, stress takes a toll on the immune system, making stressed-out workaholics more vulnerable to other illnesses. In Japan death from overwork has its own name—karoshi. Recently the Japanese Economic Planning Agency estimated the annual number of karoshi deaths at about 1,000, or five percent of all deaths from cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease among people ages 25-59. Other estimates have put the number as high as 10,000 workers per year (Nishiyama and Johnson, 1997).

In a number of countries feelings of being stressed for time are more strongly positively related to the amount of time people spend at the workplace than to any other cause (Hamermesh and Lee, 2003). Clearly, working long hours causes people to complain a lot about work that they view as excessive; but they continue to work hard, so that we must assume that those whom others might view as workaholics are as well off as they might possibly be given their current opportunities and preferences.

Psychological Confrontations
Psychologists also maintain that there are negative spillover effects of workaholic behavior. According to Robinson (1998b), both spouses and children may be adversely impacted: "Children are affected by parental work addiction in ways that are mentally unhealthy and can cause problems well into young adulthood." Robinson et al (2001) found that those who were married to workaholics had higher divorce rates, greater rates of marital estrangement, fewer positive feelings about their marriage, and felt less in control of their lives and marriages.

Economics of Workaholism
We have found only three uses of the term "workaholism" in the published economics literature. Mitchell and Fields (1984) and Kahn and Lang (1991) briefly use the term to describe an inherent preference for work, something clearly different from the notion of addiction in the economics or other literatures. Benabou and Tirole (2004) use the term similarly, but do so in the context of a model of endogenous preferences.

Two questions about workaholism seem relevant for positive economics. First, what are the dynamic effects on one's own future utility? Second, how might a person's long hours of work affect his or her co-workers or family? It is also important to explore these questions by developing models that try to identify conditions under which a person's long hours might or might not be detrimental to his or her own and others' welfare.

Can we reasonably call a person's long work hours an addiction; or do long work hours just show that someone has an exogenous relative lack of distaste for work? This is an ex-

tremely difficult question to answer. We deal with it obliquely in subsequent explanation that work efforts late in life and focusing on whether departures from prior expectations about hours of work are systematically related to characteristics—income and education—that generated long hours earlier in the work life.

Workaholism and Its Effects

We define workaholism as an addiction to work that is acquired as a consequence of working early in a career, and that manifests itself as an increase in one's subsequent labor supply. It is distinct from an inherent characteristic of the worker, some extra taste for work that leads a worker to supply unusually many hours of labor to the market over an entire career. Rather, it is best thought of as a hysteresis effect that develops some time after the worker has entered the labor force and finds, as a consequence of work already performed, that the disutility from additional work has become less than he/she envisioned at the start of the career. The addiction may or may not be rational, i.e., foreseen by the worker. We first briefly consider cases in which intervention may be justified solely on account of the workaholic, then discuss in detail considerations when the development of workaholism spills over onto people in close proximity to the workaholic.

If the individual ignores the impact of working in the first period on the utility function in the second period (i.e., is "myopic"), then he or she will oversupply labor in that period relative to what would maximize the true utility function. This issue does not arise if we are dealing with rational workaholics, in the sense of Becker and Murphy (1988), who recognize that working in the first period builds up the stock of the addictive good that has a positive marginal utility in the second period.2 When individuals are rational in this way, absent externalities there is no a priori case for government intervention in the market for addictive goods and services.

Conclusions

A large literature examines the addictive properties of such behaviors as smoking, drinking, eating, and gambling. In this study we argue that addictive behavior may apply to a much more central aspect of economic life: working. In contrast to most of the traditionally studied kinds of addictive behaviors, working is more likely to involve interpersonal externalities and may be more likely to be a characteristic of high-income individuals. It has been our common observation that high-income, highly educated people are particularly likely to suffer from workaholism with regard to the retirement decision—going cold turkey on their addictive behavior; they are less likely than other workers to adhere to their earlier expressed beliefs about their eventual retirement. This evidence suggests that corrective policy might involve a more progressive tax burden than otherwise, and we derive the optimal income tax structure in the presence of the internalities and externalities that might result from workaholism. Implicit throughout this study has been the assumption that workaholism occurs because of the reinforcement and tolerance that an individual develops to his/her work or career. An alternative cause may instead be that people develop apparent workaholic behavior because they develop addictions to the consumer goods whose increased purchase is made possible by the fruits of their market work.4 A useful project would attempt to distinguish the behavioral implications of workaholic behavior that arises through an addiction to consumption from the kind of workaholism discussed here.

More generally, the research agenda regarding workaholism should attempt to clarify the circumstances under which work is addictive, and document its behavioral implications, including the commitment devices that people who lack self-control might seek out. More precise information about the health costs of workaholism to the worker and the external costs to co-workers and family members is essential to quantify the appropriate corrective policies. If our sense that workaholism is an important aspect of labor market behavior can be corroborated by future research, then our sub-titular claim will be proven wrong. We hope so.

Notes

1 Search made using Google, July 11, 2005)

2 In a two-period model the distinction between the stock of past working and last period's work is not meaningful, although it is in a multi-period model.

3 Loewenstein et al (2003) allude to deeper reasons why this may occur.

4 Models of habit formation in consumption have been developed in macroeconomics since Abel (1990) and Constantinides (1990), although supporting microeconomic evidence has been elusive, as evidenced by Dynan (2000). More recently, models such as Gurgdiev (2004) have distinguished habitual dependence in leisure demand. Neither stream of the macroeconomics literature has stressed the normative implications of habit formation.

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